



The Generational Basis of Anti-Systemic Resistance Mobilizations Against Extinction

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Abstract

Scientific research, empirical evidence, and the clearly visible environmental devastation due to climate change/global warming are largely the consequences of the quest for profits of “fossil capital” that portends the greatest danger to human life. A nuclear war may kill half of the world, a sixth extinction would end all humanity. Can the wealth and political power of fossil capital be halted and reversed? Is a de-growth world society possible? Perhaps. A longer view of history has taught us that economic hegemony rises and falls, especially when people organize social movements to bring about change. But whom might be the agents of social change? And why would they act? It is at this point that we consider the importance of generations which, following Mannheim, may have as much impact as social class. It is evident that support for climate justice is most typical among the young—the Z generation. Why? Zoomers have grown up experiencing the adversities and precarities of capital, the 2008 crisis, school shootings, environmental disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic, and so on. By dint of age, education and psychological flexibility, Zoomers now spearhead several global justice movements that aim to end the use of fossil fuels, stop ecocide, and genocide.

Keywords: Fossil Capital, Global Warming, Climate Change, Environmental Devastation, Anti-Systemic Resistance, Generational Change, Gen Z



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World-systems theory (world-systems theory) is a legacy of Karl Marx's ([1848] 2014) analysis of how capitalism came to dominate the world and created a world-system as

...the cheap prices of its commodities are its heavy artillery as it batters down all Chinese walls. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

But Marx, himself influenced by Hegel's dialectical theory of history, pointed out inherent oppressions, contradictions, adversities, and crises of capitalism, many of which are especially blatant today in the now globalized, neoliberal capitalist world-system. In that vein, the world-systems theory perspective has long noted how oppression and dysfunctions foster anti-systemic resistance. Among the most serious dysfunctions of our world today is the environmental crisis. Even in the nineteenth century, Marx was aware of the environmental adversities of colonization followed by industrial capitalism and environmental despoliation long before it was widely recognized as a life-threatening condition. He noted the consequences of the Enclosure Acts and the pollution of the rivers by the waste of the factories of Manchester where the working classes were packed into unhealthy, unsanitary tenements shared with farm animals. A close reading of Marx's writings from his early critique of alienation to the three volumes of *Kapital* shows that *he was acutely aware of the environmental devastation that resulted from capitalism* (see Saito 2017).

As Jason Moore (2000) has argued within a world-systems theory perspective, the current ecological crisis began in the long sixteenth century with transition from feudalism to capitalism and the movements from towns to cities, well before coal, and then oil, fueled industrialization. In the early 1800s von Humboldt, the German naturalist, observed how the agricultural and extractive practices of the Spanish and Portuguese colonists in South America degraded the soil and devastated the land and the indigenous peoples. For Marx, alienation included humanity's alienation from Nature, as a "metabolic rift," a separation of social and ecological realms, an "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of "social metabolism" with commercialized agriculture, mining and extraction for the sake of energy production and raw materials for capitalist manufacturing and the transportation of commodities which led to devastation of the land, pollution of the waters and toxic smoke emissions that spewed into the air (Bellamy Foster 1999).

As Wilma Dunaway (2003) has shown, counterhegemonic (ethnic) struggles can be costly to the world-system and have fostered social transformations. Among these contradictions, indeed crises have been the mushrooming of inequality in which seven or eight capitalists own half of the world's wealth, along with the precarity of work for many and retrenchments of benefits that have made life especially difficult for younger cohorts. Secondly, advances in technology that clearly have given humanity longer, healthier lives and enabled creature comforts for significant numbers, as well as a degree of affluence and economic security. But the other side of that technology is the power to destroy the ecosystem on which humanity depends. Have we created a Frankenstein that will destroy us? On July 30, 2022, The *Guardian* noted the publication of Bill Maguire's *Hothouse Earth*:

Now we are going to pay the price for our complacency in the form of storms, floods, droughts, and heatwaves that will easily surpass current extremes...The crucial point, he argues, is that there is now no chance of us avoiding a perilous, all-pervasive climate breakdown. We have passed the point of no return and can expect a future in which lethal heatwaves and temperatures in excess of 50C (120F) are common in the tropics.¹

Author Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) suggested that we now face a Sixth Extinction. Consider how 70 million years ago, between an asteroid crash and a nuclear winter in which dust blocked sunlight destroying most vegetation, the dinosaurs perished. Today, the ways humanity has employed unsustainable agricultural practices, polluted the land and waters, and the massive use of fossil fuels for energy to secure raw materials, produce goods, transporting them, transporting people and provide comforts have led to growing CO₂ and methane levels, leading to increasing average annual temperatures, and devastating floods, droughts, and wildfires.

The “captains” of fossil capital (Malm 2016) clearly understood the damage done by coal and oil extraction, their refining and transportation and their use as fuels, but the logic of capital accumulation seeks to maximize short-term private wealth *regardless of the long-term human costs-even if that means extinction.*² Fossil capital mobilizes, lobbies, and financially supports climate change deniers and financially well supported “friendly,” politicians that suppress scientific information and promulgate lies and distortions to sustain their profits. Fossil capital has spent millions of dollars bribing politicians and supporting climate change deniers and myriad influencers that obscure and debunk science as “false facts” and dismiss environmentalism as a left-wing hoax.³ In the current world, a significant number of people owe their jobs, livelihoods, and lifestyles directly to the fossil fuel industry and everyone else is dependent indirectly on fossil energy. There is a lot of public and institutional support for fossil capitalism.

These Are the Times that Try Men and Women’s Souls

The adverse conditions of capitalist globalization, in its neoliberal moment, privileges market fundamentalism, attenuating government regulation indeed seeking to eliminate entire government agencies, erasing programs, and cutting off benefits programs that help millions of people. This has led to growing inequality, poverty, precarity, immiseration, homelessness, and hunger-while

¹ “‘Soon it will be unrecognizable’: total climate meltdown cannot be stopped, says expert,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/30/total-climate-meltdown-inevitable-heatwaves-global-catastrophe>

² By the early 1980s scientists accurately anticipated the environmental damage brought by fossil fuel extraction and use. See “Exxon Knew about Climate Change almost 40 years ago” <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/>. See also the PBS documentary on Big Oil, Especially Part 1, on Denial. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAAbcNl4Lb8>

³ Naomi Klein’s (2015) *This Changes Everything* includes a comprehensive discussion of the logic of capitalism in which vast profits are sought while being indifferent to the externalities that challenge the very existence of humanity, and with massive support from institutes and organizations that propound climate denial.

retrenching or privatizing social benefits. We should also add alienation, dehumanization, “possessive individualism,” and the fragmentation of social relations. But the most serious concern of our times is the environmental hazards of fossil capital, the massive consumption of coal, oil, and natural gases that are spewing tons of greenhouse gases, global warming and hence threaten the very viability of our species. The detritus of plastics derived from petroleum-based products, such as trillions of discarded water bottles, can be found almost everywhere, especially in our rivers, lakes, and oceans, and in the bodies of many fish and reptiles, as well as leaving micro plastics within the human body with adverse health consequences.

