

# **Breaking Consensus, Transforming Metabolisms. Notes on direct-action against fossil fuels through Urban Political Ecology**

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*(Forthcoming on Social Text, Issue 150, Volume 40, Number 1, March 2022)*

## **1. Introduction**

The impacts of climate breakdown are increasing their toll, hitting hardest the countries and communities least responsible for climate-changing emissions.<sup>1</sup> The facts have never been clearer<sup>2</sup> but facts do not speak for themselves. Scientific consensus does not, and cannot, establish a clear cut, universal political consensus. To acknowledge that the climate is changing due to anthropogenic activity is different from determining which experiences and understandings of climate change – in its causes, effects and solutions – ultimately matter.<sup>3</sup> This is the realm of politics: a field traversed by a multiplicity of standpoints and structured by unequal relations of symbolic and material power. Therefore, a consensus-based conception of the political and a singular conception of climate change may prevent the articulation of conflicting interests and of competing visions that do not fit dominant framings, and may end up in reproducing hegemonic narratives thriving on the invisibilization of disagreement.<sup>4</sup>

Debates around climate mitigation exemplify such tensions. Scientists agree that deep decarbonization is unavoidable to mitigate global warming but while “cost effective” gradual mitigation pathways and faith in technological solutions are part of a global consensus around climate change governance,<sup>5</sup> decisive reductions in fossil fuels use – the main culprit of greenhouse gases emissions – through supply side policies have not gained traction and are still considered politically challenging.<sup>6</sup> In this context, a rising wave of climate justice activism is mobilizing to decommission emitting devices, establish a moratorium on new fossil energy projects and leave fossil fuels in the ground.<sup>7</sup> Just underneath the thin cover of consensus, there lies the conflict attempting to break through.

According to the geographer Erik Swyngedouw,<sup>8</sup> the consensual regime of climate change governance is an outcome of the current post-political condition that attempts to foreclose politicization and evacuate dissent through apparent participation and technocratic expertise in the context of a non-disputed market-based socio-economic organization. Under this condition, the work of climate justice movements becomes more relevant than ever, for they attempt to disrupt the regime of invisibility in which alternative values, desires, experiences of, and solutions to, climate change are relegated, by bringing back dissent as the true engine of politics.<sup>9</sup>

Climate justice movements draw attention to the historical and contemporary inequalities that underlie climate change and make those least responsible for emissions the most affected by climate chaos, advocating for mitigation and adaptation strategies that do not increase vulnerabilities but reduce them, therefore rejecting false solutions.<sup>10</sup> Since the late 2000s, these movements have engendered a new political space for the critique of official climate policies and have engaged in various forms of direct-action, providing a platform for anti-systemic approaches

against the elite capture of the climate debate.<sup>11</sup> At its core, climate justice involves an antagonistic framing of climate politics that breaks with attempts to construct climate change as a “post-political” issue<sup>12</sup> and instead targets the political process itself with an agenda of systemic transformations. Thus, their approach holds the potential to embrace the urgency of ending the fossil fuel era while retaining commitments to justice and equality. But which kind of strategies and tactics are best positioned to counteract the traps of consensus and to forward just transformations?

In this essay, I begin exploring this question through an analysis of what I consider one of the most promising current instances of the climate justice movement: direct-action against fossil fuels’ infrastructure, manufacture and development. Drawing on the conceptual toolkit of Urban Political Ecology (UPE), I frame the debate around solutions to global warming away from a consensus-based conception of the political to bring to center stage multiple aspirations for a metabolic transformation of the socioecological assemblages and imaginaries produced by, and sustaining, the capitalist economy. On this basis, I reflect on the case of the Swedish climate justice movement *Fossilgasfällan* (The Fossil Gas Trap, FGF) through UPE, focusing in particular on the blockade of the Gothenburg gas terminal in 2019. My aim is to provide some initial notes on the potential of direct action against fossil fuels to break consensus around useless and unjust solutions and to enact an effective and transformative climate justice politics.

## **2. An emerging “Blockadia”**

In the thematic map “Blockadia”, the Environmental Justice Atlas reports sixty-nine ongoing cases of resistance movements and place-based mobilizations against fossil fuel projects along the whole chain, from extraction to transportation to combustion.<sup>13</sup> The term Blockadia, popularized by Naomi Klein,<sup>14</sup> refers to this transnational, loosely connected conflict zone where the defense of land, livelihoods and climate is expressed through direct-actions such as blockades, occupations and protests. Local resistance against fossil fuel extraction is not new. In a review based on the Atlas, Temper et al. record three hundred seventy-one cases of conflicts related to fossil fuels from 1997 to 2019.<sup>15</sup> A notable antecedent to the current surge is the fight of the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta against Shell’s operation in the 1990s,<sup>16</sup> culminating in the withdrawal of Shell from Ogoni land. What is new is the growing awareness of the interconnectedness of these spaces as multiple frontlines in a global struggle for socio-environmental and climate justice.

