

Lukas Slothuus

Climate Social Movements and the Politics of Leadership

Abstract: Do climate social movements need leadership structures and if so, which ones? Tackling this question is a central problem facing such movements. How can scholars intervene with critical and normative contributions to this question in order to strengthen these movements? In this chapter, I develop a vision of different forms of leadership and the role they can play for climate social movements. I engage with historical and contemporary literature on leadership in emancipatory politics, such as spontaneism and party organisation. Specifically, I focus on vanguardism as a possible promising type of leadership yet ultimately propose that a rearguard can play a crucial role in supplementing vanguardist climate politics. A diversity of tactics and leadership structures alike can aid climate social movements. Concerted, disciplined, and resilient leadership from the front and the back is needed to strengthen the concrete material struggle over life and—now possibly only—*habitable* life.

1 Climate Social Movements

The climate emergency is the most pressing and potentially catastrophic challenge facing humanity today. Scientists from the Earth Commission recently concluded that 7 of their identified 8 planetary boundaries have already exceeded levels considered just and safe, “putting human livelihoods for current and future generations at risk” (Rockström et al. 2023). The lead author, Johan Rockström, exclaims how “the window is rapidly shutting; we’re very close to irreversible tipping points” (Bisset and Francis 2023). As leading environmental scholars have authoritatively demonstrated, this is a modern problem caused by the emergence of capitalism and its destructive relationship to nature (Moore 2016 and 2017 as well as Malm 2016). Such anthropogenic or capitalogenic climate change puts the very possibility of a habitable planet for humans at risk.

Climate social movements are a central part of this existential struggle for humanity, nature, and the planet against anthropogenic and capitalogenic climate change. Yet many of these movements face considerable public resistance and backlash, and groups within the overall climate movement disagree substantially on the most appropriate strategies and tactics. One important aspect of this is what kind of leadership—or absence thereof—the climate movement should employ.

Should climate social movements be horizontal and leaderless? Should they be centralized and hierarchical? Should they be led by a committed and disciplined vanguard, or should their leaders merely lead them from the back, contribute to their legitimacy, and protect them from attacks? Considering the sheer scale and urgency of the climate struggle, answering these sorts of questions is crucial. Therefore, scholars must attempt to both understand the politics of the climate movement and intervene with critical and normative contributions to strengthening the chance of success of climate social movements.

Many prominent climate social movements today are based around leaderless and non-hierarchical grassroots campaigns. From Extinction Rebellion to Just Stop Oil (JSO) and from the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement to the Lützerath coalmine protests and Letzte Generation in Germany, many climate social movements eschew the vertical organizational structures more commonly found in political parties and NGOs. Such horizontalist social movements are neither unique to the issue of climate catastrophe, nor are they new. From the 1968ers across Western Europe to the alterglobalization movement of the turn of the century and from the post-2008 Occupy movement to Black Lives Matter, horizontalism is perhaps one of the defining features of radical forces of opposition to the status quo in the past half-century. Within climate movements, horizontalism has also played a key role, for instance in the 1979 Alta Uprising in northern Norway or the British climate camps of the early 2000s. Horizontalism today is facilitated in part by the structure of social media, where the techno-capitalist platform economies encourage and structure activism and organization in particular ways that do not lend themselves well to centralized control and tight discipline. Nowhere is this more true than in social movements, which are often considered social movements precisely qua their horizontalist character.

To be sure, this is partly a symptom of the failure and inadequacy of representative political parties to properly represent. If electoral democratic structures cannot perform the function they set out to do, it should come as no surprise that social movements blossom as a more promising alternative. Yet while the proliferation of movements should be celebrated, the demise of party politics for achieving climate justice is a problem in itself. As Peter Mair argues, electoral politics has become reduced to ruling the void in which political differences are minimized, technocratic governance rife, and undemocratic supranational institutions increasingly powerful (Mair 2013). This kind of anti-politics, in which there is no genuine contestation between antagonistic forces pushing in different directions, is not particularly conducive to the kind of radical change required to address the climate emergency. The hegemony of politics as necessity, where neo-classical and neoliberal economic doctrines and practices squeeze out socialist

and ecological horizons is damaging to the possibility of properly addressing the planetary crisis.

