



Full Length Article

Political action in planetary times: Extinction activism, Anthropocene ontopolitics, indigenous complexities

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A B S T R A C T

This paper brings the narratives of the environmental activist groups Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and Fridays for Future into conversation with Critical Anthropocene Theory and Indigenous environmentalism to interrogate pathways for and limits of environmental political action under planetary conditions marked by nonhuman shaping power. Critical Anthropocene Theory, the paper argues, can problematise the simplistic positivism and managerialism of the new 'extinction activism'. However, the conversation with Indigenous environmental practices, which flexibly manage tensions within human-nonhuman relations and centre radical social impact, reveals the political limitations of both extinction activism and critical Anthropocene thinking. The paper distinguishes the logic of fast change within existing socio-political parameters, which drives extinction activism, from Critical Anthropocene Theory's focus on ontological change as a precondition for a non-exploitative environmental politics, which deprioritises activist practice. Different from both, the paper argues that Indigenous environmentalism is marked by a yet different pragmatic approach, where both modern and non-modern political means are mobilised towards radical change. Indigenous environmentalism is marked by the dynamic co-evolution of cosmology and politics and moves flexibly between modern/nonmodern boundaries, highlighting new pathways for political action in the relational Anthropocene.

1. Introduction: environmental activism in the Anthropocene

In 2022, the climate activist group 'Just Stop Oil' (JSO) received widespread media attention for performatively 'vandalising' famous paintings by van Gogh and Monet (concealed behind glass, the paintings remained unharmed). Their motivation was to alert the public to the unfolding climate crisis. Adding eye-catching acts of civil disobedience to the more conventional protest means of roadblocks and public marches, JSO follows in the footsteps of 'Extinction Rebellion' (XR), which had emerged as the, to this date, biggest single, centralized ecological movement a few years earlier.¹ In 2019, XR attracted widespread attention with an 8-day series of protests at multiple sites across London. Amongst the attendees was Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish climate activist who rose to prominence as the face of her own, transnational environmental youth movement, 'Fridays for Future' (Fff). While a number of academic publications have begun to analyse the distinct organisation, messaging and composition of Europe's new environmental activism (Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2022; Johnston & Holland Bonnett, 2023), their activist practice has so far not been linked to the theoretical debates on agency, responsibility and governance in the ontologically relational Anthropocene, which have significantly

shaped the social sciences and human geography over the past years (Chandler, 2018; Hornborg, 2019; Lundborg, 2022). While the grassroots politics of recent environmental activism and the ontological questions of Anthropocene thinking are developed in distinct registers, they have direct implications for their respective other. Environmental movements are based on, and thus reinscribe, certain assumptions about the planetary reality they demand action for, just as the ontological considerations of Anthropocene theory set the parameters for governance in practice.

But what do activist practices and relational ecology, taken together, tell us about the pathways open to environmental politics today? Driven by this research question, the paper establishes two novel theoretical nexuses to explore the opportunities and limitations of governance in the Anthropocene at the intersection of ontology and political practice. The paper's theoretical analysis speaks to, and advances, environmental political scholarship in human geography, the social sciences and the wider humanities that aims to conceptualise and map politics for planetary conditions that have radically called into question the parameters of modern-liberal governance. First, the paper brings into conversation the politics of the above movements, which we will in the following refer to as 'extinction activism', with the insights of critical, posthuman

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¹ The movement now comprises of 650 activist groups in 45 countries (XR, 2023a).

Anthropocene scholarship, henceforth referred to as ‘Critical Anthropocene Theory’. As we will argue in the following, the political contribution of Critical Anthropocene Theory is primarily ontopolitical, meaning it lies in broadening and reconfiguring our understanding of politics as the precondition for an environmental governance fit for a posthuman planet (Chandler, 2018: xiiv). It highlights how extinction activism remains anthropocentrically committed to a ‘climate fix’ via human ingenuity and managerial steering. Taken together, we argue, the theory and practice of Anthropocene environmental politics presents us with a choice between two options: act quickly, at the expense of deepening the pitfalls of liberal modernity, or rethink political action radically, accepting that posthuman political tools need to be crafted before we can act on climate change.

The second novel theoretical nexus established in the paper links this Anthropocene environmental politics and the ideas, principles and stories collected from Indigenous cosmologies and Indigenous environmental activism, which this paper terms ‘Indigenous environmentalism’. Adding Indigenous environmentalism to the dialogue between extinction activism and Critical Anthropocene Theory reveals that the choice between fast and decisive political action and relational ontological rethinking is not absolutely necessary. Indigenous environmentalism’s dynamic relationship between cosmology and action, we argue, mean that political means are here not determined by their ontological grounds. Indigenous environmental politics utilises both Western and non-Western political means to work towards radical ecological and social transformation. Where extinction activism focuses on quick change but within the parameters of liberal modernity, and Critical Anthropocene Theory centres the ontological reconfiguration of the political space, we argue that Indigenous environmentalism highlights pathways for reconciling the demands of both via pragmatic action towards radical change.

How, and whether at all, two scholars from the Global North can legitimately engage with Indigenous thought and politics is certainly contested. We acknowledge our outside positions as members of a predominantly white, Western academic system and are acutely aware that engaging with Indigenous communities from this position carries the risk of reproducing colonial hierarchies and patterns of (knowledge) extraction (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). However, we suggest that the blanket rejection of non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous cosmologies and politics is an inadequate way of mitigating this danger, because it risks freezing Indigenous communities in a continued status of alterity. We locate our arguments within the uncomfortable tension of competing perspectives on Western engagements with Indigeneity. We position ourselves, in line with Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s claim that non-Indigenous scholarship ‘can engage with Indigenous analytics but not produce them’ (2016, p. 4), neither as the outside discoverers of an objective Indigenous knowledge nor as inside knowledge-holders. The purpose of collating Indigenous cosmologies and practices in this paper is not descriptive but methodological: they offer a comparative foil that allows us to interrogate the politics of Western Anthropocene environmentalism, in theory and in practice. The ‘Indigenous environmentalism’ we refer to is not intended to serve as the truthful and complete

representation of a particular Indigenous community, or of something like a shared, abstractable Indigeneity itself.² Rather, it is a loose, consciously selective collection of cosmological principles, norms and practices related to environmental issues. The umbrella term ‘environmental’ is here broadly conceived, and includes action related to climate change, sustainable economy, land ownership and control, as well as fights for resurgence and cultural restoration linked to the former.³ Importantly, when referring to Indigenous environmentalism, we do not assume that the principles and actions it encompasses are completely separate from their non-Indigenous counterparts. On the contrary, the theoretical nexus established in this paper highlights alignments with Western Anthropocene environmentalism in both theory and practice, subverting a classification of Indigenous communities as nonmodern outside others (see also: Rojas, 2016; Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007).