Besides defending local livelihoods, direct action against fossil fuels can be seen as a supply side strategy of climate mitigation from the bottom up.<sup>17</sup> According to Piggot “analysis suggests that a large portion of global fossil fuel reserves will need to remain unburned to keep climate change ‘well below’ 2°C (...) Yet, investment in fossil fuel infrastructure continues at a pace that is inconsistent with agreed climate goals, and no meaningful global policies exist to keep fossil fuels in the ground.”<sup>18</sup> This has been the result of an organized push-back by the fossil fuel industry, employing a variety of tactics to keep its business afloat, like political influence, climate change skepticism, co-option of local groups and other efforts.<sup>19</sup> While neither the European Green Deal (EGD) nor the European Commission energy plans promote the expansion of fossil fuels for climate reasons, in the latest EU list of prioritized energy infrastructure projects – the Projects of Common Interest (PCI), benefiting from simplified permissions and EU funding – there are thirty-

two fossil gas projects eligible for funding of up to twenty-nine billion euros. Since the PCI lists were introduced in 2014, 42% of the total amount of funding has gone to fossil gas infrastructure projects. Moreover, as a recent report shows,<sup>20</sup> governments are planning to produce about 50% more fossil fuels by 2030 than would be consistent with limiting warming to 2°C and 120% more than would be consistent with limiting warming to 1.5°C.<sup>21</sup>

Resistance is thus mounting. In recent years, in North America, grassroots coalitions of Indigenous Nations and environmentalists animated the struggles against the Keystone XL, Dakota Access and Trans Mountain pipelines, catalyzing mass movements of international resonance that have been brutally repressed by state forces.<sup>22</sup> In Europe, a varied and interconnected landscape of direct-action coalitions against fossil fuels has emerged during the last decade, building on the myriad local conflicts against fossil fuel extraction and infrastructure. Some of the most prominent coalitions include *Ende Gelände* (Here and No Further), one of the biggest direct-action climate coalition groups blocking coal mines and coal-fired power plants in Germany since 2015; *Coode Rod* (Red Code), a climate justice group from the Netherlands that amplifies the resistance to gas extraction in Groningen and is the main instigator of the global campaign *Shell Must Fall*; and *Frack Off!* in the UK, that was instrumental in the government's suspension of gas extraction on the British Islands in 2019. Despite growing membership and some victories, these movements are also increasingly criminalized and framed as extremists,<sup>23</sup> becoming the target of state repression through violence,<sup>24</sup> espionage,<sup>25</sup> and counterinsurgency techniques.<sup>26</sup>

What unites such diverse coalitions is the reaction against the occupation of space (both earthly and atmospheric) and of the future provoked by the relentless extraction and burning of fossil fuels. Their repertoire of action includes campaigns for divestment<sup>27</sup> and for legislation against fossil fuels.<sup>28</sup> Alongside these actions, or following their failure, a crucial tactic remains the blockade: a counter-occupation that, besides denouncing the inconsistencies and the hypocrisy of governments and corporations, aims to re-politicize fully the debate around climate change by providing platforms for radical critiques of the status quo. An occupation for liberation through which coordinated movements counteract false solutions and the evacuation of justice concerns, call for wide-ranging transformations and perform visions of alternative futures in the practice of the camp.<sup>29</sup> In the following section, I discuss key concepts of UPE in relation to the approaches and politics of direct-action against fossil fuels. My argument is that these activists display a metabolic perspective of capitalist-driven environmental destruction and global warming, prompting a radical critique of the consensual regime of climate politics through political performances aimed at metabolic transformations.

### **3. Metabolic activism: UPE and direct-action against fossil fuels**

The manifold socioecological processes at the root of global warming, and the uneven distribution of their effects along different geographies and social groups, are inextricably linked to the urbanization of nature. Drawing upon UPE, I define the urbanization of nature as the relentless transformation and mobilization of biophysical entities for feeding the expansion of the urban form on a planetary scale, a process unfolding through the social and material relations organized by the dominant economic system of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

UPE scholars investigate urbanization through the prism of socioecological metabolisms: the dynamic assemblages of political economic processes and biophysical transformations along global networks that make up the concrete realities of cities.<sup>31</sup> A metabolic understanding of nature's urbanization brings to the forefront the ways in which societies incorporate biophysical entities into their functioning, providing insights into the role of power distribution at several scales in determining the drivers, the forms and the outcomes of socio-environmental change. Through this perspective, the analysis of commodities, such as fossil fuels, reveals the processes that turn a material thing into a resource, uncovering the connections between different histories and geographies, the main actors and nodes, the socio-environmental effects and the unequal power relations embedded in metabolic assemblages.