From the earliest times of clubs and spears, bows and arrows, maces and swords, the destructive power of weapons has increased exponentially. Over the millennia, warfare has become ever more deadly. Moreover, contemporary geopolitics, rooted in changing global conditions and political- economic conflicts, has led to highly destructive wars in Ukraine where Russia has repeatedly rattled the nuclear saber, prompting concerns about the use of nuclear weapons and a possible World War III that might involve the use of hydrogen bombs that can each wipe out millions—a catastrophe that could kill as many as five or six billion people. Tensions are increasing between nuclear powers. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists now claims we are at 90 seconds before a midnight of nuclear annihilation, the highest level since 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis. Meanwhile a genocidal war is ongoing in Gaza in which massive destruction and seemingly endless deaths and injuries are a daily occurrence. As will be seen, these two crises of climate change and warfare are interconnected and are fostering many of the social movements that are currently emerging.

But before we retreat into gloom, doom, despair and cynicism, we must also note that contradictions and crises usually generate countertrends, and some of these may be emancipatory resistance via anti-systemic social movements. Today, *there are growing expressions of global resistance qua collective mobilizations against various forms of oppression and domination*. In the mid-twentieth century, environmental concerns were rekindled after Rachel Carson (1953) exposed the hazards of DDT pollution which then rallied public concerns with the environment. In 1970, the first Earth Day was celebrated, organized in part by 25-year-old Dennis Hayes (Goodell 2020) and the EPA was established. Ever since, there has been growing awareness of the dangers of pollution, especially the carbon emissions fueling global warming. Average temperatures keep rising every year because of 200 years of “fossil capital” beginning with coal, now oil; and in turn we see devastating climate changes: powerful hurricanes, cyclones, tornadoes, a whiplash of droughts and floods, and extreme heat emergencies are more frequent. Desertification has expanded, and sea levels are rising. These conditions are forcing many people to migrate and many more will have to move when temperatures in the tropics start boiling (Xu, et al. 2020). The acceleration of the pace of global change has prompted mainstream social movement research to consider the problem in general and the role of youth in particular (della Porta and M. Diani. 2020). The very survival of our species depends in large part on the eventual success of a number of progressive global justice movements in which most of the social actors

consist of younger activists whose generational location strongly exposes them to the crises of our time.⁴

As V. Gordon Childe (1941) noted, ever since the Neolithic Revolution when class societies first emerged, irrigation-based agriculture conjoined with calendars and enabled surplus food production, freeing many from plowing the soil while providing food for many more. Standing armies were created and used to secure wealth (land), slaves, or power through warfare. While fictional, Aristophanes' play, *Lysistrata*, is a feminist antiwar protest from the fourth century BCE. To this day we have seen a variety of strong antiwar and pacifist movements. The spirit of the antiwar movements of the 1960s has been rekindled in many college and university occupations protesting Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Oppression, Resistance and Social Change

Most approaches to the study of protests, social movements and social change tend to be quite partial, often limited by "acceptable" disciplinary boundaries and/or political considerations. In the following pages I will combine the world-systems theory structural perspective with the cultural approach of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory and with concerns about crises, character, emotions, and mobilization. This is intended to enable the integration of structure and agency to understand the current global situation and to do something about it. While both the world-systems theory and Frankfurt School Critical Theory perspectives are quite interdisciplinary, there have been few attempts to join them to understand anti-systemic resistance movements and their potential capacity to be spearheads of both progressive and reactionary social change.⁵ That said, one must start with the nature of the global political economy as the basis of structural oppression and strains, contradictions and dysfunctions. Structural crises eventually become evident as crises in everyday life. Although Marx never developed a theory of social movements as such, he understood the material basis of oppression. Alienated labor was the basis of suffering and the thwarting of agency. The working class needed to move from a group in-itself to for-itself, aware of itself as an agent of change. In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels called for a proletarian revolution, the overthrow of capitalism, democratic ownership of the means of production and withering away of the State.

Marx was influenced by the Hegelian theory of history in which the dialectic of Spirit (*Geist*—the shared ideas, values, and ethos of a people) moved through history, in which the Negations, the contradictions within led to negations of the negation, in which new resolutions, guided by the "cunning of reason," aim toward absolute knowledge and freedom. Given his materialist perspective, Marx saw contradictions and crises of ideology that were rooted in the inherent contradictions of the underlying material base, the political economy. Thus, political

⁴ See below.

⁵ This essay is primarily concerned with progressive and emancipatory anti-systemic social movements although the framework first produced by the Frankfurt School studying crisis, emotions and character was rooted in their analysis of the rise of fascism in the 1920s and the 1930s.

economic conflicts often become contested in the cultural terrain. Marx's (1852) analysis of the coup and subsequent dictatorship of Louis Napoleon, as well as the Paris Commune (1871) and its bloody demise, reflected the conflicting material interests of different classes. In 1917, given the vast inequality of Czarist Russia and the squalor of the newly emancipated peasantry and after defeat of the Czar's military in World War I, elements of the Czar's soldiers and sailors defected to support the St. Petersburg Soviet. There followed a revolution in which the Bolsheviks eventually gained predominant control, establishing their "official" interpretations of Marx's ideas regarding the dictatorship of the proletariat that had become the dictatorship of a vanguard party.

In the late 1920s, a group of Hegelian Marxist scholars created the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt to develop critiques of the authoritarianism of the Third Internationale and its economic reductionism that ignored cultural and social psychological moments of capital that Marx had noted in his critiques of alienated labor, his critiques of Feuerbach in German ideology (Hegel), and even within *Kapital*, especially the discussions of reified labor as essential for capitalist production and accumulation. The Frankfurt School attempted to update and rescue Marx's critique of capitalism and to combine this with Weber's perspective on Instrumental Reason, modern rationality and bureaucracy, the demystification of the world and charismatic authority. And finally, they attempted to integrate Freud's theories about human nature, character, unconscious motivation, desire, and emotions. Early Frankfurt School Critical Theory scholars such as Eric Fromm and Herbert Marcuse were among the first to read the then recently discovered *1844 Manuscripts* in which Marx analyses how wage labor and alienation warp and thwart the workers and hypothesized how a post-capitalist society could free humanity from domination, restore agency, enable human fulfillment and provide harmonious communities—as well as harmonious relationships with Nature.