Unfortunately, political philosophy in particular has been slow to reckon with the power of social movements. While there are of course political philosophers who are concerned with the bottom-up popular politics of social movements, for instance in the radical republican and the Marxist traditions, these are largely side-lined by the mainstream liberal literature. Political theory, perhaps due to its closer proximity to sociology, anthropology, and political science, has generally been quicker in its appreciation of the central role of social movements for theorizing politics. Yet even here, the strong moralistic bend of much political theory impedes appropriate reckoning with the critical dimensions of forms of politics outside individual agency or state institutions. Thus, most work on climate change within political theory takes place at one of two levels. At one pole, it can be simply applied moral philosophy in the bourgeois vein, considering questions of individual moral agency and duty within a world of climate change. At the other pole, it is highly abstract at the level of theorizing the grand philosophical status of humans and nature, most prominent in the debate between monism and dualism, i.e., whether nature and humans should be considered as part of a unified whole or fundamentally separate (Moore 2016 and Foster 2022).

What is missing is at the middle level, namely, between individual agency and abstract philosophy—in short, a properly political theoretical consideration of climate social movements. One of the crucial questions here is to consider what kinds of political organization is needed for ecological emancipation. To be sure, contributions to this middle level do exist. Most famously, Andreas Malm's (2021) *How to Blow up a Pipeline* considers the shortcomings of non-violence in the climate struggle, arguing instead for particular kinds of violence. He advocates for a radical flank to supplement a moderate flank, thus defending a diversity of tactics and a pluralistic climate movement composed of a variety of principles, strategies, and actions. Beyond Malm, there is limited critical academic scholarship on the strategies and tactics of climate social movements. I therefore explore this topic in the present chapter.

In the political void created by the poverty of parliamentary politics, social movements present a powerful and compelling force. Such movements practice the kind of political worlds its participants want to inhabit, function as a learning device, and equip participants with the experiences and tools necessary for larger uprisings and future ruptures in the established order. In other words, social movements are prefigurative, heuristic, and a form of practice in both senses of the word—a trial run as well as a way of acting out theoretical principles. This is what John M. Meyer (2023) calls “climate experimentalism.” They are prefigurative because actors act out certain principles during the movement, rather than

simply agitating for those principles to be instantiated later. If solidarity, comradeship, radical equality, and planetary justice are at the heart of the demands of social movements, such principles might only come about through the embodiment of these very principles in the movements themselves. Equally, movements are heuristic because through trial/error and occasionally adventurous actions, activists learn or at least hone rather than apply readymade principles. Severing an artificial division between fully abstract ideal theory and concrete practice, social movement actors figure out their principles by discussing, defending, and trying them out. This can be in tension with prefiguration, because how is one to embody principles in action if those very principles are not fully decided or determined?

One way out is by seeing social movements as engaging in what John Berger (1968) calls “dress rehearsal for revolution” in his 1968 essay on mass demonstrations. Even if the possibility of such revolution is of course “now rare,” Berger’s understanding of mass demonstrations tracks well the role of social movements today, specifically ones related to climate change (Berger 1968). Berger distinguishes riots, revolutions, and mass demonstrations. Whereas a riot has immediate aims, e.g., “the seizing of food, the release of prisoners, the destruction of property,” a revolutionary uprising has goals that “are long-term and comprehensive,” ultimately aiming for “the taking over of state power.” (Berger 1968) Mass demonstrations, on the other hand, gain strength in numbers and are more “symbolic,” “it demonstrates a force that is scarcely used,” what sometimes gets called “people power.” (Berger 1968) Berger claims that “theoretically they are an appeal to the democratic conscience of the State,” (Berger 1968) which might seem closely related to civil disobedience in the liberal tradition, like that of John Rawls. Yet he hastens to add that “this presupposes a conscience which is very unlikely to exist,” (Berger 1968) i.e., that appeals to the state presupposes some degree of receptiveness on the part of the state. Looking at Britain today, leaders of both major political parties readily dismiss JSO as illegitimate fringe extremists.