The arguments of this paper will be developed in four sections: in the first part, we will briefly introduce the environmental movements of XR, JSO and FFF and explain their framing as ‘extinction activism’ in this paper. The second part interrogates their ontological underpinnings and political tactics through the lens of Critical Anthropocene Theory. In the third section, we show how Indigenous environmentalism aligns with the Critical Anthropocene Theory call for a relational, non-anthropocentric understanding of ecology, but more explicitly allows frictions between different actors to be resolved in favour of human concerns. The final section of the paper draws out the distinctly flexible relationship between cosmology and political practice that drives Indigenous environmentalism, which allows for (modern) concerns regarding governmental management and radical aspirations of ontopolitical change to be thought together.

2. Extinction environmentalism: ideas, aims, actions

This opening section provides a brief sketch of the three activist movements that will be unpacked as ‘extinction activism’ in the following. We use this label not to suggest that the discourses of all three environmental movements analysed in the following is explicitly dominated by the concept of extinction. It is rather intended to reflect the distinct quality of the new environmental activism they exemplify, which scholars have described with a view to their ‘rhetoric of climate or planetary “emergency”’ (Richardson, 2020, p. 1; see also: Friberg, 2022). The quickly unfolding, human-made climate catastrophe that is now closely associated with the geoscientific concept of the Anthropocene forms the hinge of an otherwise diverse ‘wave of climate activism that is new in several respects’ (Svensson & Wahlström, 2023, p. 1; see also: Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2022). The more tightly organised, locally

² The cosmological principles and activist stories we explore are embedded in different cultural and political contexts but do not offer a comprehensive, full account of globally diverse Indigenous activism; the accounts and communities included, for example, notably over-represent North America. This is partly because the recent turn towards Indigenous knowledges is driven by academic institutions of the Global North. Yet, attempts to undermine the primacy of Western knowledge with Indigenous science and experiences to develop ‘mutual respect, common understanding, and collaboration [...] is a pan-Indigenous and transnational concern that goes beyond North America’ (Knopf, 2015, p. 180). This means that insights drawn predominantly from engaging with North American Indigenous communities can still be relevant for the interaction between Indigenous and Western knowledges more generally.

³ Like the label ‘Indigenous environmentalism’ itself, the notion of Indigenous environmental activism is certainly a constructed artifice to draw out how relational cosmologies are implemented (or not) in political practice. The diverse, loosely grouped political expressions the label captures go beyond what is conventionally understood as environmental activism in a Western sense, as Indigenous communities’ approaches to activism are flexible and open-ended. We do not discuss here how ‘Indigenous activism’ or ‘Indigenous environmentalism’ are used in and amongst Indigenous scholarly and activist epistemic communities, which is for instance explored in Goodyear-Ka’ōpua (2017).

specific ecological movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s were often focused on specific environmental issues, such as nuclear waste or the destruction of a particular lake or forest. Climate activism in the age of globalisation presents as dissociated, composed of both local and transnational initiatives, and hyper-visual. It often utilises the branding tools of a global capitalism it positions itself against (Wynn, 2020, p. 11–24).

We explore XR, JSO, and FfF as prominent examples of this vibrant, quickly changing European and particularly UK-based environmental activism, where disparate initiatives and practices are held together by the umbrella narrative of the urgent planetary threat to humanity (Wallis & Loy, 2021).⁴ Drawing attention to the narrative of an urgent planetary emergency, we suggest, can tell us about how these movements envision action in the present, at the intersection between an ontological sketch of the planet in crisis and a vision for political change suitable for the former. XR and JSO were founded in the UK and thus share significant links. While XR has members and operates in 45 countries but retains a core focus on British politics, JSO specifically mobilises against the UK government's leniency on fossil fuel and energy. As a global youth movement originating in Greta Thunberg's lone protests outside the Swedish Parliament, FfF operates primarily via mass demonstrations that are organised as 'climate strikes' on Fridays. The high points of FfF's activism were fall 2019, when 4 million people participated in 4500 actions worldwide on one Friday, and again leading up to the Cop27 summit in fall 2022 (Gayle, 2022). XR and JSO deploy a twin political strategy of peaceful but, compared to FfF, more disruptive protests, which frequently include strategic roadblocks and mediatisable protests stunts (Shirreff, 2023). In the UK, 2023 examples of XR action include activists pouring black paint outside UK Levelling Up minister Michael Gove's office to protest against his approval of a new coalmine in Cumbria (Gayle, 2023) and splattering the London headquarters of the lobbying firm UK Finance in pink (XR, 2023b). Despite these differences, the three movements share a tactical focus on civil disobedience directed against industry, government, and finance. They aim to achieve a social tipping point in support of decisive climate politics via high public visibility (Gunningham, 2019; Wahlström et al., 2019).