The process of urbanization has never been solely about the shape of the city; neither is it contained within city borders. On the contrary, urbanization has always been about what happens *beyond* urban agglomerations, as the myriads processes fundamental to the building and functioning of cities shape the operational landscapes of global production and supply chains stretching across continents.<sup>32</sup> These *extended* forms of urbanization – sites of resource extraction, agro-industrial production, energy and information circulation, waste management and military occupation – wrap the world in interwoven networks of global metabolic exchanges.<sup>33</sup> The places in which such sites, routes and nodes integral to cities have proliferated are frequently the setting of environmental conflicts waged by impacted communities against processes detrimental to their survival. Alongside local communities, direct-action movements for climate justice are increasingly targeting the ramifications of fossil energy hidden in plain view: the wells and drills through which fossil fuels are extracted; the pipelines, roads, railways, airports and ports that allow their circulation; and the petro-chemical factories that multiply their pervasiveness. The primary aim is to stop them from continuing their activities through the force of social cooperation. Civil disobedience provides the broader framework and the connection with a long genealogy of grassroots action to stir change.<sup>34</sup>

Another crucial insight of UPE is an understanding of the political process as fundamentally shaped by conflict. UPE's approach focuses on the question of who gains from and who pays for particular trajectories of socio-environmental change articulating at several scales.<sup>35</sup> By resorting to physical and discursive strategies of resistance and self-organization of alternatives, impacted communities and activists disrupt the active de-politicization of social antagonisms and socioecological metabolisms, counteracting both the material processes producing socio-environmental inequalities and the hegemonic narratives of environmental problems and solutions. This is particularly relevant in light of current climate change governance as a manifestation of the post-political condition that foreclose politicization and evacuates dissent by rejecting ideological divisions and by reducing the political terrain to the sphere of consensual governing and policy-making within the given neoliberal order.<sup>36</sup> In practice, this has allowed the capture by elites of the framing and management of the climate crisis. Conversely, according to UPE scholars, the remaking of socioecological relations under global warming should be framed not as a techno-managerial problem but rather as a metabolic transformation of the socio-environmental assemblages underpinning the urbanization of nature through political performances that make visible multiple potential futures beyond capitalism.

Conflict and dissent, in this perspective, are understood as genuine manifestations of “the political”: a performative interruption of the policed order of the sensible by the part that has no part.<sup>37</sup> This conception is in line with agonistic theories of climate change,<sup>38</sup> which consider consensus undesirable because it suppresses dissent and embodies a rejection of the political. Consensus, rather than merely suggesting agreement, is also an expression of hegemony, which subordinates some political identities to others.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is only through multiple forms of counter-hegemony that a radical democratic praxis of climate change may flourish.

UPE’s approach resonates with climate justice activism and in particular with grassroots battles waged against fossil fuels. My contention is that they share a metabolic perspective insofar as they both assign preeminent political relevance to the transformation of the flows, nodes and spaces structuring the capitalist urbanization of nature – of which fossil fuels constitute the *lifeblood* – not only to halt global warming but also to rebuild a more just and equal world. Related to that, both aim to debunk and discard the imaginaries of society-nature relations that sustain these assemblages in order to open up the array of interpretations of, and solutions to, climate change to marginalized voices and experiences. Therefore, I call for increased conceptual scrutiny and political support towards direct-action against fossil fuels, a form of climate justice activism currently at the fringes of the climate movement but that reconnects with a long history of physical and symbolic occupations aimed at radical change.<sup>40</sup> In so doing, I answer to recent calls by critical urban scholars towards “developing a vocabulary and grammar that can support politically performative theory and engaging with real existing political movements.”<sup>41</sup> Preliminarily, I define as *metabolic activism* those instances of grassroots eco-political engagement that aim to disrupt, block, occupy and ultimately transform capitalist-driven metabolic flows and relations by intervening directly in the operational landscapes that quilt together these assemblages while experimenting with alternative values, knowledges, spaces and socio-material relations.