In the face of the rising currents of fascism in the 1920s the Frankfurt School Critical Theory began extensive studies of German family life. Following Wilhelm Reich ([1933] 1993), they systematically explored the role of punitive socialization practices that instilled authoritarianism as a character trait that disposed some people, especially those in the lower middle classes, to embrace the "mass psychology of Fascism." Fromm (1941) called authoritarianism a "mechanism of escape" that alleviated the fear and anxiety caused by economic crises, especially massive unemployment and hyperinflation. Reactionary ideologies and leaders directed blame and anger toward those "scapegoats" responsible for economic problems—the Jews and Communists. Many people embraced the authoritarianism of the Nazi party and its cult-like devotion to its charismatic leader—Adolf Hitler. The Frankfurt scholars offered an early perspective on how political and economic crises spurred certain individuals to embrace authoritarianism and to support or join reactionary social movements to escape anxiety (Fromm 1941).

Most perspectives in social movement theory minimize or ignore these Frankfurt School Critical Theory perspectives on social movements (Hetland and Goodwin 2013). Indeed, they have often minimized the role of economic factors that engender sexism, racism and homophobia. And most structural approaches tend to pay less attention to the qualities of the actors or to analyze how structural strains and crises are mediated through cultural understandings, character, and/or

identity to foster the emotions that impel or impede social protests (Jasper 2018). What motivates social actors to support and join social movements? And what motivates choices about whether to support progressive or reactionary movements? As will be argued, an interdisciplinary perspective, informed by Marxist traditions as well as by recent perspectives on emotions, topics that have been typically eschewed by most social movement perspectives, became more acceptable given the progressive movements of the 1960s that Marcuse (1969) called “great refusals.” Jurgen Habermas noted the relationships between crises, emotions, and social mobilizations (see below). The perspective I am developing here is especially useful for understanding the global justice movements that emerged in the first decade the twenty-first century and the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring movements that were precipitated by the economic grievances of young democratic-character types who mobilized for equality, freedom and dignity.

From “Normal” to Crisis⁶

Hegel (1956) called certain submerged moments of Spirit “concealed fronts” that lie beneath the dominant ideas and the long-term typicality of the quotidian. These underlying dormant negations of the status quo are often nascent for a long time, but they become evident when they erupt during times of crisis, contradiction and transformation.⁷ The “concealed front” is not so much an action or a movement, as it is an affective and cognitive disposition to an action or movement that may be actualized at a time of a social crisis when there tends to be a withdrawal of loyalty to the dominant system and openness to alternatives. And through the negation of negation, a new reality emerges. “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please...but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1852). Elements of bourgeois trade were evident in late feudalism, especially when the Crusaders brought silks, spices and porcelain back to Europe, creating demand for more. But it was only after trade had reached a certain level that a rising bourgeois class embraced rational capitalism and eventually displaced land-based feudalism and challenged dynastic rule. For Marx class conflict was inherent to class societies while its contradictions had often been long present *sub rosa* but not recognized.

Ecological despoliation, an “externality,” an indirect but inevitable consequence of capitalist production and accumulation, was little recognized outside of scientific circles. It was just a nuisance that people lived with. Marx, however, was aware of the dangers of environmental despoliation long before it was generally seen as a life-threatening condition. His immediate concern was the critique of capital intended to inform and mobilize workers to become a revolutionary class that would overthrow capitalism. But that was not to happen. To forestall revolution and safeguard profits, the capitalist classes thwarted revolution. They increased wages, benefits, and entitlements. Nationalism, often intertwined with imperialism, transformed workers

⁶ This is evident from the research of Milkman, Luce and Lewis (2013); Castells (2014). della Porta (2015), See especially Bensi, Langman, and Tejerina (2013).

⁷ Fossil fuels created the conditions for environmental resistance, a “concealed front” which was not recognized until global warming was seen as a threat to survival.

from members of unequal, competing classes into “equal,” harmonious, citizens of the nation, members of an “imagined community with mediated connections and ersatz solidarity (Anderson 1983). And of course, these members of national communities supported the claims of the leaders to bring peace, freedom, democracy and prosperity -or that was how the leaders packaged imperialism. In the early twentieth century workers began to own some of the products they produced, beginning with Model T Fords. Consumerism, as a lifestyle and palliative to alienated labor, dulled critical thought and obscured class interests while creating profits for the capitalists and ever more pollution. Capitalism was normalized if not celebrated. As Fredrick Jameson said, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.⁸ Today, far too many ignore the dangers of fossil fuel-based consumerism, and/or resist the deep changes required to halt global warming. If heaven cannot help us, who will? Environmentalist movements!

*Les Trente Glorieuses*⁹

In 1944 representatives of the Allied nations gathered in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire to establish rules and regulations to facilitate investments, trade and the convertibility of currencies and to enable rebuilding of a post-World War II world economy. This created the foundations of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and eventually the World Trade Organization. With the embrace of Keynesian economics and major government investment and regulation, there was a rebuilding of the devastated infrastructures. Men, especially straight white men and veterans, easily found jobs and government-funded higher education. Germany and Japan caught up with the United States in manufacturing, producing an overcapacity profit squeeze. The increasing globalization of production in lower wage countries with skilled workers, often with more up-to-date machinery, would impact the more antiquated production facilities in the global North. This led to deindustrialization—wastelands of rusted hulks of abandoned factories. This led to unemployment and the closure of many small businesses in smaller towns that had been dependent on a large factory or two. The Fordist-Keynesian moment ran into a financial crisis and stagflation. The resolution of these economic crises paved the way for the embrace of the neoliberal globalization project that began with Clinton and Blair paving the way for Reaganism/Thatcherism and the Washinton Consensus as the solution.

What Hath Adam Smith Wrought?

Neoliberalism was a revival of the Smith–Ricardo celebration of a liberal, “free market,” aka “market fundamentalism.” *They claimed that the pursuit of profit was the primary and indeed the*

⁸ Quoted by Mark Fisher (2012) in *Capitalist Realism: Is There Still No Alternative?* For an interesting scenario of the end of the world, see below. It would be helpful to know Portuguese Spanish or Italian to follow the dialogue but there are English subtitles. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/companies/mit-has-predicted-that-society-will-collapse-in-2040-economics-explained/vi-AA1uzRS8>

⁹ The Thirty Glorious Years, 1945–1975

only worthy goal of business. Governments should have little or no role in regulating the economy since the free market can allegedly regulate itself. Government services and providing resources beyond security, issuing quality and health standards and even fire protection and clean water should be privatized.¹⁰ Relief from the “burdens” of the welfare state and/or pushing “woke agendas,” would free up vast sums of money for investment and “the invisible hand” would pass over the society and bring prosperity for all. The rising tide would raise all ships, but when the tide rose, many of the smaller ships had short anchor chains and as the tidewaters rose, they sank.