Narratives of crisis, catastrophe and imminent threat play an important role in prioritising political action on protecting a narrowly conceptualised, non-human environment. Key is the assertion of the climate crisis as a matter of scientific fact; politics must 'listen to the science' (FfF, 2023a) and 'tell the truth' (JSO, 2023a; XR, 2023c) about the consequences of climate change. The landing page of JSO's website prominently displays a quote from the UK's former chief scientific advisor, David King: 'What we do over the next three to four years, I believe, is going to determine the future of humanity' (JSO, 2023b). In the face of the scientifically proven climate catastrophe, the only available political choices are mobilising 'on behalf of life' (XR, 2019, p. 18) or accepting species annihilation. Because the threat of species extinction dwarfs all other human concerns, extinction activism maintains that it cannot afford to become trapped in the ideological battles of established party politics but must transcend them. A protester at one of JSO's April 2023 marches clearly express this sentiment: 'This is life or death, survival or collective suicide. [...] This is bigger than World War 2, the Miners' strike, and the Berlin Wall, bigger than the Poll Tax Riots. We need a human tipping point. It's time to pick a side' (JSO, 2023a). XR goes furthest here, distancing itself from the strategies of left-wing grassroots movements by maintaining friendly relationships with the police. Activists at different XR protest sites were captured marching to

⁴ The three movements we focus on should not be understood as case studies that are explored fully or allow for generalisable insights, but merely as examples that stipulate the primarily theoretical analysis developed in this paper. While we believe that the markers of extinction activism are visible beyond the three examples explored here, asserting this goes beyond the scope of this paper, and hence does not constitute one of its claims.

the chant 'police, we love you, but we are doing this for our children'.⁵ The choice of non-partisan colours to represent their movements underlines the planetary, boundary-transgressive messaging of extinction activism. JSO displays its messages and images on orange ground, whereas XR frequently chooses pink: XR's April 2019 protests in Oxford Circus, for instance, were spearheaded by a bright pink sailboat, strikingly floating in a sea of activists.

The narrative of a serious, potentially lethal climate crisis that requires urgent, non-partisan response that drives all three activist movements shapes the political aims they formulate. While environmental destruction is linked to the politics and economics of Western modernity, the need for systemic change is here trumped by the necessity to mitigate the threat of climate change now. XR, for instance, recognises the climate crisis as the effect of the capitalist-colonial 'extermination of biological diversity and of Indigenous cultures' (Shiva, 2019, p. 23; see also: XR, 2023d). However, the movement's three political aims are focused on achieving urgent action on environmental protection, and as such are addressed to the UK's existing political leadership only: acknowledging the reality of the climate emergency, achieving net zero by 2025 and creating a "Citizens Assembly On Climate and Ecological Justice" to guide policy-making (XR, 2023c). For FfF, the campaign for a March 2022 protest march acknowledges the interwoven histories of liberal capitalism, resource extractivism and colonialism similar to XR: 'Colonizers and capitalists are at the core of every system of oppression that has caused the climate crisis, and decolonization' (FfF, 2023f).⁶ While the demand of climate reparations appears here locally within the messaging of FfF, the movement's official declarations mirror the narrow, environmental policy focus of XR: keeping the global temperature rise below 1.5 °C, following the Paris agreement, and uniting behind the science (FfF, 2023a).

Comparatively, the activism of JSO features a more specific aim, though equally addressed to the UK's existing political leadership: a commitment to halting new fossil fuel licensing and production (JSO, 2023b). This specific aim is embedded in a wider political narrative that emphasises the need for the UK to invest in renewable energy and transition to a carbon-neutral economy within the coming eight years (ibid.). Despite this narrower focus, JSO does also highlight the globally imbalanced power relations that the current climate crisis is situated in. An example of this is the campaign speech by Indigenous Colombian activist Juan Pablo Gutierrez on the movement's blog. Here, Gutierrez emphasises that the climate crisis is 'created and fuelled by those countries who call themselves world powers – and who are actually still colonisers under a different name' (JSO, 2023c).

3. Critical Anthropocene Theory: ecology beyond positivism, humanism, universalism

Extinction activism has attracted criticism from academics, activists and journalists (Akec, 2019; Russ, 2022). Commentators from the critical left particularly take issue with the pro-police attitude of XR and the new environmentalism's rejection of links to established left-wing activism. In an unlikely alliance with right-wing and centrist media reporting (Aitchison, Bucks, & Henn, 2020; Lewis, 2019), they also decry that extinction activism brackets the concerns of those whose socio-economic position renders voluntary arrests or drastic lifestyle changes unviable. In the following, we mobilise Critical Anthropocene Theory to examine the political presumptions and implications of extinction activism beyond the superficial criticism of 'too white, too

⁵ Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAH3AkuNC08>.

⁶ The loose organisational structure of FfF further means that branches in different locations at times formulate distinct aims that are not always echoed in the umbrella messaging of the movement, such as the demand to set up a €100bn national climate fund by protesters in Berlin in 2022 (Gayle, 2022).

middle-class' (Lewis, 2019). What we term Critical Anthropocene Theory in this paper is constituted by a quickly growing, heterogeneous body of recent scholarship that applies posthuman, new materialist and increasingly de-colonial social theory to the issue of climate change (Bennett, 2005; Chakrabarty, 2021; Colebrook, 2014; Haraway, 2018; Latour, 2017, 2021; Stengers, 2013; Youatt, 2020). We distinguish Critical Anthropocene theory on the one hand from scholarship that explores environmental governance in proximity to the (positivist) sciences. Critical Anthropocene Theory indeed developed as a counter-perspective to science-inflected approaches that map how human societies can pool resources, skills and managerial tools to meet and conquer the threat of climate change (Hamilton, 2013; Steffen et al., 2011).

On the other hand, we also view Critical Anthropocene Theory as distinct from Anthropocene scholarship that calls for a reorientation of social life and political governance along established or at least already visible epistemic and political lines (Burke et al., 2016; Dryzek & Pickering, 2019; Kelly, 2019). Critical Anthropocene Theory takes seriously the ontological challenge of the Anthropocene. Being and acting in planetary relations with other humans and nonhumans must here be rethought first before a politics that addresses, rather than deepens, an ecological crisis rooted in modernity's misguided humanism can be enacted. In the Anthropocene, the first political act of modern humans must be to render uncertain everything that is thought about and done to the Earth (Latour, 2017, pp. 190–197; Chakrabarty, 2021 pp. 150–152). Like other overview classifications of the vast and complex Anthropocene scholarship (Chipato and Chandler, 2023; Lundborg, 2022; Randazzo & Richter, 2021), we acknowledge that our Critical Anthropocene Theory label involves a degree of simplification, and brackets certain nuances. However, we maintain that the frame Critical Anthropocene Theory is fit for the task at hand, which is to highlight a distinct branch of environmental scholarship that adds an ontological political register to present discussions on climate change governance.⁷