Grounded in a conflictual attitude towards the status quo, metabolic activists go beyond the politics of invitations to powerful elites by enacting confrontational tactics in alliance with civil society, impacted communities and grassroots environmental movements. They deploy blockades and occupations to confront “carbon entanglements” – the deep interconnection of economies and political structures with the fossil fuel industry<sup>42</sup> – and rise against the networks and actors driving the world towards climate chaos while pretending to roll out solutions.<sup>43</sup> Their activism is a reaction to a de-politicized public sphere and a tool of re-politicization, staging those demands, experiences and desires banned from the consensual order of climate change governance. It is precisely this order that allows fossil fuel companies and investors to present their techno-managerial fixes as green, sustainable and climate-friendly initiatives, while relentlessly continuing extraction, multiplying emissions and locking in increasing global warming. In the attempt to foster radical transformations, direct-action climate coalitions lay siege to the consensus around technological, market-led and growth-focused transition by doing the “dirty work” of stopping the machine with their bodies. Not by focusing on corporations’ headquarters and government’s buildings in city centers, but by going “out there,” in the sparse geographies of fossil fuels’ extraction, flows and manufacture. Moreover, and crucially, metabolic activists for climate justice seek to recast the climate change debate from just an issue of emissions’ accounting to a general critique of the hegemonic socio-economic, political and cultural systems built on

environmental destruction, class divisions, colonial legacies, racism and imperial relations. To ground and expand these reflections, in the following section I trace the rise and the struggle of *Fossilgasfällan* (FGF), the Swedish climate justice movement that organized the first ever blockade of fossil fuel infrastructure through direct-action in Sweden.

#### **4.1 Fossilgasfällan: Direct-action against fossil gas**

In recent years, the port of Gothenburg in Sweden has stepped up ambitions to become a hub for storage and selling of so-called liquefied natural gas (LNG). On May 30, 2014, the Administrative Board of Västra Götaland County granted to Swedegas, the infrastructure company that owns and runs the Swedish gas transmission network, a permit for the expansion of the LNG terminal in the port of Gothenburg under the project name GO4LNG. The permit allowed for increasing storage capacity up to thirty-three thousand m<sup>3</sup> of LNG and for handling a maximum of five hundred thousand tonnes of LNG per year. A crucial leg of the project aimed to link directly the terminal to the national gas network, fostering increased and long-term gas imports to supply the country's energy grid. However, this connection did not materialize. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Swedish government rejected the Swedegas application because of climatic concerns: according to the Minister of the Environment and Climate Isabella Lövin, the project of connecting the terminal with the national grid contradicted Sweden's ambitious national climate goals, as it would have locked the country into fossil infrastructure.<sup>44</sup> In between the approval and the rejection, fundamentally influencing the debate in the country and the final decision, there were three years of grassroots campaigning spearheaded by Fossilgasfällan, a Swedish climate justice movement that arose in opposition to the consensus surrounding gas as clean and climate-friendly energy source.

A small group of Swedish activists based in Gothenburg founded FGF in 2017. The founding members had a background in environmental conflicts, animal rights, migrant justice, Sami rights and environmental NGOs. Some of them were involved for years in *Fossil Free Sweden*, a campaign advocating divestment from fossil fuels by public and private institutions, without much success in Gothenburg. The choice of targeting fossil gas also reflected their relation with the *Gastivists*, a global network devoted to fight the normalization of fossil gas as a "transition fuel" by connecting frontlines communities with climate justice groups to oppose new gas infrastructure. The *Gastivists* network facilitates knowledge creation and sharing, and provides a practice-based model of intervention rooted in civil disobedience through workshops and trainings.

The initial work of FGF focused on building a knowledge base of the relations between climate change and fossil gas. Their main point of contention was the framing in policy circles and in the energy sector of gas as a bridge fuel for the energy transition required by climate change. Starting from the name – dismissing "natural" for "fossil" gas – their analysis deconstructed the rising popularity of gas showing how this was the result of a clever greenwashing operation by fossil fuel companies and their lobbies in government chambers.<sup>45</sup> The main tools for building the campaign were social media, newspaper articles and actions in cities. Through a dedicated website, FGF set up a "knowledge bank" collecting sources challenging fossil gas and instructing on alternatives. The social media channels of FGF on Facebook and Twitter were instrumental for reaching a large audience, alongside physical venues to spread flyers and posters with the help of sympathetic

campaigns and movements. Virtual info meetings on Youtube provided an easy way to broadcast information, to gather support, and to expose the financial interests and players behind the Swedegas project. Informed by climate justice concerns, FGF took seriously the claims and experiences of local communities impacted by the extractive processes to harness fossil gas, most notably through hydraulic fracturing, also known as “fracking.” This led to a holistic critique of fossil gas associated with the development of a set of alternative proposals for the transformation of energy systems and of society as a whole.