Neoliberalism worked quite well for some, especially the CEOs of financial and/or high-tech/digital enterprises. The incomes of CEOs of major corporations are now hundreds of times greater than those of the average worker. The incomes and wealth of the top have skyrocketed. The 1 percent now own about 30 percent of the national wealth in the United States—seven or eight individual men now have as much wealth as the bottom half of the world. The incomes of most people stagnated, and many have seen declines. Elon Musk was recently granted a \$50 billion bonus. The upper classes are doing quite well as evidenced in resurgent consumerism, especially palatial mansions, private jets, luxury cars, yachts, and costly vacations. But for most people, incomes have been stagnant or declining while living costs have risen. Employment is more precarious and most of the new jobs are poorly paid, providing few benefits, little job security and few possibilities for mobility. The American Dream has turned into a mirage—especially for youth. There is a growing precariat which now includes many young people (Standing 2011).¹¹ College graduates have difficulty finding jobs commensurate with their levels of education while being burdened with large student debts, facing ever high costs-of-living. Many take less skilled, low salary or gig jobs with little security or chances for mobility.¹² And much of the growing unionization movement is due to college graduates who took some sociology or philosophy courses and developed a critical view, but subsequently could only find work as baristas at Starbucks or delivering packages for Amazon.

Neoliberalism has been especially crisis prone. In the last few decades many of the more “advanced” capitalist societies have faced a variety of crises, the Dot.com collapse, the Thai real estate crash, the Savings & Loan debacle, bank failures, the massive Global Crossing bankruptcy, and, of course, the 2008 financial crisis that followed the deregulation of banks via the overthrow of Glass-Steagall, and the bundling of high risk mortgages that were peddled at teaser rates to

¹⁰ The call for further deregulation and privatization has been reiterated in the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 that would even dismantle government-provided Social Security and health insurance—the Affordable Care Act.

¹¹ For Standing (2011) the precariat is: 1), unskilled minorities and/or immigrants, 2), the sons and daughters working-class parents that have no more than a high school education that can no longer find the well-paid blue-collar/pink color jobs of their parents as many older factories have closed, and the newer factories pay far lower wages and provide far fewer benefits, and 3) recent college graduates facing very limited job markets, and high costs of living beginning with rents that often take 30 percent or more of one’s take-home income.

¹² Milburn (2019) has offered an extremely comprehensive analysis of the rise of neoliberalism and its impact on different generations, especially the financially insecure Z Generation that embraces not only progressive redistribution politics, but an emphasis on caring and mutual aid. Meanwhile the fear of losing one’s property, increased taxes to pay for social benefits for underemployed youths and/or minorities shifts older cohorts to the right.

unsophisticated borrowers. These “creative securities” magically transformed debts into assets that were used to purchase complex derivatives. When the short-term mortgages came due there were massive defaults and major banks and investment companies lost billions, and some firms like Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns, and AIG went under. Of course, neoliberalism was quickly shelved by incoming President Obama, Keynesianism was revived, and trillions of U.S. dollars were printed to save the banks that were “too big to fail.” Those who lost their homes, savings and jobs were out of luck. The bankers got bonuses. The short-term result was the most serious economic crisis since 1929. There followed a “global slump”(McNally 2010) that adversely impacted countries around the world, leading to massive job losses, stock market crashes, and growing poverty and inequality.¹³ As we will see, many of the Z-generation were young children at that time, but many of their families were exposed to, and impacted by, the 2008 financial crisis at an early age, disposing their embrace of progressive values (Milburn 2019; Volpe 2022).

The economic crisis of 2008 is a key event of our time, a generation-forming moment. It has crystallized and accelerated the ongoing generational divide in life chances. As young people, among others, found the conditions of life increasingly intolerable, they began the process of identifying and rejecting the structural constraints placed upon them. (Milburn 2019: 2)

The rising anger and discontent of these young people was first seen in some of the early anti-globalization/global justice protest movements such as support for the Mexican Zapatistas, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and the huge anti-WTO protests. There followed the Arab Spring movements, the Occupy Wall Street movement that established an encampment adjacent to Wall Street and directed its outrage at the 1 percent. Similar encampments sprouted up in many other cities across the nation and the globe (Curran, et al. 2014). Zuccotti Park,¹⁴ where the New York encampment took place, and the other occupy zones across the globe were a “moment of madness” (Zolberg 1972) in which radical democracy, participation for all, horizontal leadership, and short-term solidarity were in bloom. The *jouissance* of the encampments was more of a moment than a movement. It did not produce a coherent radical analysis, a vision, or a lasting organization. Yet it did change the dominant discourse from the need for austerity demanded by the elites to a critique of the mushrooming inequality among the masses (Langman 2013).

For Milburn (2019) it was at this moment that the Z Generation became “Generation Left,” as in being *left behind* financially and then embracing *left politics* in the many occupations, marches, and protests, and then moving toward electoral politics. Notwithstanding some short-term victories in Spain (*Podemos*) or Greece (*Syriza*), their numbers were too small. Nor could they match the power of global capital. In the United States, Generation Left gave electoral support

¹³ And for many people across the globe, the devastating economic impact initiated a growing embrace of right-wing nationalist, populist and neofascist politicians and regimes. This was clear in the recent reelection of Trump and many of his supporters placed economic factors as primary.

¹⁴ In 2011, Zuccotti Park became the site of the Occupy Wall Street protest camp, during which activists occupied the plaza and used it as a staging ground for their protests throughout the Wall Street Financial District.

to Bernie Sanders, in the UK to Jeremy Corbyn. But the times were not yet ripe to break the ruling class grip on power. Moreover, as recent right-wing trends have shown, there has been a backlash against progressive policies in general and against youth protests.

Toward a Critical Theory of the Environment

Kant ([1784] 1991) suggested that the Enlightenment marked the freedom of humans from ignorance and the emergence from self-imposed immaturity. But for Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), while the Enlightenment was scientifically and culturally emancipatory, freeing people from blind tradition, despotic feudalism, superstition, religious dogma, and ignorance, and creating the potential for freedom, democracy, and autonomous self-production; nevertheless at same time, its embrace of Instrumental Reason and scientific progress without a humanistic ethical position ultimately created new forms of domination, control, oppression, and dehumanization that undermined its own ideals. Humans and Nature were reified and rendered as objects to be used for the sake of capital accumulation. This thwarted the promise of human fulfillment that the Enlightenment had celebrated. The rationality of production for profit, indifferent to adverse consequences for both workers and the planet, has now been universalized. This was the dialectic of Enlightenment. It has also given us rationalization and global warming. Rationality, Instrumental Reason—the logic and legitimating hegemonic ideology of capitalist modernity—privileged “efficient” capitalist production and accumulation, regardless of the human consequences, entrapping all in the “iron cages” of a bureaucratic world (Weber [1905] 2003). First evident in the steam powered water pumps in the coal mines, then the looms of Manchester where textile production became more fully rationalized, by the twentieth century with Fordism/Taylorism rational mass production and administration had become the norm. Today, between digitalization, computerization, CAD/CAM and AI, production, administration, and distribution extract as much surplus value as possible through the simplification of routinized mass production and distribution. But since so many of these processes are not clearly visible there is a vast blindness to the externalities of capitalist accumulation—namely environmental despoliation, endangered health, especially of workers, and the very viability of human survival.