In this context, climate social movements do take on some of the same functions as other social movements, yet also differ in important ways. I therefore now want to consider in detail the politics of leadership in relation to climate social movements. I develop a vision of what kind of contribution different forms of leadership can make for climate social movements. I look specifically at vanguardism as a possible promising type of leadership. However, I ultimately propose the central role that can be played by a rearguard to supplement such vanguardist climate politics.

2 The Politics of Leadership

A basic problem facing social movements is how to tackle the question of leadership. This is a question that has been the focus of activists and theorists alike. In recent years, it has resurfaced in relation to climate change. Malm (2019), for instance, calls for “ecological Leninism or Luxemburgism or Blanquism.” Clearly, Lenin, Luxemburg, and Blanqui are quite different on the issue of leadership. Auguste Blanqui ([1866] 2003) defended a kind of “apocalyptic insurrection” led by a highly disciplined communist vanguard engaging in conspiratorial work to overthrow the “tyranny” of “capital” (Cameron 2023, 6 and 10). While Blanqui is sometimes mischaracterized as a hot-headed adventurist and spontaneist, such a view is quickly dispelled by turning to his own writings:

The essential thing is to organize. No more of these tumultuous risings, with ten thousand isolated heads, acting at random, in disorder, without any overall design, each in their local area and acting according to their own whim! (Blanqui [1866] 2003).

He calls for organization, but simultaneously disparages the weakness of a mass movement without vanguardist leadership to direct it, in short a “determined minority” (Fernbach 2011, 186). The nascent revolutionary proletarian movements of Blanqui’s late 19th century Europe must be understood in the context of the dual meaning of the term nascency: underdeveloped, yes, but also on the rise. Thus, Blanquism was and, to the extent that it still exists, is, a political theory of a nascent movement. This makes it simultaneously extremely unsuitable and perhaps rather suitable for the present moment. The organized proletarian movement is dead, except perhaps in pockets of the global south.

Lenin takes Blanqui’s vision in a new direction to marshal the now massive organized proletarian movement of the early 20th century, calling for a centralized vanguardist leadership to direct the proletarian movement from the front. In response, Rosa Luxemburg (1999), calls Lenin’s vision of the vanguard a “Blanquist movement” that must be rejected for being too spontaneous, adventurist, and hierarchical. However, Luxemburg is unfortunately also sometimes mischaracterized too strongly as anti-vanguardist. While long tracts have been and still can be written about the similarities and differences between Blanqui, Lenin, and Luxemburg, the key point for the purpose of my present inquiry is to highlight the contextual character of their theoretical interventions. This is a point that Lenin in particular—but Luxemburg, too—repeatedly emphasizes. As Lassere (2022a) points out, the key is to think of “Lenin as method,” condensing this view from Malm’s work, such that “we cannot refer to Lenin without constantly updating him, that is, without constantly leading Lenin beyond Lenin.” While the fundamen-

tal tenets of Marxism as a critique of political economy are universal and do not require the absolute historicism propagated by, e.g., Antonio Gramsci, once we think of Marxism as a political practice, it becomes necessary to embrace at least a partial historicism (consequently, this is therefore where Gramsci becomes essential) (Thomas 2007). Hence, the role of leadership in climate movements must be anchored in the concrete reality of what such movements look like and what kinds of practices they engage in. One major part of the concrete reality is their relationship to the question of who the agents of change will be.

One of the chief reasons the climate struggle is distinct from the proletarian struggle is, of course, the lack of a self-conscious revolutionary subject who can be the agent of change in and of itself. In other words, while the socialist and communist movements were the embodiment of the proletarian movement representing its own interests, the climate movement does not, narrowly defined at least, represent its own interests. This raises a fundamental question of whether it is possible to make revolution without a revolutionary subject. Nature cannot speak for itself, except if one subscribes to a dubious idea of endowing the planet with agency (e.g., seeing climate change as revenge or ecological disaster as earthly resistance). Without a self-conscious revolutionary subject, the struggle for ecological emancipation gets more complicated. It necessarily implies a speaking-on-behalf-of, i.e., a politics of representation. This is true even if we subscribe to an analysis of ecological breakdown rooted in capitalism, such that it becomes a struggle between labor and capital, because it cannot be reduced to this. Put simply, climate catastrophe is, but is not only, a class struggle. The problem is that it is difficult even to get purchase on the idea that it is (also) a class struggle. Struggles ensue over who can speak for nature or the ecological world. The lack of a class-conscious proletarian movement might make emancipatory climate struggle significantly less possible because it lacks a transformative subject who are the driving force of the struggle, but it might also make it more plausible because all the limitations on voluntarism, adventurism, and spontaneity disappear.