In one of their first public actions, on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018, about thirty people gathered outside the Social Democrats' office in Gothenburg to protest the construction of the terminal GO4LNG that had begun despite the fact that Swedegas lacked a concession under the Natural Gas Act for the entirety of the project. In a fiery speech, besides denouncing the false promises of gas, activists set the terms of the issue within the broader geographies and consequences of extraction:

*Fossil gas has major negative impacts where the gas is extracted and infrastructure is built: water poisoning, earthquakes, landslides, repression of human rights, destruction of land areas and agricultural areas. What is happening now in Gothenburg harbor affects all of Sweden and all of the world's people.*<sup>46</sup>

The campaign by FGF gave the climate movement in Sweden a clear target around which a broad alliance of activists and concerned people could coalesce. To ground complex and seemingly abstract issues like climate change by targeting specific nodes and facilities implicated in the fossil economy, where opportunities for short-term gains and victories sustain momentum and movement building, has been an explicit strategy of the climate movement since at least a decade.<sup>47</sup> This approach has also helped reconnect with the historical legacy of direct-action environmental campaigns and with contemporary struggles of frontlines communities against fossil fuels extraction and infrastructure. In particular, looking at the past, the anti-nuclear German movement blocking trains carrying nuclear fuel and waste during the 1980s represents the clearest European antecedent to FGF, and can be seen as the precursor inspiring *Ende Gelände*.

Moreover, by linking ideally and practically with frontlines communities resisting fossil fuel operations and expansion, the movement against fossil gas in Sweden was able to frame its actions as both an ecological and social battle with immediate implications in the life of communities far away from Sweden, and as a decisive step to halt GHGs emissions. This internationalist approach was operationalized by inviting to Sweden representatives of communities impacted by gas extraction and infrastructure from the USA, Argentina and Ireland. A counter-narrative of gas metabolism was elaborated by merging the claims of place-based campaigns for environmental justice, Indigenous sovereignty and rights to a clean environment with the climate struggle against the expansion of fossil fuels in Sweden. A series of video interviews became the medium to advance this narrative, highlighting the injustices along the whole gas metabolic chain and linking campaigns through solidarity and mutual support.<sup>48</sup>

The first aim of FGF was to put the task of debunking fossil gas as climate-friendly transition fuel on the agenda of the climate movement and of Swedish climatic debates. From this aim descended the work of self-formation and knowledge sharing, the linking with anti-extraction campaigns

around the world, and the subsequent targeting of public media discourse. Their second aim was to block the completion of the terminal, considered unjustifiable for three interrelated reasons. First, LNG may reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but it increases tremendously methane emissions, a powerful GHG;<sup>49</sup> second, gas infrastructures linked to the national energy grid lock-in fossil energy imports (in Gothenburg it would have been for about forty years); third, a fossil “transition” fuel is not a step towards comprehensive social and ecological transformation but rather an obstacle to it. Finally, through this campaign, activists pursued the strengthening of the climate justice movement in Sweden and Europe by “learning from each other [and by] building on and make use of the momentum we collectively created” (interview to A.F. from FGF).

The strategic approach of FGF relied on what they called a “staircase model,” meaning a gradual deployment of tactics that escalate each time the movement’s claims and requests go unheard. This unfolded with various forms of dialogue to drive media and political attention, then more confrontational actions as the movement grew and the project continued (like a spectacular, if rather windy, kayak demonstration in 2018) and culminated in the coordinated mass direct-action to block the terminal. The latter became inevitable when the project continued its course towards the final permit. At the beginning of 2019, according to FGF, an intervention to influence the pending decision by the government was needed. They had already experimented with direct-action in December 2018, when a group of thirty people demonstrated for a few hours in front of the gate of the terminal. The time had come to raise the bar. Together with the growing network of European direct-action movements against fossil fuels, supported by the international coalition *Gastivists*, and enlisting social justice movements from all of Sweden, FGF participated in the creation of *Folk mot Fossilgas* (People Against Fossil Gas), which was simultaneously a coalition, an event, and a climate camp geared at blocking the gas terminal’s operations for at least one day during September 6-8, 2019.