In a pioneering tract called *The Domination of Nature*, William Liess (1972), informed by Frankfurt School Critical Theory, showed that Western attitudes toward human domination over Nature were long standing. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and paid dearly for his crime. Sisyphus was unable to thwart gravity, while Daedalus and Icarus, attempting to fly, flew close to the sun and experienced global warming ended with the drastic consequences.¹⁵ It was not until the 1960s that very many people became aware of the environmental damage brought by “rational” capitalism. In 1962, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, an early effort to educate the public about the dangers and adverse environmental consequences of pesticides, especially DDT, rallied many

¹⁵ This is not to suggest that the pollution of air, land and water was not already evident in antiquity. Think of the smelters of Rome spewing toxic fumes into the air.

people and might be seen as initiating a wider environmentalism. In 1970 the first Earth Day was celebrated, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established.

It should be noted that Erich Fromm (1941, 1947, 1973) and Herbert Marcuse ([1972] 2005) were among the first scholars to read Marx on alienation, species-being, the “metabolic rift,” and the estrangement of capitalist society from Nature that now threatens human existence.¹⁶ As will be noted below, these scholars provided a vision of hope based on the emergence of a characterological change, in which a new kind of person with a radically different character more devoted to caring and sharing with others rather than possessing material things. While quite rare today, as will be argued below, the contradictions and adversities of today are fostering generational changes in character that could lead to a saner society.

Toward a Critical Theory of Social Mobilization

To understand the contemporary environmental movements and antiwar protests, as moments of a more progressive trend, we need a dialectical perspective that sees contradictions and negations, typically evident as the inevitable consequences of capitalist production *that fosters suffering that impels transformative collective resistance to resolve the contradictions*. Unfettered, neoliberal capitalism, in either its State or private forms, creates vast amounts of pollution and degradation beginning with the extraction of fossil fuels, their transport (pipeline “accidents,” tanker sinkings) factory farms and commercial food production, energy for factory production to serve rampant consumerism, transportation by car, plane or ship, and so on. As has been noted, the dialectical consequence has the carbon emissions that have led to global warming, climate change and the various adversities previously mentioned. These are not simply nuisances or inconveniences but life-threatening adversities. Many cities adjacent to oceans will suffer serious consequences as the ice caps melt and oceans rise. We have already seen this taking place in Bangladesh. Some scientists suggest that global warming has already reached several tipping points, and our species may not survive.

The studies of the rise of reactionary fascism offered some hints for understanding progressive resistance today. Although World War I and the reparations devastated the German economy, it slowly recovered; but when the Great Depression of 1929 hit, the economy collapsed, unemployment skyrocketed, hyperinflation soared, and people felt victimized, fearful, anxious, angry and desperate for change. The weak Weimar government could do little. The Nazi party promised restoration of German and Aryan greatness (MGGA, Make Germany Great Again), economic remediation, defending traditional family values—read: privileging hegemonic masculinity—revenge for the injustices of Versailles, and harsh punishment for the “enemies” who “stabbed Germany in the back” —Jews and Communists. The Nazis cleverly used the then new mass media, film, and radio for propaganda purposes. Many people, especially the more authoritarian segments of the lower middle class, as well as some upper-level blue collar workers

¹⁶ See Gunderson (2014) on the role of ecology in Fromm’s concept of biophilia.

in industries like Krupp or IG Farben, were joined by some of the lumpen proletariat. The Frankfurt School Critical Theory incorporated psychoanalytic theories of character, desire, and defense to explain authoritarianism, the internalization of domination, and why Nazism and Hitler had mass appeal. Membership in the Nazi party provided an escape from alienation and loneliness and provided a sense of belonging to a community, overcoming powerlessness and meaninglessness (Fromm 1941). The Nazis gained power, Hitler became Chancellor and assumed absolute supremacy and the rest is history. These events and early studies from over 100 years ago, joined with more current perspectives on social movements, provide a framework for understanding anti-systemic mobilization starting with *legitimation crises, evoking strong emotions, differentially impacting actors at different social locations of class and age the role of character structure/identities and visions of the actors, and exposure to mass media.*

Legitimation Crises

As noted above, to understand social movements we need to start with injustices, contradictions or crises that evoke suffering. Following Marx's discussion of the crises of capitalism—overproduction, falling rates of profit, technological changes, and so on. Habermas, (1975) updated and expanded Marx with his analyses of systemic legitimation crises beginning with, first, the economic system which needed to produce and distribute adequate amounts of necessary and/or desirable goods and services; second, the State needed to provide the legal, political conditions, and regulatory conditions to produce and equitably distribute wealth—often as entitlements—while insuring personal and collective security and civil rights. Third, the cultural system should provide shared meanings, values, goals, and gratifying collective identities including citizenship via “national populars”—holiday rituals, sacralized places, and monuments that celebrate collective identities and provide solidarity and loyalty to the nation.¹⁷ Little noted in 1975, Habermas showed concern with the growing hazards of environmental despoliation and climate change that now threaten the viability of humanity.

Emotions

What motivates and impels actors to join resistance movements? For Habermas (1975), crises of legitimacy at the systemic level migrate to the life worlds of experience, motivation, identity and, especially, emotions. For many, especially younger cohorts, there is growing consciousness of the adverse consequences of environmental damage/global warming. When ecological disasters cause personal hardships, such as losing jobs, savings, homes, businesses, and loved ones, people suffer and experience strong complexes of emotions—anxiety, fear, depression, and so on. There is often anger at conditions, policies, or political leaders. But some people, while themselves not immediately impacted by these crises, form a consciousness of environmental damage and global

¹⁷ Surely, following Gramsci, the cultural system is the major site where hegemonic discourses secure “willing consent” to the historic bloc (class arrangements) and loyalty to the nation-state such that people actively reproduce their domination and subjugation as “common sense.”

warming, and have the capacity for empathy with the sufferings of others. There may be anger and outrage toward the polluters, government policies, and leaders. These emotions prompt motivated and dedicated actors to do something, to support or join resistance movements for social change and long-term struggles. Some actors have democratic characters and identities that enable empathy, embracing critical perspectives and visions of the possible that facilitate agency. In much the same way the carnage of war, especially when many victims are noncombatant women and children, provokes empathy with strangers. These actors are also likely to join antiwar, movements, marches and organizations that put pressures on governments to cease-and-desist their genocidal combat strategies.¹⁸

For Habermas (1981) the “new social movements” of the 1960s youths—antiwar, civil rights, feminist, LGBTQ, or environmentalist movements—that emerged at the seams of the system and life worlds were not based on economic concerns *per se* but *were driven by emotional reactions regarding issues of meaning, values and identities*. These movements sought to realize new constellations of identity that extolled freedom, equality, toleration, participatory democracy, and creative self-fulfillment. Habermas (1981: 33) claimed that these:

conflicts deviate from the welfare-state pattern of institutionalized conflict over distribution [or] material reproduction; channeled through parties and organizations. Rather, the new conflicts arise in areas of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization. They are manifested in sub-institutional, extra-parliamentary forms of protest. The ...media of money and power are not sufficient to circumvent this reification.