Critical Anthropocene Theory offers a framework to problematise how heavily extinction activism relies on straight-forward scientific truth-claims to establish the reality of the climate crisis and the urgency to politically act on it. Where the new environmental movements urge us to 'listen to the best united science currently available' (Fff, 2023a) because 'the science is clear ... the clock is ticking' (XR, 2023b), critical Anthropocene scholarship highlights how the modern hubris of a rationalism that can fully calculate, predict and thereby control action from the nonhuman environment is exactly what caused climate change in the first place. To be clear, Critical Anthropocene Theory is not simply

⁷ Anthropocene scholarship is often categorised through its use of time (Rothe, 2020, p. 147). The distinction between different temporalities can to an extent, be used to capture the differences between positivist Anthropocene theory (and an extinction activism that echoes its concerns) and Critical Anthropocene Theory. While the former is marked by notions of fissure and tipping points that separate the Anthropocene present from the Holocene past, Critical Anthropocene Theory draws attention to the continuity of a non-linear, planetary deep time that now invades the linear temporality of modern societies. While the climate apocalypse, for the former, can still be prevented, the eschatology of Critical Anthropocene Theory reveals that humanity will not be saved, and is already living in the drawn-out end of times (Northcott, 2015). At this juncture, Critical Anthropocene Theory has highlighted similarities between its own, non-linear temporality and that of Indigenous cosmologies (Randazzo & Richter, 2021). We suggest that a temporal frame is of limited use for developing the arguments developed in this paper as it would bias the interaction between our three perspectives by over-emphasizing the gap between extinction activism and Indigenous environmentalism and by marginalising differences in the respective non-linear times of Critical Anthropocene Theory and Indigenous environmentalism (Alt, 2023). Time offers a way of categorising different ontological and political positions rather than enabling an exploration of the dynamic, flexible, iterative, and agential movement across them.

anti-positivist. It does not reject the alarming findings of climate scientists as false or irrelevant. But, its critical realism insists that we must do more than 'listen to the science' we have. Modern societies must recalibrate their scientific, epistemic and political tools in light of the 'imperative' (Latour, 2021, p. 51) role nonhumans play in shaping all planetary processes. A planetary science suitable for the Anthropocene cannot rely on establishing facts via distant observation and calculation. It must accept its intertwinement with experience, the local, incomplete and dynamically evolving status of its facts (Latour, 2017, pp. 13–19; 2021, pp. 31–33; 2021, p. 113; Colebrook, 2019, p. 3).⁸

Stengers describes the scientific process of 'characterising' the Anthropocene as more akin to writing science fiction than it is to a positivist science aimed at 'unveiling' an objective, pre-existent truth (2015, p. 34). For Stengers, accepting the ecological relationality of the human condition must also mean 'accepting to think with this fact: there is no choice' (2015, p. 58) but to ditch the modern-liberal compass for locating truth, value and societal goalposts. As Latour puts it, 'to get out, we need to get out of the idea of getting out' (2021, p. 146). The Anthropocene is, for the critical scholarship, not a geoscientific state to be ascertained from the distant observer position of modern science but a mode of being whose unfolding marks the immanent condition of all human pursuits. Relinquishing modernity's diagnostic certainty calls into question the assumption that the climate catastrophe can be resolved via quick and decisive governmental action, which underpins the political demands of extinction activism. The JSO website urges: 'Don't be late'; 'What we do over the next three to four years ... is going to determine the future of humanity' (JSO, 2023b). Fff, similarly, explains the need for climate strike action with the insistence that 'there is still time to change, but time is of the essence. The sooner we act, the better our shared future will be' (Fff, 2023c; see also: 2023d).

Critical Anthropocene Theory further breaks open the idea of a singular, universally shared environmental crisis itself. It conceptualises recent ecological challenges as unequally distributed and diversely framed. Looking beyond the experiences and ontologies of the Global North, the critical scholarship highlights that the existential danger of climate change is unprecedented for liberal moderns only. For communities subject to the continuously unfolding catastrophe of colonisation, on the contrary, climate change is only one in a long sequence of lethal threats (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2016, p. 104; Haraway, 2018, pp. 70–82). Elizabeth Povinelli recounts the plot of a film produced by the Aboriginal art collective *Karrabing* to illustrate how the Anthropocene disrupts the idea of a universal order of values; for a group of young Indigenous men wrongfully accused of theft, a toxic wasteland that the police would not enter becomes a space of safety (2021, pp. 306–307).

Extinction activism recognises the path-dependent relationship between imperial colonialism and today's unequally distributed burdens of climate change that places colonised peoples at the receiving end of human and nonhuman violence (XR, 2023e; XR, 2023f). The social media accounts of the new environmental movements regularly showcase the effects of climate change on different parts of the world, from water scarcity in South America (XR, 2023g) to flooding in the Philippines (Fff, 2023f, 2023e; 2023f), to signal solidarity with climate activists across the globe. As Fff states in a tweet from 2022, 'We need to work with the indigenous, feminists, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, queer, anti-racist movements' (Fff, 2023g). Critical Anthropocene Theory highlights that such expansion of the geographic scope and temporal lineage of the climate catastrophe does not subvert the universalisation

⁸ The scholarship we discuss as Critical Anthropocene Theory here certainly encompasses different ontological and epistemological stances – Colebrook, for instance, is closer to a post-structuralist perspective than Stengers or the late Latour. However, we suggest that the ecological writings of all thinkers included fall within a critical realist spectrum insofar as meaningful knowledge about the planetary condition is possible but partial and situated.

of a Western perspective on the climate crisis. For extinction activism, it is still one and the same existential threat that singularly ‘affects everyone’, including ‘vulnerable African communities’ (FF, 2023d). Critical Anthropocene Theory pulls the ontological rug from underneath the science-led, management-focused responses to the climate crisis that extinction activism calls on governments to implement. Viewed from the perspective of Critical Anthropocene Theory, the humanist ontology of modern liberalism, which democratic institutions are steeped in, precludes a genuinely transformative Anthropocene politics. The modern State, like science, ‘cannot be trusted in the face of Gaia’ (Stengers, 2015, p. 75) because both are caught up in the parameters of human exceptionalism, rationalist planning and linear progress that have first given rise to the climate catastrophe, and then concealed its effects for so long.