#### **4.2 Folk Mot Fossilgas, the camp and the blockade**

About six months before the designated days, the campaign *Folk mot Fossilgas* was launched through an international call inviting “anybody who wants to act for climate justice and who agrees with the action consensus” to join the Swedish activists at the port of Gothenburg. The action consensus is a typical mode of involvement utilized by direct-action movements against fossil fuels in Europe to ensure an informed participation by anybody who is sympathetic with the movement’s goals and tactics, and to allow the widest participation irrespective of strict ideological adherence to a specific movement’s identity.<sup>50</sup> The kind of consensus sought by climate and environmental justice activists does not silence antagonism and partisanship. Instead, it exposes them by drawing a line against racial, ethnic and gender discriminations, and by grounding collective action in anti-fascist and anti-capitalist values.

The campaign was organized around eight working groups – action planning, finance, mobilization, communication, logistics, training, wellbeing and legal issues – each with two facilitators serving as coordinators. The organizers chose to have a relatively high degree of anonymity and security during preparations, using code names, encrypted communication and technology-free in person meetings. This implied a careful navigation of the complex balance between agility and safety. As the date approached, the European network of allies cooperated in

the organization of meetings and trainings in Copenhagen, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels and other Northern European cities. These encounters recruited participants while the trainings introduced the neophytes to civil disobedience and to the organizing principles of coordinated direct-action. The trainings represent a crucial element for the success of the action, transferring practical skills and building a sense of empowerment and safety among participants, preparing them to respond to police intervention through non-violent civil disobedience and providing coordinating skills to manage decisions within affinity groups that try to dismantle groups' internal power dynamics.

On the morning of September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, people began converging to the camp set up by the organizers in a meadow about one kilometre from the Gothenburg port. The camp comprised a big circus tent for the assemblies plus five smaller structures housing the info point, the area to eat meals, the media centre, the legal support and the health support. Next to the seashore, about a hundred camping tents were distributed into rows. The media centre worked tirelessly to film, edit and upload content, to write up articles and press releases, and to scan the mainstream media narrative of the event before, during and in the aftermath of the blockade. Interviews with international delegates in video and in crowded plenaries brought to Gothenburg the concerns and the solidarity of frontlines communities fighting against gas extraction and gas terminals. One of them was Christopher, an *Esto 'k Gna* from the tribe of *Carrizo Comecrudo* that dwells in the valley of the Rio Grande in Texas, USA. Alongside their reservation, three different shale gas extraction sites had been approved, causing earthquakes and polluting groundwater. That gas was then shipped to European terminals like the one in Gothenburg. According to Christopher, fighting the extraction and trade of fossil fuels is just the continuation of the anti-colonial struggle of Indigenous peoples against a process of exploitation and genocide that began in 1492.<sup>51</sup>

The most important purpose of the communication team and the media centre was to make sure that the narrative of the campaign reached out to the broader public. Since mainstream media and politicians often dismiss civil disobedience, the “narrative battle” was a key site of resistance. Activists led it highly effectively, as shown by the fact that spokespersons from the campaign were interviewed in most Swedish major media and that the action was mentioned by the media in relation to the government decisions a month later to stop the terminal. Special care was also devoted to the wellbeing of participants, through a dedicated group consisting of people with and without medical experience that provided physical and mental support to keep the activists in good shape. They offered workshops on sustainable activism during the camp, help with first aid kits, blankets, water and snacks (and also hugs and kind words) during the action, and conversational support to activists who needed it after the action.

The practical tasks to keep the communal life of the camp going were distributed on a voluntary basis and taken very seriously by volunteers. The average age was under thirty and the overwhelming majority European and white. Time passed between assemblies, food sharing and trainings. The trainings were organized by the group *Climate Justice Program* and were meant to introduce neophytes to the tactics of civil disobedience and coordinated mass action, the distinctive tools of the militant climate movements consolidating in Europe. Essentially, these kinds of actions are mass interventions on a physical infrastructure implicated in the fossil economy with the aim of slowing it down or blocking it altogether. The objective is not a sabotage but a demonstration

of grassroots force that aims at maximum visibility to nurture imaginaries of revolt and to inspire emulation. As acts that defy the law, by invading private property or occupying public places, the risk of being arrested is an integral part. The high number of participants guarantees collective security. Violence against things and provocations are banned, but other forms of illegality connected to the success of the action, and carried out in a group, are considered legitimate. The training sessions are necessary to socialize the complex series of organizational principles and communication codes that allow dealing with highly dynamic actions in a coordinated manner, responding quickly to changing conditions.