Nevertheless, some scholars of social movements reject Malm's approach for its danger of vanguardism. They claim that vanguardism (or the ostensibly synonymous *avant-garde* political action) is ineffective at creating meaningful social transformation. William Scheuerman, for example, argues that "Political vanguardism typically fails to generate the broad-based, durable shifts in attitudes and behavior on which meaningful political and social change ultimately depends" (Scheuerman 2022, 805). This is a dubious claim. Not only does the history of 20th century socialist and communist movements show the power of vanguardist politics in the form of Marxism-Leninism, including in the Soviet Union, Cuba, and China, the contemporary research on climate vanguardism also points to a more promising role of climate vanguardism (Vardar and Schuinski 2023).

On the history of socialism, a quick dismissal of vanguardism—particularly one grounded in the historical experience of actually existing movements—is unwarranted. Firstly, as Gabe Rockhill points out:

In an ideal world in which socialism would have been allowed to develop unhindered by counterrevolutionary war (which has never been the case), local and self-directed forms of autonomous organizing would likely flourish. However, in the actual world, in which there has only ever been socialism under siege, the very survival of revolutionary movements has often required tight party unity and centralized organization (Rockhill 2020, 648).

In other words, it is all well and good to celebrate horizontal organization and to detest vanguardism in theory, when in practice the demands on socialists “under siege” by establishment forces leaves open few other options than strong leadership and discipline. Because socialism is always brandished as a seditious and treacherous movement, the status quo will necessarily attack it. This goes for both the domestic as well as the international level. In Britain, for example, the enormous scale of undercover policing operations against left-wing groups (known as the Spycops scandal) was uncovered between 2010 and 2015 (Lewis and Evans 2013). This was particularly fierce in targeting environmental and climate related movements. In such a context, it should come as no surprise that suspicion and paranoia brew steadily. In his crucial study on the impact of the Spycops scandal, Nathan Stephens Griffin interviewed scores of activists who all help paint a picture of a widespread culture of distrust and “ontological uncertainty” (Stephens Griffin 2021, 466). One activist points out how “everyone was questioning everything,” another that upon the Spycops revelation, “it was just very surreal and made me question the whole reality of it” (Stephens Griffin 2021, 467). Undercover police furthermore actively and passively “derailed” activists away from climate change issues, thus weakening these movements (Stephens Griffin 2021, 469–470).

Secondly, contemporary research specifically on climate movements also challenges the strong, off-hand rejection of vanguardism or adventurism. In a recent study, Brent Simpson, Robb Willer, and Matthew Feinberg (2022) find evidence to support the “radical flank hypothesis,” i.e., the idea that if a moderate movement is complemented by a radical flank that engages in more antagonistic and radical action, overall support for the movement as a whole increases (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2022, 1). They explain that “the presence of a radical flank increases support for a moderate faction within the same movement” (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2022, 1). Seeking to test their argument in a real-world setting, James Ozden and Markus Ostarek (2022) report “a positive radical flank effect, whereby increased awareness of Just Stop Oil resulted in increased support for and identification with Friends of the Earth,” where JSO is part of the radical

flank and Friends of the Earth is within the more moderate center of the climate movement (Ozden and Ostarek 2022, 1). While they acknowledge a drop in support from those who have low baseline support for moderate climate organizations, i. e., the kind of people who might think of all climate activism as worthless, those who consider the climate movement as already important significantly strengthen their conviction that this is the case (Ozden and Ostarek 2022, 2). More generally, it is unwarranted to argue that contemporaneous public opinion polling of social movements is the only measure of attitudes toward a certain issue. In his study of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Soumayajit Mazumder (2018) finds that while the movement was largely unpopular at the time, it nevertheless led to major shifts in public opinion on questions around race later in time.