While Critical Theory influenced New Social Movement Theory as it was developed by Touraine (1981), Melucci (1989), and Castells (2009), less attention was paid to the political/economic antecedents and subjective aspects (character or emotions) of these new movements. But they were seen as the means of realizing a new kind of society with more “desirable” kinds of selfhood and collective identities, in which creative self-fulfillment would replace competition for wealth and status, and being fully human will replace having material things and where caring, sharing and generosity will have displaced greed and selfishness.¹⁹ The fundamental goal of protests and resistance was to enact the identities, values and interpersonal relationships in the here and now

¹⁸ Most of the youth protesting the war in Vietnam did not actually know any of the millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians, or Laotians who perished in that war. But it did become clear that policies such as Operation Phoenix routinely tortured and murdered tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Today, the daily news and social media present images of the carnage, destruction and suffering taking place in Gaza and Lebanon. Many of the protesters of Israel’s war in Gaza do not personally know victims of that war. It should also be noted that many of the young protesters are secular Jews especially chagrined at the massive violence towards civilians committed by a Jewish government.

¹⁹ In 2009, Castells argued that in “network society” there were three basic types of identity, most people tended to be rather conventional and conformist, some groups, tended to be more conservative if not reactionary and finally, some groups embrace what he called “project identities” feminism, equality for minorities, toleration for LGBTQ and the progressive changes that have been discussed in this article. Further, in 2004, his analysis of the Arab Spring, Castells contended that it was motivated by the anger and outrage of progressive youths at the traditional forms of corrupt domination in the Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) countries and the hope for a better world.

and as models that would prefigure a new kind of person and a new kind of society in the future. Thus, they chose demonstrations and protests in the public spheres, rather than the political/electoral sphere dominated by the top-down policies and leaders of the ruling parties.²⁰ In this realm actors articulated what Castells (2009) had called “project identities,” narratives of self and interpersonal styles as exemplars and goals for a future society. These anti-systemic, emancipatory resistance movements were spontaneous, bottom-up mobilizations not tied to political parties or NGOs. Leadership, if any, emerged spontaneously and tended to be more democratic and horizontal.

The Generational Locations of Actors

The experiences, interpretations and reactions to social events and crises depend on one’s social location, especially class, region and/or age/generation. Yes, but of the most important aspects of social movements, often given little attention, has been the social, historical, and material context, and key conditions of the era in which each generation comes of age. For Karl Mannheim ([1928] 1972), the larger economic political and cultural realities of the era in which a cohort comes of age, often marked by a striking event or an unpredictable sudden change in the way that people think of themselves, play a role in shaping the attitudes, values, and identities of that cohort that endure throughout the life span. In terms of political values and activism, it is become useful to look at the Z generation, X generation, and Baby Boomers) who each grew up at different historical moments, and that in part shaped their values. The boomers, born 1946 to 1964, grew up at a time in which the postwar economy was booming, jobs were plentiful, most people, at least white people, had job security, promises of mobility and affordable housing often in suburban developments in which large homes, yards, and two-car garages were typical. They became, and to an extent remain, most of the political leaders left or right. Their politics are typically centrist: (center-left, center-right). You are highly progressive or extremely conservative—and the different political parties could work together to attain a compromise. Gen X, typically those born between 1965 and 1980, sometimes called the latchkey or lost generation, since they grew up at a time of rapid social change, emerging feminism, as there were more women working and gaining income, which meant with growing agency, would see the beginnings of third wave feminism, granting women agency and equality. This was expressed in the classical *Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963). Then followed the sexual revolution, increased divorce rates, and young children coming home from school to empty homes. They generally tended to be independent, open, and flexible and many would grow up and become computer/cell phone users. Their social values are bit more liberal than their parents, but they did value financial security.

The Z generation, born roughly between 1999 and 2012, sometimes called a “political generation,” grew up at a time of economic crisis, mainly the 2008 housing scam implosion when they were young, schoolyard shootings, and a very different economic context in which the

²⁰ In France, many such demonstrations were organized by the Situationists who used transgression and irony as tools of protest.

impacts of globalization were more evident as factories closed, imports surged, secure jobs decreased especially for the college-educated youth. There was greater economic stagnation and precarity (Della Volpe 2018, Millburn, 2019). One third of recent graduates are living at home since they cannot afford rent and will probably never be able to afford to own a house. The general response for most of these young people has not only been a very sharp move toward liberal social values and extremely progressive socioeconomic values. Almost half of them reject binary codes of gender, they support racial equality, and slightly more than half say that they prefer socialism to capitalism (though they tend to equate socialism with “free” healthcare and college tuition). It is not surprising then that many of the differences in values today are clearly generational. But the important point is that the vast majority are not just supporters of climate justice movements but constitute the majority of activists and even in some cases have become leaders in these movements. In her American Sociological Association presidential address, Ruth Milkman (2017), following Karl Mannheim’s approach to generations, analyzed four different youth movements of the time. She claimed these youth:

comprise a new political generation with lived experiences and worldviews that set them apart from their elders. Not only are they the first generation of “digital natives,” but, although they are more educated than any previous U.S. generation, they face a labor market in which precarity is increasingly the norm. And despite proclamations to the contrary, they confront persistent racial and gender disparities, discrimination against sexual minorities, and widening class inequality—all of which they understand in the framework of “intersectionality.” (Milkman, 2017:1)

More recently, Milburn (2019), Katz and their colleagues (2021), and Volpe (2022) have offered perspectives on the Z generation—living in a digital world, while economically left behind, highly stressed and very progressive. As will be seen, the issues of today, environmentalism and antiwar protests have mobilized large numbers of youth. As each cohort exists within the context of world history another cohort takes its place in the age structure. Ergo, the Z Gens of today, will be the leaders of tomorrow.