Critical Anthropocene Theory politicises the ontology of environmental politics to highlight that a genuinely transformative Anthropocene politics cannot grow from the same ground that has nourished planetary exploitation and careless resource extraction. It calls for reconfiguring our understanding of being and agency first, and reinventing a posthuman politics worthy of humanity’s entangled condition on this basis, second (Colebrook, 2014, p. 114; Haraway, 2018; Stengers, 2015, p. 104). The consequence is not, or at least not for most Anthropocene thinkers, that all that is left to do for humanity is to complacently wait for the assured destruction of all life on Earth. Critical Anthropocene Theory does not seek to bracket political concerns. On the contrary, it aims to undo modernity’s depoliticization of large parts of social life at the intersection of human and nonhuman shaping power via its ontopolitical reconfiguration of the actors, spaces and processes of politics (Haraway, 2018; Latour, 2003; Reynolds & Szerszynski, 2015; Youatt, 2020). Human agency, and political action with it, must be radically rethought away from ‘modernist planning practices oriented around logics of centralisation, control and prediction’ and towards ‘principles of reflexivity, adaptive management and institutional change [...] as a means of living with and developing through emergent disruptions’ (Wakefield et al., 2020, p. 4). The ontopolitical intervention of Critical Anthropocene Theory produces new modes of politics, which are captured with labels like ‘resilience’ (Wakefield et al., 2020) or kinship (Haraway, 2018), but retain a degree of abstraction because they cannot readily be linked or translated to our still thoroughly modernist practices of environmental governance. A radically different environmental politics can only be fully conceived of, and deployed, once the Anthropocene’s posthuman ontological revolution has taken place.

4. Indigenous environmentalism: fractious relations and open-ended ecological negotiations

In this section, we show that Indigenous environmentalism, like Critical Anthropocene Theory, approaches ecological sustainability as relational but fractured and uneven. This challenges the singular totality of the climate crisis that underpins extinction activism. But where both extinction activism and Critical Anthropocene Theory latently privilege the contributions of the nonhuman environment, Indigenous environmentalism highlights how negotiating sustainability between the needs and demands of different, relationally connected actors can sometimes mean prioritising the, in themselves multi-faceted, needs of particular human communities (often centrally involved in the stewardship of their human/nonhuman ecosystems). Indigenous cosmologies encompass both concern for the nonhuman environment that sustains Indigenous communities and for the physical, cultural and economic welfare of their human members as distinctly important (Whyte, 2018a; Muller et al., 2019, pp. 406–409). As Anishinaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake

Simpson argues, ‘separating environmental knowledge from other kinds of knowledge ... violates the fundamental belief system and understanding inherent in Indigenous Knowledge systems’ (1999, p. 64).⁹ Mohawk leader Katsi Cook (2018), in this sense, draws on Indigenous cosmologies to ground her environmental activist practice, which is focused on protecting and enhancing the lives of women. Commenting on Cook’s activism, Anishinaabeg scholar Winona LaDuke explains that the ‘first environment, from Katsi’s perspective, is the starting place for it all [...] The first environment is about a baby, a woman, and family. [...] That is a part of the Mohawk belief system. That is why, whether it is GM contamination or the mental health of the mother, all must be cared for if the baby is to be healthy’ (2015, p. 41).

In *On the Streets and in the State House*, Diane-Michelle Prindeville shows how Indigenous women environmental activists in New Mexico view their encompassing understanding of nature as a clear separating line from Western environmentalism (2004, p. 125). As one activist points out, Indigenous ecology centres ‘the spiritual value of nature’ and locates ‘nature not only in a patch of forest, but also in the middle of downtown. An Indigenous environmentalist does not see anything “wild” about nature’ (Linda, quoted in Prindeville, 2004, p. 125). For an environmental politics informed by the expansive Indigenous notion of ecology, this means that protecting nature cannot be severed from the human concerns, efforts and relations the former is connected to in complex ways (LaDuke, 2006; Stevenson, 2006). Discussing the “White Earth Land Recovery Project”, Anishinaabeg scholar LaDuke states that the ‘struggle to preserve the trees of White Earth is not solely about forest preservation and biodiversity. It is also about cultural transformation, for the Anishinaabeg forest culture cannot exist without the forest’ (2015, p. 169).

The interwovenness of human and nonhuman concerns in Indigenous cosmologies means that different dimensions of sustainability must continuously be balanced and negotiated. In the early 1990s, the Campo Band of Mission Indians put forward a proposal for creating a landfill on their territory, which sparked outrage on the part of local farmers, who worried that the waste would pollute their surrounding land. The Campo tribe chairman Ralph Goff, in response, defended the proposal by emphasizing the economic benefits for the tribe while assuring that ‘environmentally [the project] can be done’ (Goff, quoted in Smithers, 2015, p. 91). In the case of the landfill, which was eventually built in 1993 after a court had confirmed the environmental safety of the proposal, the Campo community weighed up the distinct needs of humans and nonhumans and decided to prioritise the former, not ignoring the latter but rendering them secondary in this instance. A similar balancing of divergent needs underpins the 1998 Oglala Sioux proposal to generate income and employment by farming hemp in the Pine Ridge Reservation (Ecoffey, 2019).

Interacting with nonhumans in a sustainable fashion was a concern here – the tribe selected a plant that could be grown sustainably. But the need to sustain nonhuman nature did not trump the desire to address poverty and unemployment, which ultimately legitimised the plan to alter tribal land (ibid.). The case-by-case balancing that these political decisions exhibit is, we argue, rendered possible by Indigenous ecologies where human and nonhuman actors and issues are linked, but remain distinct and can stand in tension and opposition to each other. The political resolution of these tensions can necessitate prioritising human concerns without violating the principles of cosmological relationality. ‘I believe in ecology, in the restoration of the human spirit, of the Earth’, a New Mexico Indigenous activist observes, ‘but people need to work to eat. We have to have jobs, responsible industries’ (Dalia, quoted in Prindeville, 2004, p. 127). The ‘native solution[s]’ (LaDuke, 2015, p. 6) to the ecological crisis that Indigenous environmentalism advocates for,

⁹ Like critical Anthropocene thinking, Indigenous thought and scholarship also rejects Western positivism as appropriate means to establish such environmental knowledge (Deloria, 1995).

for instance renewable energy, do not bracket human concerns, but must always be able to care for both the nonhuman environment and the wellbeing of Indigenous human communities.