Property destruction or violence should therefore not be seen as a distraction or hijacking of a broader movement, but an essential part of it. Crucially, Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg show that “it is the use of radical tactics, such as property destruction or violence, rather than a radical agenda, that drives this effect” (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2022, 1). There is thus evidence for the beneficial role of radical action in the climate movement, and while this can take the form of both horizontalist spontaneity, it can also be in the form of climate vanguardism as the kind of leadership that directs the overall struggle in a more radical direction. This is in line with Malm’s argument for the importance of a cautious vanguardist leadership in the climate movement: “[...] blowing up a pipeline in a six-degrees world would be to act a little late in the day. Should we wait for approval from a near-consensus? A majority? A big minority? The task of climate activists cannot be to take an existing level of consciousness as a given, but rather to stretch it” (Malm 2021, 119). He then explains the role of leadership, saying that activists should walk ahead—not too far from the masses, which would lead to isolation; nor in the median or rear, which would obviate their mission. They must prepare to be calumniated by some (anything else would be proof of inefficacy) while steering clear of tactics that would put off too many—the tightrope walked by any working vanguard. Actions should be undertaken if plan, goal and execution can be explained and garner support, in an intimate relation to the existing consciousness, to be pushed up a notch (Malm 2021, 119).

As explained here, it is crucial to appreciate the fine balance between winning and losing potential supporters. Overall, then, climate vanguardism or “ecological Leninism” cannot readily be dismissed, neither by history, contemporary empirical evidence, or theoretical argument.

However, in the past five decades, the most serious challenge to Marxism-Leninism has come not from followers of Luxemburg but from what can be called post-Marxism or poststructuralist ex-Marxism (Lane 2020). Perhaps the most influential among these, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s post-Marxist model of

radical democracy (2001) is in large part motivated by a rejection of the Leninist idea of the vanguard. Since they dispense with the fundamental status of class in capitalist society in favor of a model of “radical indeterminacy,” the party necessarily serves a different function, as does radical politics more generally (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). To them, the party contributes to the “articulation” of “chains of equivalence” into hegemonic forms through the radicalization of democracy, which can then alter the structure of society in a democratic (even socialist) orientation (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Since there is no essential class antagonism to be overcome, but a plurality of social struggles over and around identities of race, gender, sexuality, and so on, the vanguard party becomes superfluous. While parties are crucial, these are supposed to build broad coalitions.

This stands in stark contrast to the military metaphors which frequently appear in the Marxist tradition, from Karl Marx’s “class struggle” between “two great armies,” Lenin—an avid reader of military theorist General von Clausewitz—in his development of the vanguard, Mao’s “protracted people’s war” and “strategic defensive” as well as of course Antonio Gramsci’s distinction between a war of position and a war of maneuver (Marx [1847] 2010). Laclau and Mouffe chastise the “growing authoritarian turn of Communist politics,” the cause of which they locate in Lenin’s “militarization of politics” and “interweaving of science and politics” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 70 and see also 59). One of the key elements of their enterprise is to dismiss class struggle as the expression of scientific socialism, thereby purging Marxism of its antagonistic dimension understood as the ineradicable and fundamental conflict between labor and capital. The proliferation of such accounts of radical indeterminacy in radical and perhaps even socialist politics can be seen in the ubiquity with which non-class-based antagonisms take center stage, central to the rejection of vanguardism. This is particularly troublesome in relation to climate catastrophe. Here, the conflict is very clearly one between labor and (fossil) capital. The richest 1% are responsible for twice as many carbon emissions as the poorest half of the world’s population (Oxfam International 2022, 2). Discursive articulations will not save us from a burning planet.

By thinking of rearguardism as borrowed from military vocabulary and strategy, it is possible to reinscribe the military metaphor of the Marxist tradition into struggles against climate catastrophe. Since military metaphors abound in previous theoretical debates on strategy, it is curious that the idea of rearguardism has only received scant attention in the academic literature, especially in relation to climate catastrophe. One notable exception is found in Adam Tooze’s critique of Malm, where he discusses the promises of “war communism.” (Tooze 2021) He challenges moderates to spell out an answer to the question: “what are the social democratic politics of emergency?” (Tooze 2021). Here, turning to Davide Gallo Lasere’s work is instructive and can help answer Tooze’s question:

The gradualism and long-termism of the social democracies are in fact part of a period that is now over: we are already in the middle of a temporality that makes the hope in the slow improvement of living standards on the basis of social dialog and compromise between opposing parties naïve and obsolete (Lassere 2022a).