But generation is not a homogeneous category, as Mannheim pointed out. Within any generation there are different groups, what he called “generation units.” While most of the Z generation are quite progressive, many, especially Southern, rural men without college educations, who have been especially hard hit by economic factors, tend to be more conservative and many of these voted for Donald Trump. Contrary to the shibboleth that radical young people become conservative as they get older, most retain their progressive values even if work and family no longer permit as much time for involvement in social movements.²¹ Cohorts, shaped by different historical contexts, have different interests, values and goals. College students occupy a unique position, old enough for their cognitive abilities to have been fully developed, but many, especially

²¹Whalen and Flacks (1998) have shown that most of the young activists of the 1960s went on to jobs in journalism, research, social services, and teaching at many levels including universities. The Fines study (2013) found that most had a long history of progressive activism going back to the sixties and today, many of these need wheelchairs or walkers to get to meetings and protests.

those with more flexible characters, are young enough to be open to new ideas and capable of changes in character, identities and values given the capacity for “dynamic character change” (Fromm 1941). Indeed, for many, youth is an identity moratorium, a period in which strong commitments to an identity are put on hold as young people develop a sense of self and their place, their niche in the world. And youth have a flexible moment in the lifecycle for exploration of self-concepts and lifestyles, some of which may be quite rebellious (Erickson 1956). Colleges and universities, especially liberal arts and science programs, expose students to a wide variety of critical perspectives, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, college brings large numbers of young people together from very different classes, cultural, national, or racial backgrounds. They are likely to meet and gain knowledge of each other and their cultures. Those with an activist bent find larger concentrations of fellow travelers that share their perspectives. Attending college creates spaces and openings for critical thought and collective actions, as we have so often seen in the antiwar movements of the 1960s and again in 2024 with the many campus protests of Israeli genocide.

In the 1960s, many college students engaged in a variety of progressive social movements especially opposition to the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. Inglehart (1981) surmised that this generation had been raised following the advice of Dr. Spock—more democratic and authoritative rather than hierarchical and punitive. Their parents stressed caring, sharing, and empathy rather than obedience and conformity. Many youths in this cohort had more democratic personalities, were more empathic toward others, more tolerant of differences, aware of, and critical of, the long-term injustices and sufferings of subordinated and denigrated groups such as racial minorities, women, or LGBTQ. Having been raised in more democratic and egalitarian families, they were more likely to take critical courses taught by progressive teachers. Many were influenced by the legacies of French existentialism and the Beat writers and poets who protested the repression, empty conformity, ennui, and shallow consumerism of American middle-class life. This discontent was noted by David Riesman (1950) and C Wright Mills (1959). By the 1960s across many American and European campuses there was growing resentment, protests and mobilizations against the imperialist war in Vietnam—an extremely bloody conflict intended to sustain American domination and prevent the “evils” of Communism. This antiwar movement challenged traditional identities and values and led to a backlash that was seen in the election of Richard Nixon 1968 and the later rise of Reaganism/Thatcherism. In 1968 there were similar social movements led by students in Paris and Mexico City. Masses of French students were joined by workers protesting low pay in the defense factories of Nanterre. These spontaneous bottom-up mobilizations influenced the rise of the New Social Movement theory. And while the protest mobilizations subsided, their legacies would endure as many of the activists became journalists, organizers and teachers. The propensity for progressive activism would again be seen at the end of the last century with the rise of the global justice movement that was kicked off by the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico in 1994. Through brilliant use of the newly emerging Internet, the Zapatista rebellion garnered support throughout the world. This was followed by the anti-World Trade

Organization (WTO) protest in 1999 (the Battle of Seattle) that brought students, environmentalists and organized labor together.

Social Character

In any society only a small proportion of the people engage in social activism, the organization of and participation in social protests. Why do they? For Fromm (1941) social character was the typical personality constellation found among large numbers of people rather than individual psychology, but in larger, class societies, there are differences in social character, often tied to class status and levels of education. Which social or political causes, issues and agendas do they support or oppose? To simplify, we can consider the role of “social character” that came out of the early Frankfurt School Critical Theory studies of fascism in which the “authoritarian personality” was, as Reich (1933) suggested, more typically found in working and lower middle-class families who’s strict, if not punitive child rearing practices prepared children to accept orders from superiors when they became workers. Authoritarianism psychologically disposes people to embrace fascist ideologies, movements, and leaders.²² Subsequent research has shown that class still matters in socialization and character and that it impacts political orientations and support for social movements.

In a landmark study, Kohn (1989) found that the relationship of social class and child rearing values was tied in part to the nature of the kinds of work different classes performed, primarily the extent to which one’s occupation allows self-direction, deals with complexity and a variety of tasks the require flexibility. Parents with these kinds of jobs encourage the self-direction of their children. On the other hand, parents with jobs that do not have much autonomy teach their children to more fully accept the official expectations of the job and to dutifully carry them out without question. More recently, Lareau (2011) found that working class parents are more likely to give more directions to their children and placed more emphasis on physical punishment. They are more likely to accept the notion that children naturally develop their personalities as opposed to the more middle-class families that are more likely to reason with their children, raise questions and listen to the children’s own views, encouraging their self-direction in both thought and action.

Lakoff (2016), a cognitive psychologist, reports a similar pattern in which a strict, authoritarian family model stresses physical discipline and a strict morality as necessary for raising children to function and succeed in a tough world that is basically bad. Taking care of oneself and one’s family are the primary values. And this implies indifference to those less fortunate. This pattern disposes right wing politics. The nurturant, egalitarian family model emphasizes empathy, creativity, and social responsibility so that their children can empathize with others and assume creative forms of self-fulfillment while caring and sharing with others. These families see the world as good, but it can be made better. Faced with adversities and crises, democratic characters

²² In the social psychology literature, there have been thousands of studies of authoritarianism and related characteristics such as dogmatism and Machiavellianism in a constellation called the “deadly triad.” There have been far fewer studies of the democratic personality.

strive to establish a society that is more tolerant, egalitarian, democratic and fulfilling for all. In their analysis of the 2016 election, Smith and Henly (2018) found that authoritarianism was a better predictor of voting for Trump than most of the demographic or economic variables.

The various social conditions of today, beginning with more nurturant, empathic child-rearing and greater levels of education in general, have typically fostered a more egalitarian democratic character that, in face of injustices, contradictions and/or legitimation crises, embraces progressive change. Such characters see the difference between what is and what might be and subscribe to the post-Enlightenment vision that is the core of humanism and human dignity. These progressive movements, nascent in earlier struggles such as the abolition of slavery, feminism, and LGBTQ rights, can be considered “mobilizations for dignity” that advocate that every person should be free of domination and should be able to realize his or her own creative self-fulfillment. This stance favors a future in which universal respect for the equality of all people would hold a special value. It has nothing to do with their class, race, gender, religion, abilities, or any other factors other than being human (cf. Benski, Langman, and Tejerina 2013).