The attention to forms of dialogue that enhance horizontal decision-making, before and during the action, not only responds to the refusal of authoritarianism but also to the attempt at “erasing” the leaders from the picture, thus avoiding that certain subjects more exposed become visible to repression. The micro-techniques that safeguard collective consensual action owe to the political awareness of militant feminism. Starting from the concentric structure – which has buddies at its core, integrated in affinity groups, then in action fingers with different roles, in turn collected in the totality of the “mass” – up to the sign language and the facilitation techniques that lead the discussions, without neglecting spaces dedicated to the expression of individual emotions and self-criticism. Overall, a set of practices rooted in the tradition of civil disobedience but conjugated in new forms. When it goes well, the result is the collective construction of a symbolic event, highly visible and easily understandable to the outside, inviting and safe for inexperienced activists, culminating in a formative and transformative practice for individual participants.

The exact plan of how the blockade would unfold remained secret to avoid preventive police boycott and was arranged by a core group of activists who studied the terrain and the targeted terminal for months. The next morning, about five hundred people were divided into three fingers ready to block the terminal. Halfway to the terminal, the fingers separated towards three different gates. The finger I joined arrived in front of the electrified gate of the main entrance. The space was conquered easily by sitting closely on the pavement. A group of about twenty police officers stood still. On both sides of the gate, the row of tank trucks was blocked. In the meanwhile, drones were buzzing around for video filming by the action organizers while at least two other people were taking photos until the evening. These were professional photographers and filmmakers, chosen to ensure good visual communication around the campaign. Their images later became the media product disseminated online, part of the strategy to influence the narrative on legitimate practices of climate resistance and to present this kind of action as exciting and effective.

Two people in yellow vests had the role of communicating with the police. After a brief exchange, they spread the news that the police were not going to remove us. The tension disappeared, as the same news arrived from the other blocks. Everything ran smoothly, the terminal was blocked, the trucks did not enter or leave, the police merely observed, and the morale was high. Several television stations carried out interviews, showing the blockade on major Swedish media and talking about “fossil gas” instead of “natural gas,” a clear symbolic victory. At noon, the food brigade arrived to feed us, going to all the gates and coming back for dinner. In the end, the blockade lasted more than 12 hours, achieving the interruption of the terminal’s output flow, positive media coverage, and no violence from the police, this time.

While it would be a mistake to overemphasize this single action as the cause of the government rejection of the final permit for Swedegas, it certainly managed, together with three years of campaigning, to occupy temporarily and to fracture in multiple ways the widely held common sense of Sweden as climate leader. Further, it represented a turning point for the climate justice movement in this and neighbouring countries: coalition building, direct-action and blockade were shown to be viable strategies to break consensus and to influence the course of national climate politics.

## **5. An emerging metabolic activism?**

Looking at direct-action movements against fossil fuels like FGF through UPE's conceptual toolkit can help illuminating their features and relevance in the current conjuncture. Here, building on previous sections, I chart three interrelated points that provide a basis for further investigations.

A first element is that such movements disrupt the hegemonic consensus around top-down climate governance by showing its inconsistencies in order to make space for other claims, knowledges and experiences. In this sense, they react to a post-political condition in which climate change has been taken up as an object of regulation and policy but only by evacuating the structural and systemic inequalities that are at its root and that are reflected in the uneven socioecological outcomes of climate breakdown and the "green transition."<sup>52</sup> They do so by critically addressing both the specific set of discourses and interventions put in place by states, corporations and international agreements, and the political and economic arrangements within which these actors build their legitimacy and ground their power. By bringing back dissent as the ultimate engine of truly democratic politics, these movements re-politicize the debate around climate solutions and link it directly to the struggles for land, water and other basic socio-environmental needs waged by impacted communities. FGF enacted such politics by contesting the legitimacy of gas as a transition fuel endorsed by the Swedish state, putting the spotlight on the entanglement of financial interests and socio-environmental consequences of fossil gas along all stages of its metabolism.

This is linked to the second point: the metabolic perspective detectable in direct-action movements against fossil fuels allows them to shift the focus of climate politics on the financial players and material infrastructures that reproduce the relation between fossil economy and climate chaos. From the hegemonic consensual framing of climate action as the management of disembodied emissions – a leap that has helped the abstraction of real emissions into rates and amounts that could be traded and/or offset<sup>53</sup> – the targets become the concrete actors and material nodes of the fossil fuel economy, thus welding emissions to a larger set of concerns, including neo-colonial relations, habitats and local environments destruction, class and gender issues, pollution and health, lack of democracy and the prospect of transformations towards a fossil fuel free society. In this sense, FGF's aim has been to expand the locally focused Swedish debate around gas in light of the social and environmental articulations of gas as energy source and GHG, globally and historically. The metabolic perspective is visible also in FGF's strategy: based on a deep engagement with the local context and on thorough knowledge of Swedish climate politics, and at the same time harnessing resources, support and legitimacy from international networks of climate justice and grassroots movements. In their approach, pursuing the goal of stopping one specific fossil gas project is inseparable from the global struggle against all fossil fuels. By making the

tensions between the local and the global productive of relations, claims and strategies, they are best positioned to tackle an issue that is simultaneously global and local like climate change.