Until we have a more credible answer, it is too hasty to reject Malm's ecological vanguardism. We therefore need an antagonistic politics that can confront the fundamental division between labor and capital. Tooze continues, probing beyond the social democratic irenicism: "What is our logic of action in the face of disaster? What are our political options when there is every reason to think that we have very little time left?" (Tooze 2021) The sheer urgency and scale of the problem forces us to turn every stone in an attempt to find the right path.

Climate movements build on the horizontalism of the alterglobalization movement and the Occupy movements (Maeckelbergh 2022). In many contemporary cases, however, such horizontalism is twinned with a form of vanguardism, which is clear in the case of JSO, for instance, whose non-hierarchical character nevertheless contains a form of spontaneism and ultra-leftist vanguardism. While one activist within JSO "describes it as a non-hierarchical coalition of organizers, scientists, lawyers and former workers in the oil industry who collaborate on both demands and tactics," in which "activists then operate in autonomous blocs with shared resources but no formal leadership," it is possible to see the internal structure of JSO as non-hierarchical and horizontal while seeing the place of JSO as an organization as a vanguardist part of the radical flank (Lynskey 2022).

3 Rearguardism as Leadership From the Back

One way of overcoming some of the purported problems with vanguardism is by slightly reframing the question. Rather than ask what kind of leadership is most effective or desirable for climate social movements to pursue, a different but nevertheless important related question is: what can intellectuals (in the broad Gramscian sense) do to strengthen climate social movements? (Gramsci 1971). In this section, I propose rearguardism as a form of leadership from the back that can complement—rather than replace—vanguardism. Taken together, these can play a promising role for climate social movements.

The idea of a rearguard can be found mentioned in passing across critical literature of the past century, where the until recently most elaborate formulation of a rearguard could be found in the work of decolonial theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. In his extensive work on epistemic justice and the need for reckoning with colonial ways of knowing, de Sousa Santos elaborates what he calls "epistemologies

of the south” against “epistemicide,” i.e., the systematic destruction of knowledge systems (de Sousa Santos 2014). He proposes a way of thinking about knowledge and justice from below, focusing on the communal and collective values that should ground human society, such as solidarity and *buen vivir* (living well) (de Sousa Santos 2018). One of the cornerstones of this, albeit not developed systematically anywhere in his work, is the idea of a rearguard. Having rejected the idea of a vanguard, he instead posits the rearguard as a way of supporting social movements. Indeed, he explicitly claims that “there is no place or legitimacy for vanguards today, we have to listen to the voice of the movements” (de Sousa Santos 2016, 21). This is where the rearguard emerges, using the term interchangeably with “activist-intellectual” and “postabyssal researcher,” pointing to the idea of modernity inhabiting an abyssal way of thinking that excludes indigenous and decolonial thought (de Sousa Santos 2018).

One of the main problems with de Sousa Santos’ account is that it abstracts rearguardism from the concrete antagonism between labor and capital and retreats into an epistemic domain in the pursuit of epistemological justice. He explains how “the epistemologies of the South call for rearguard intellectuals, intellectuals that contribute with their knowledge to strengthening the social struggles against domination and oppression to which they are committed” (de Sousa Santos 2018, ix). This is necessarily a modest endeavor, one in which the vanguard intellectual or theorist employs “a stance of humility proper to the rearguard intellectual” who can only think and theorize in response to, not ahead of, the movements (de Sousa Santos 2018, 153). As Jacob Blumenfeld forcefully argues, we must push “against the idea that scientific awareness of the facts of climate change is enough to motivate a common ethical project of humanity toward a unifying good” (Blumenfeld 2023, 2). Epistemic justice will simply not cut it in the struggle against climate change (nor will it in the struggle against capitalism tout court). Climate ethics is not sufficient, and it may well not even be necessary. The problem is not that we do not know why climate change is wrong, but that we lack the political capacity and organization to confront it.