As shown above, extinction activism renders the climate catastrophe the umbrella threat under which all other social issues and activist causes are subsumed. 'The problem is ecology. The problem is the environment. The problem is biodiversity. The problem is capitalism. The problem is colonialism. The problem is power. The problem is inequality' (Knights, 2019, p. 32). Presuming that distinctly human dimensions of the Anthropocene crisis will be sufficiently addressed simply by resolving the planetary umbrella threat here flattens the former. In Indigenous environmentalism, we see a careful balancing of and negotiations between different human and nonhuman concerns. Viewed against its background, extinction activism not only offers no means to resolve questions of priority and focus arising in the implementation of environmental politics. It also latently privileges the protection of nonhumans over the welfare of human societies. As JSO reminds us: 'It's time to pick a side' (JSO, 2023a).

Critical Anthropocene Theory conceptualises its uneven networks of shaping power to avoid such a flattening of ecological relations and is acutely aware that the agency of particular humans and nonhumans might not align, or even conflict. Wakefield and Braun (2018) discussion of 'oystertexture' as flood protection, Jane Bennett's (2005) nod to the agency of electrical grids or Latour's early Actor-Network-Theory work (Latour & Woolgar, 1986) all emphasise that 'unruly' nonhumans must, but cannot always be, persuaded to cooperate for human aims to be reached. However, the theoretical tools of Critical Anthropocene Theory are unsuitable to problematise the prioritisation of nonhuman over human concerns within the flat climate crisis of extinction activism because it is latently replicated in its own ontopolitics. Critical Anthropocene Theory is written as an intervention into the humanist mainstream of social theory. The political writings of Anthropocene thinkers hence, in the first place, ontologically re-map politics with a particular focus on the contribution of the nonhuman – as 'flowering ... on the previously neutralised ground of the technical' (Reynolds & Szerszynski, 2015, p. 71; see also: Latour, 2003).

Where the political focus of Critical Anthropocene Theory is coloured by its theoretical history and contribution, the way relational cosmologies inform Indigenous environmental practices is shaped by the concrete demands of communal life under settler colonial conditions of adversity and scarcity. These, at times, require the prioritisation of human matters. Where Critical Anthropocene Theory tends to zoom in on nonhuman agents only when considering the political practice of its entangled world, Indigenous ecologies are without such legacy bias. What Indigenous environmentalism thus highlights for Anthropocene scholarship is a way forward beyond its established focus on bringing in the nonhuman. Such an Anthropocene theory could not only tell us how nonhumans assemble, focus and limit the agency of human communities, but also where and how their influence must occasionally be managed, limited or rendered secondary.

5. Three models of political change for the Anthropocene

This final section will focus the above conversation between extinction activism, Critical Anthropocene Theory and Indigenous environmentalism on their respective visions for political change. Where extinction activism is driven by the imperative to *change fast* and the political proposal of Critical Anthropocene Theory counters the former with an emphasis on *changing ontology*, Indigenous environmentalism offers a 'third way' perspective centred on *pragmatic action towards radical change*. Where Western environmentalism sets up a choice between quick action with existing political means and radically transformative politics on posthuman, relational grounds, Indigenous environmentalism reveals this binary as false, because both can work in conjunction. While Indigenous environmentalism employs liberal-modern political tools where necessary, these are always mobilised

towards radical change beyond the ontological, political and economic parameters of Western modernity.

Distinctly non-modern aspects of Indigenous spirituality and cultural practices are central to Indigenous environmental action. This does however not mean that Indigenous environmentalism primarily aims at the preservation of a static, ringfenced mode of Indigenous agency. The link between cosmological frameworks and political practice is here essentially dynamic and can thus adapt to the changing contexts in which human and nonhuman sustainability are to be secured. As Anishinaabeg scholar and activist Deborah McGregor puts it, Indigenous ecologies are 'based in part on ancient philosophies' but also 'Indigenous peoples' [...] role in creating an expanded dialogue of sustainability informed by their understanding of Mother Earth and humanity's obligations to her. The ideas are both ancient and innovative' (2020, p. 138). For Indigenous communities, actual sustainability requires the radical transformation of the settler-colonial State and of the economic exploitation it facilitates. For the purpose of this radical transformation, some (not all) Indigenous environmentalism (Hess et al., 2017; Piper, 2019), albeit reluctantly, mobilises the very tools of modern-liberal politics in addition to distinctly Indigenous action.¹⁰ An elected official from New Mexico, where Indigenous environmental activism operates via the interconnected strategies of grassroots politics and securing office (Prindeville, 2004, pp. 150-55), expresses her reservations clearly. While she perceives herself as 'coopted by the system' of settler colonial politics, where 'you have to play within [its] rules' (Jacinda quoted in Prindeville, 2004, p. 133), she also acknowledges that she 'can be more effective from within the system. You still have to keep pushing, but from a political perspective, I can be more effective' (ibid.).

How the desire to achieve large-scale political transformation trumps the rejection of the modern-liberal political institutions interwoven with settler colonialism also becomes apparent in the political speeches of LaDuke, who ran as Vice-presidential candidate for the US Green Party in 1996 and 2000. LaDuke makes it clear that, as an Indigenous woman, she is by 'nature not someone who is inclined to participate in [US] electoral politics' where 'the native community [...] was not given the right to vote until 1924' (1996). However, these concerns are outweighed by the political necessity to fundamentally transform economic production, agriculture and the distribution of wealth towards a US society that is sustainable for humans and nonhumans. 'We don't want a larger piece of the pie', LaDuke makes clear, 'we want a different pie' (ibid.). Sustainability for Indigenous (and other) humans and nonhumans cannot be realised without large-scale, structural change. In other words, Indigenous environmentalism cannot help but work towards 'a different pie' (LaDuke, 1996). Yet, in the face of continuous crises brought about by settler colonialism, activists mobilise all political means available to actualise this political otherwise.