Third, by (re)creating spaces and communities around resistance to the nodes of the fossil fuel metabolism of capitalist economies, direct actions turn climate justice concerns into concrete practices of transformation and prefiguration. Indeed, the present iterations and uses of blockades and occupations constitute a formidable laboratory of grassroots climate politics that links the struggles of frontlines communities with the organizing effort of urban activists. The critique of fossil-powered capitalism makes clear that solutions will not come from the elites, prompting the search for alternatives that would be democratically managed and socio-ecologically viable in the broadest sense. Indeed, FGF explicitly proposed a vision of fossil fuel free society to articulate through the banning of all fossil extraction, infrastructure and imports; the massive reduction in energy consumption; the creation of a wider welfare for all; and by making citizens energy producers rather than just energy consumers. Moreover, the everyday life of the camp puts into question the pursuit of self-interest and competition (hallmarks of neoliberalism) in favor of practices of mutualism and cooperation. The experience of participation can be potentially transformative for individuals insofar as it renders tangible in practice alternative social and ecological relations, making room for forms of interaction and values that disrupt dominant epistemologies and subjectivation processes.

## **6. Conclusions**

According to UPE, the current post-political condition reduces the space of politics to techno-managerial governing and policy-making within the given neoliberal order, thus foreclosing a radical politicization of the status quo. This is particularly evident in the current hegemony of a consensual regime of climate change governance revolving around market mechanisms and technological upgrades that do not fundamentally challenge either the drivers or the systemic inequalities at the root of environmental destruction and global warming. In this context, dissent and antagonism become fundamental to break up the consensus and to make visible marginalized interpretations of, and solutions to, climate change. In this article, I argued that direct-action climate justice movements against fossil fuels may be the best positioned to counteract the traps of consensus and to forward just transformations, while retaining commitments to fairness and equality. I provided some initial notes on the relevance of their strategies and tactics through the framework of UPE, grounding my analysis in the empirical case of FGF, a Swedish climate justice coalition fighting against the development of fossil gas. Direct action movements against fossil fuels share with UPE a metabolic understanding of global socioecological systems that assigns political relevance to the transformation of the flows, nodes and spaces structuring the capitalist urbanization of nature in order to halt global warming and to rebuild a more just and equal world. Moreover, they both abide by a conception of the political based on conflict and dissent, promoting multiple forms of counter-hegemony through a radical democratic praxis of climate change.

Direct action climate justice movements against fossil fuels deploy counter-narratives, blockades and the camp as primary tactics of their political work, reconnecting with a long tradition of civil disobedience. In Sweden, FGF through the *Folk Mot Fossilgas* coalition and event has been able to mobilize five hundred people in a direct-action against the expansion of the gas terminal in

Gothenburg. As a culmination of FGF's three-years long campaign directed at Swedish society, the blockade has contributed to the dismissal of the terminal expansion by the Swedish government, crucially influencing the public representation of fossil gas and materially halting the terminal operations for one day. Such actions and related campaigns are fundamental to break the hegemonic consensus around top-down climate governance. Besides showing its inconsistencies and its capture by the elites, they make space for other claims, knowledges and experiences, shifting the focus of climate politics to the financial players and material infrastructures that reproduce the relations between fossil economy and climate chaos, and turning climate justice concerns into concrete practices of transformation and prefiguration.

These initial considerations warrant more sustained and engaged inquiries into direct-action activism against fossil fuels through metabolic and political-ecological perspectives. Important issues remain understudied, like the relations between direct action and violence, the potential for escalating and generalizing this activist strategy, and the prospect of alliances between movements against fossil fuels and workers movements in the fossil fuel sector. It is timely for scholarly analysis to seek a better understanding of venues for transformation and of the best strategies and tactics to build a more just and equal world. In this sense, looking at direct action against fossil fuels may provide a promising and politically relevant field of inquiry.

**Acknowledgements:** support for work on this article was provided by FORMAS (Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development) under the National Research Programme on Climate (Contract: 2017-01962\_3).

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