I shall now set out a more promising vision of rearguardism before turning to its limits for climate social movements. The rearguard does not direct struggles outright like in a vanguardist sense. Instead, it can defend and protect climate social movements. Since the climate struggle does not have a revolutionary party or a class-conscious proletarian popular mass, rearguards can legitimate and protect existing nascent climate social movements. Rearguards should be linked and in close proximity with climate social movements rather than theorizing about, and perhaps even criticizing, them from a distance. There has to be a reciprocal relationship here, in which the movements also have the ability to depart entirely from the benevolence of the rearguard if they do not find it helpful.

Such rearguards can prevent social movement actors from falling behind in the forward march of the movement, for example by legitimating these movements when they are under attack. At the same time, rearguards can play a semi-directive role akin to a gentle vanguard when they push movements to consider the strategic and tactical implications of their actions, as well as realigning too strong departures from theory into actionism as action for action's sake, the kind of aesthetic protest of a powerless movement. The point here is not just to achieve epistemic justice but to struggle for emancipation, epistemic only insofar as it abets emancipation from the material conditions that produce exploitation and domination. By collapsing the rearguard into a purely epistemic realm, its leadership is reduced to an interpretive function of thinking with rather than struggling with the movements.

Moving beyond the epistemic, a key point useful for theorizing the rearguard is taking “the deepest aspirations and feelings” of climate social movement actors as the starting point, which must be marshalled by “a very skilful political leadership” to lead a movement to victory (Gramsci 1971, 88). It is over-optimistic to assume that climate social movements can win durable and lasting victories without some form of leadership and tight organization, particularly in light of Rockhill's proclamation of how all existing socialism has been under siege. The climate movement is also under siege from the combined power of the fossil fuel industry and broader capitalist interests, as well as reactionary and fascist political forces. Rearguards can play a central role by leading from the back based on these sentiments of the people involved in the movement. Deep knowledge of the movements and its participants is required for intellectuals to not simply be speaking from their own subject position but genuinely with the dominated.

The need for leading from the back by being attuned to the aspirations and feelings of the dominated can be undertaken through the practice of legitimation. While the rearguard should generally applaud the movement's concrete struggle, it must also avoid—and warn against—uncritically embracing action that stands little chance of success, particularly if there are superior alternatives available. Rearguardism requires defending really-existing movements from intellectual obstacles. Ensuring a cohesive connection between movements and theorists is crucial. Leadership is not a bad word as fully horizontal movements can easily struggle with defeat and disintegration. Hence, its defensive functions must make sure to also be protective. This enables pushing these movements in a productive and stronger direction, simultaneously protecting the rear end of the movement, particularly if it is faltering or despairing after successive crushing defeats.

However, the rearguard must also provide a material dimension, rather than simply an epistemic or emotional one. Remaining intimately connected to the

movements, rearguards can use their resources to strengthen climate social movements rather than attempting to co-opt or control them. A rearguard can, in contrast, offer moral leadership that legitimates climate social movements. However, providing legitimacy or moral leadership are not the only functions a rearguard can perform for climate social movements. They must also focus on providing material and organizational leadership, i. e., contributing to these movements through concrete practices of financial support, sharing of resources and networks, contacts in the media, and access to physical spaces.

Rearguardism thus only makes sense as a collective endeavor, in which the armchair intellectual has no place. Instead, through acts of collective solidarity and organization, such theorists can defend and protect climate social movements against attacks and threats from outside and within. Implicit here is therefore also that movements must allow themselves to be open to comradely critique in private, as forms of strategic advice and philosophical concerns, warning against e. g., fatalism and despair, two of the major threats to climate social movements. Crucially, such critique must be with the express and sole aim of propelling such movements closer to ultimate victory in their struggles. Therefore, rearguardism must be complemented by a qualified defense of vanguardism. In other words, I am not proposing rearguardism to replace vanguardism but as a necessary supplement. Rearguardism could even be considered a subsection of vanguardism, insofar as both involve direction and leadership, albeit from each their end.