In a similar sense, economic planning and labour practices are also deployed as a means of creative Indigenous agency that is charged - but in what it can produce not determined or limited - by ecological cosmological principles. The development plans that Hawaii's Moloka'i community put forward for the island of Moloka'i exemplify how Indigenous communities are actively seeking to implement an ecological and economic otherwise beyond capitalist extractivism. But rather than outrightly rejecting tourism business on their land, which has mainly been driven by international property developers, the Moloka'i developed their own vision of the former, 'the ruling principle on the island being 'Moloka'i: Not for Sale. Just Visit' (McGregor, quoted in Baker,

¹⁰ While the examples used here are North American, they are representative of a type of pragmatic engagement with liberal democratic politics on the part of Indigenous environmental activists that can also be observed in other parts of the world, for instance the cooperation with State actors in shared stewardship arrangements in New Zealand (Tănăsescu, 2020) or Indigenous lobbying for the legal enshrinement of rights for nature in Ecuador (Kauffman & Martin, 2014).

2011). The ‘Moloka’i proposal aims to guide and limit Western-liberal economic activity through a framework of Indigenous rules that prevent exploitative engagement with the humans and nonhumans on the island. The economic and environmental future they invoke is the product of a dynamic interaction with the ideas and structures of liberal modernity.

Extinction activism is motivated by the same fundamental scepticism towards a democratic politics underpinned by possessive liberalism. It distances itself from the ‘broken parliamentary democracy’ (XR, 2023a; see also: JSO, 2023b) that ‘has brought the whole planet to the brink of ecological disaster’ (Yamin, 2019, p. 43). Where Indigenous environmental activism however pragmatically accepts the usefulness of democratic institutions and processes, and utilises them towards the goal of radical political change for humans and nonhumans, extinction activism is marked by a different kind of compromise. In contrast to their 20th century counterparts (Ollitrault, 2022), extinction activist movements neither set up extra-parliamentary political fora nor do they show appetite for entering party politics. Driven by the imperative to achieve *fast change* in the face of the impending climate catastrophe, it opts for the political ‘short cut’ of creating public pressure to force meaningful action via the processes of parliamentary democracy it ostensibly rejects. Aspirations for large-scale structural change that would address the socio-cultural and economic dynamics that extinction activism identifies as the root causes of the Anthropocene crisis are here bracketed for the benefit of quick policy action.

XR’s plans for the Citizens Assembly that forms one of its key political aims illustrates this pointedly. XR worries that any attempt to change the UK’s political system, which would require a Parliamentary majority, ‘not only potentially delays action [on the climate emergency], it also is no guarantee that commitments won’t simply be rescinded in the future’ (XR, 2023a). For this reason, they focus on mobilising public support for climate politics, through which the ‘government will be obliged to take the [citizen assembly’s] recommendations on board’ (ibid.). FfF and JSO stop short of formulating programmes for structural, systemic change altogether but address national and global political leaderships with specific policy goals (JSO, 2023d). FfF is most explicit in expressing that they ‘do not make concrete political demands ... it is not our job to determine specific policies. What we are asking for is political accountability’ (FfF, 2023h). Extinction activism is content with forcing the hands of existing governmental elites on climate issues while leaving what they themselves recognise as the economic, cultural and political root causes of the Anthropocene crisis unaddressed. Eric Swyngedouw, for this reason, labels extinction activism an ‘ecological populism’ that ‘does not invite a transformation of the existing socio-ecological order, but rather calls on the elites to undertake action such that nothing really has to change, so that life can basically continue as before’ (2022, p. 910).

For Critical Anthropocene Theory, as articulated in the previous section, a response to the planetary crisis that is focused on the political management of environmental changes and their social effects is insufficient. Here, meaningful change away from modernity’s environmental destruction cannot take place via collective political action only but must be located on the level of ontology. The imperative is here to induce *ontological change* that dislodges the primacy of Man over nature and Man’s right to own, claim, extract, and waste resources to fuel growing capitalist economies. To achieve this ontological de-centring away from modern Anthropos, Critical Anthropocene Theory produces novel frameworks for a posthuman, relational environmental politics, but brackets its practical workings and implementation in a still humanist political context (Wakefield et al., 2020; Wakefield & Braun, 2018; Haraway, 2018). The juxtaposition with Indigenous environmentalism shows that Critical Anthropocene Theory, against its best intentions, thereby de-prioritises political action. The presumption that politics needs to take place on the right ontological grounds (see also: Povinelli, 2021, p. 15–18) disconnects Critical Anthropocene Theory from present political activism.

The Western response to the political problem of the Anthropocene, we argue, reveals a binary choice between decisive political action (extinction activism) and radical ontopolitical reconfiguration (Critical Anthropocene Theory). Either option makes a powerful case for why its particular response is urgently needed. But taking action in the register of either practical politics or ontology here seems to require pausing or at least de-prioritising transformation in the respective other register. If, as Critical Anthropocene Theory suggests, modern societies must reimagine being and governing in the Anthropocene, any action taken with modern-humanist political means would only deepen the planetary crisis. If the challenge is, as diagnosed by extinction activism, to mobilise the full force of scientific knowledge and governmental action to render planetary life in the Anthropocene sustainable, then we cannot afford to waste time on questioning whether our epistemic and political tools are actually fit for purpose.

Indigenous environmentalism reveals the political/ontological change binary of the Western environmentalism as unnecessary. Cosmological frameworks and political practices are here in themselves dynamic, and interact flexibly, without either determining the respective other.¹¹ Indigenous environmentalism is marked by *pragmatic action towards radical change*, which can compromise on using exclusively Indigenous practices and actions but remains focused on achieving radical change beyond the liberal-modern structures of colonial economics and politics. In Indigenous environmentalism, political outcomes are not determined by the ontological situatedness of the tools used to achieve them. This means that all available political means, both Indigenous and modern-liberal, can be mobilised towards a radically changed future. Indigenous environmental political action takes place under uncertain, ever-changing conditions produced by a combination of human and non-human forces. The political means available to govern communities might not yet be those that allow for moving beyond settler-colonial regimes. But they can nevertheless be effective in protecting or advancing Indigenous livelihoods, and thereby open up new futures, with new opportunities for political transformation (Corntassel, 2012; Whyte, 2022).