While I have attempted to address the shortcomings in de Sousa Santos' version of rearguardism above, there are nevertheless problems even with the reconstructed version that should caution against an unqualified embrace. I therefore now briefly turn to their limits. Specifically, the problems with Malm's account of leadership have been explored most forcefully by Jasper Bernes and Alyssa Battistoni (Bernes 2023, Lassere 2022b, 2022a, and Battistoni 2022). Bernes points out how addressing the ecological disaster we are faced with "will require the demolition of capitalist social relations, that is to say total social transformation through social revolution. Bombs and bombers may play a part in that revolution, even a key part, but not the starring role" (Bernes 2023). Indeed,

we are less defending ourselves in such an instance than the lives of future generations. To do so will require expropriation not only of the oilfields and pipelines and refineries, in order to dismantle them, but of the industrial economy which they feed and upon which they depend (Bernes 2023).

Concerted, disciplined, and resilient leadership from the front and the back is needed because climate catastrophe demands a new concrete reality of humans and nature, one in which the metabolism of the latter by the former is no longer

unsustainable, to use a term that is by now otherwise rather anachronistic. Perhaps the good life of *buen vivir* is no longer possible; all we can hope and struggle for is *vivir*—life. Bernes suggests that “pipelines and the forms of life they support will have to be replaced by new ways of living, new ways of doing things. Such a movement, a revolutionary, communist movement, would need to be against pipelines but, even more importantly, for these new ways of life” (Bernes 2023). The crucial point here is that this will come about not simply through an epistemic justice struggle giving way to new emancipatory paradigms of knowledge, but chiefly the concrete material struggle over life and—now possibly only—habitable life in the face of the possibility of eco-fascism, climate barbarism, and the slow planetary death of liberal establishment politics.

Unfortunately, the ways out are if not unclear then at least extremely fraught. Wanton spontaneism and simply blowing up parts of the fossil fuel industry will not suffice. Indeed, Battistoni outright cautions against the allure of seeing pipeline terrorism as a panacea:

It is oddly comforting to think that blowing up a pipeline would succeed where existing movements have failed: it suggests that the fate of the world really is in the hands of those who want to change it. The truly difficult thing to contemplate is the possibility that better strategies or more radical tactics might not, in themselves, be able to remake the world built by fossil capital on the timescale we face (Battistoni 2022, para. 23).

Forms of radical action are therefore necessarily only a (small) part of the overall climate struggle. Heeding Battistoni’s argument, an important lesson is therefore to let go of the urge or desire to fully control, direct, or determine what the climate struggle will look like. The sheer scale of the struggle required to tackle the problem of the ongoing climate catastrophe means that many different elements have to come together. It also means that philosophy must try to understand social movements better, even if philosophers are often concretely far removed from such movements. What counts as important objects of study is linked to the material reality of those who study them. Unfortunately, in the context of social movements, it might be the case that philosophers have not even interpreted the world, let alone changed it.

4 Conclusion

Radical action is clearly needed in the climate movement in order to slow down ongoing climate catastrophe and ecological disaster, or perhaps even halt and avoid it altogether. As even the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres acknowledges, “Climate activists are sometimes depicted as dangerous radicals. But, the

truly dangerous radicals are the countries that are increasing the production of fossil fuels” (Guterres 2022). More empirical research and deep thinking is therefore needed to figure out precisely which kinds of leadership are conducive to radical climate action. The role of vanguardism cannot be readily dismissed, yet must be supplemented by the rearguard legitimization of intellectuals who lead from the back and protect movements from attack. The climate movement needs a diversity of tactics, a variety of strategies, and a pluralistic attitude to its constituent parts

Central to this is to see the struggle as but another iteration of the struggle between labor and the tyranny of capital. Otherwise, we might very well find ourselves descending into what Blumenfeld calls “climate barbarism” (Blumenfeld 2023). We must therefore also figure out what to do before the climate catastrophe fully materializes. Creating a livable planet does not simply mean averting climate catastrophe but overthrowing and replacing all the social structures that exploit, dominate, and hurt us in the present. This necessarily involves a break with the profit motive, private property, markets, and regimes of accumulation. While technology can help, the most central part is going to be a radical shift in the relations of production. In short, only by forming a broad, proletarian movement against both fossil capitalism and capitalism without adjectives will we be able to have a shot at creating a better planet and securing a livable future for all—and such a movement must involve vanguard, rearguard, and other forms of leadership, including an army of committed philosophers.

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