Indigenous environmentalism employs the means of modern and Indigenous politics to bring forth an alternative future that is not untainted by the ideas and structures of liberal modernity but assembled through the use and re-combination of both Indigenous and liberal ideas and practices (Bouich, 2021). This fluid relationship between cosmological base and political practice is clearly visible in Indigenous politics of resurgence, understood as the revitalisation of traditional Indigenous practices and the re-establishment of land ownership and political sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2016, p. 24). While the recovery and practice of authentic Indigenous principles is central here, Indigenous resurgence has one face turned towards the past and one towards an alternative future yet to be carved out through political action. Moving towards an Indigenous otherwise does not follow the model of linear progress (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013, p. 80). Speculative and aesthetic practices, such as art, craft and storytelling, offer a creative means to ‘live on in ways that sustain Indigenous culture, health, identity, and sovereignty and engender activism’ (Horton, 2017, p. 49) for future communities who will live under condition distinct from both Indigenous pasts and modern-liberal presents (Kuwada & Yamashiro, 2016, p. 19). The dynamic interaction between ontology and politics that drives Indigenous environmentalism, we argue, opens new pathways of action for, and importantly, interaction between, extinction

¹¹ In part, the prioritisation of transformative political power over political expression that remains originally and exclusively Indigenous is, as shown above, certainly the outcome of pragmatic-strategic considerations (see also: Smithers, 2015). However, we argue that it also follows from the fact that Indigenous ecological cosmologies are only to an extent equivalent with Western ontology. They constitute dynamic resources for creative production rather than grounding being and action in a static, linear sense.

activism and Critical Anthropocene Theory. It highlights that supporting fast political action with existing political means does not preclude establishing and working towards the end goal of more radical social-systemic and ontological change. Anthropocene environmentalism does not need an order of priority for overcoming the worldviews of liberal modernity and committing to radical political change in, and with the means of, the political present, but can work towards both at the same time.

6. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the politics of JSO's, XR's, and FFF's extinction activism by triangulating them with the politics of Critical Anthropocene Theory and Indigenous environmentalism. Doing so, it has been shown how Critical Anthropocene Theory offers a useful lens for problematising the modern-anthropocentric underpinnings of the above movements' political proposals. We highlighted that extinction activism is driven by a simplistic positivism that universalises climate change as a singularly urgent political cause that dwarfs all other human concerns. The narrative of urgent planetary threat firstly leads extinction activism to embrace political aims of environmental management and mitigation that are undergirded by an unbroken faith in the very same human reason, problem-solving agency and capacity for steady progress. Critical Anthropocene Theory has also allowed us to draw out how extinction activism's acknowledgement of local and global differences in the face of climate change falls short because it does not acknowledge the radically different realities unfolding under the umbrella of the climate crisis.

Placing this Anthropocene Theory critique of extinction activism in conversation with Indigenous environmentalism, we have shown, opens up pathways for political action in the Anthropocene. Indigenous environmentalism is based on cosmologies that understand humans and nonhumans as inherently intertwined, and necessitate social life and political action to function sustainably for both. It thus supports the Anthropocene Theory critique of an ontologically unitary, political flat climate crisis that is present in extinction activist discourses. But while both perspectives are vigilant towards the frictions and tensions of relational being, Critical Anthropocene Theory's focus on bringing the nonhuman into the frameworks of social theory, human geography and the social sciences means that it latently prioritises the agency and concerns of the nonhuman Earth. Indigenous environmentalism, at this juncture, highlights that negotiating relational being can mean prioritising the different needs, demands and governmental capacities of human communities.

Extinction activism, Critical Anthropocene Theory and Indigenous environmentalism share the political objective of working towards a future beyond the possessive liberalism that is destroying the planet > However, the logic of political change that marks each is distinct. Driven by the imminence of a planetary catastrophe, extinction activism opts for mobilising public support to achieve fast change via existing political institutions. Critical Anthropocene Theory, on the contrary, urges for ontological change as the necessary condition for an environmental politics that is distinct from liberal-modern governance in a meaningful way. Indigenous environmentalism, we have argued, transcends the binary between fast change and ontological change that haunts the Western Anthropocene. Indigenous environmentalism mobilises relational cosmologies in a dynamic fashion that does not prevent engagement with the ideas, institutions and procedures of liberal democracy. Indigenous environmentalism operates via a logic of pragmatic change that is flexible in terms of the political means utilised, but always works towards radical structural change away from settler colonial modernity.

Importantly, this paper does not claim that Indigenous environmentalism offers a superior mode of ecological engagement that Western environmental thinking and environmental political activism should move towards. In particular, we do not mobilise Indigenous environmentalism to dismiss extinction activism, along with commentators

from the political right, as a middle-class, lifestyle 'eco rabble' (Aitchison et al., 2020). Rather, we suggest that placing the Western Anthropocene, in theory and in practice, in conversation with Indigenous environmentalism can render visible some of its blind spots, and open up new political pathways. The insight to be gained from our reading of Indigenous environmentalism, we suggest, lies precisely in the openness to use, mobilise, divert and balance different means of action, activist strategies and political focal points within an environmentalism that is committed to a non-anthropocentric worldview but must, at the same time, tackle complex and multi-layered human and nonhuman issues. The provocation implied is that Critical Anthropocene Theory can free itself from the deterministic need to establish a better ground for environmental politics via an abstracted futurity before activist practices can be engaged with, endorsed and deployed.¹² The divergences between Western and Indigenous positions on non-anthropocentric and non-modern politics reveal productive plurality and room for exploration that Anthropocene scholarship, which mostly remains within the, for posthumanists, ontologically safe territories of adaptive, resilience-based political action, has yet to fully engage.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Elisa Randazzo: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Hannah Richter:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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¹² Critical Indigenous Scholars have critiqued the tendency of Anthropocene scholarship to deploy Indigenous concepts and principles in mainly metaphorical ways. Such selective engagement with Indigeneity bears the potential for manipulation and appropriation, but also abstracts from material contexts (Watts, 2013).

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