Conversely, authoritarian characters tend to be raised in stricter, more punitive ways are more frequently religious fundamentalists or highly political conservatives. They are more likely to stress obedience and conformity. Authoritarians tend to be intolerant and anti-democratic, valuing hierarchy, order, and conformity. They are often sadomasochistic and punitive, disposed to embrace domination by the strong and subordination of the weak. They are especially willing to use force and violence against perceived “enemies.” They valorize the in-group and denigrate the outgroup. They tend to be more oriented toward an imagined past Golden Age, seen as being more desirable than the present moment of moral decay. Historically, in face of crises, authoritarian characters support authoritarian ideologies, and often join movements led by “powerful leaders,” “strongmen” who articulate a rugged hypermasculinity to express “strength” and “toughness” and use that strength as a weapon which becomes an indication of masculine authority and the ability to “get things done” by any means, and that includes punishing enemies and scoundrels allegedly responsible for the sufferings of the people. They are prepared to use violence to attain their goals (Ben-Ghait 2020). Authoritarian leaders speak to the pains of “victimization” whether economic hardships, inept or indifferent governance, or cultural challenges to heretofore traditional, essentialist, hierarchical, privileges, identities, and values. In right-wing America, the enemies who challenge traditional identities and values are the “woke,” a catchall denigration of “libtards,” snowflakes, feminists, racial minorities, socialists, and communists who are leading the country toward moral decay and decline. But the strong “dear leader” promises redemption, restoration of traditional values, prosperity, and sadistic vengeance to the “designated” enemies.

To paraphrase Max Weber (1946: 280), character *qua* emotional dispositions, modes of understanding and *visions of the possible*, acts as the “switchman” on the track of history. In the face of adversities, contradictions or crises, social actors with a particular kind of social character and ideological perspective that generate strong emotions become mobilized to join together and seek change. As will be seen below, the majority of the Z generation embody a democratic personality and are mobilizing for progressive change.

Media

The total control of media by the Nazis, at that time film and radio, was an essential element of German propaganda. This legacy informed analysis of the “culture industries.” How do people find out about the world? This depends on age and character factors because of changes in communications technologies. For contemporary older people, mainstream newspapers and television are the primary sources of information, but for the younger cohorts, it is what is available on the Internet, what is accessible using computers and cell phones. Moreover, there are thousands of websites that present highly political alternative views and interpretations of all kinds. Most people will gravitate toward those sites that supply them with information that is already salient to their personality and values and will ignore opposing or different views. For the politically oriented, there are a vast number of conservatives, reactionary, moderate, liberal, and radical sites that provide information—often misinformation—about people or events. It is possible to watch live broadcasts of demonstrations against oil drilling, pipelines, or ongoing military operations, some of which show the bloody carnage of war. But the Internet has enabled more than simply providing information and viewpoints. It has become an essential tool for mobilizations, enabling “virtual public spheres,” mobilizing and even directing on the ground protests in real time (Langman 2005). This first became evident in support for the Zapatistas, and then Seattle in 1999, when unbeknownst to the authorities, 50,000 demonstrators suddenly showed up to halt the WTO meeting.

Z Gen to the Rescue

If we consider the progressive movements of the last few decades, a major political economic context has been neoliberalism and while some generations, especially older, and whiter cohorts, especially the millennials, easily found job security, economic mobility and enjoyed the “goods” life of consumerism, the younger cohorts have been more likely to face economic stagnation and precarity, with enormous amounts of college debt, compounded by the worst pandemic in 100 years. The Z generation (Zoomers), late teens to late 20s, are the largest generation in American history. They tend to be the most liberal politically, socially, sexually, and so on, valuing and appreciating people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation (Millburn 2019; Volpe 2022). This generation is typically postmaterialist and “left cosmopolitan.” They prioritize the environment, social justice, economic redistribution, and a more egalitarian society. They have a vision of a more democratic, humanistic, and equitable world. Moreover, it is not surprising that the current generation of more educated youth is more open to change and are more aware of the adversities of climate change or the horrors of war. They have grown up during a period in which fossil capital has been seen as causing more extreme heat waves, more rampaging forest fires, a whiplash of droughts and floods, sinking water tables and rising sea levels. Many in this generation experienced the consequences of the 2008 financial meltdown as young children when their families were impacted by the economic fallout. Milburn (2019) notes how the crash of 2008

impacted the English Z generation in many of the same ways as it did the Americans. Therefore, between the changes in socialization and character, and the impact of the current context, contemporary young people are driven to become progressive activists seeking to end the despoliation of the environment.

As Wolpe (2022) has argued, the Z generation represents a progressive future direction of cultural and political power. But such movements need a certain type of character identity with a progressive vision of the future and strong desire for change. Cadres of organic intellectuals of this generation are needed to educate, liberate, organize, and mobilize for radical transformation to a post-capitalist society. Frankfurt School Critical Theory provided a dialectical critique of the modernity that promised emancipation and progress, but gave us alienation, domination and meaninglessness along with environmental despoliation. But its dialectical stance also gives rise to more optimistic visions—ideas about eco-socialism, eco-feminism, and a global indigenous movement that values Nature. These alternative visions posit the possibility of a post-capitalist, environmentally secure world. More than half of the Z generation prefers socialism to capitalism, though most have little understandings of what socialism is beyond providing healthcare and education. And as this generation matures, new leadership cadres are likely to emerge and to become more knowledgeable about socialism—alternative forms of property, intrinsically gratifying labor and harmonious relationships among humans and with Nature. Moreover, as the adversities and contradictions of capital become ever more widespread and evident and more unsustainable, the characterological transformations that are now already happening will allow this generation to be more than happy to embrace a more ecologically sound standard of living that allows for more free time and space for creative self-development, meaningful social relationships and new forms of democratic collective organization.

Courageous Hope

The optimistic legacy of the Renaissance was voiced by Pico de Mirandela ([1497] 1996) on humanism and dignity, Thomas More ([1516] 2003) on *Utopia*, and then in Immanuel Kant's ([1795] 1991) vision of the Enlightenment as freedom from ignorance and the basis of universal peace. Hegel saw Spirit (*Geist*) as moving toward freedom, and Marx's vision of overthrowing capitalism and overcoming alienation informed the optimism of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Hope was a central element in the works of Ernst Bloch ([1938] 1986) who, while critical of Freud's mechanistic view of the psyche, nevertheless saw the daydream, *qua* striving and longing, as wish fulfillment—a moment of imagination about that which is “not yet,” and the realization of human fulfillment. That utopian impulse was evident in art, literature and religion. Notwithstanding the horrors of Fascism and the Shoah, Bloch remained optimistic that hope was still possible. In some ways he anticipated, and perhaps influenced, the hopeful optimism of Eric Fromm (1947) and Herbert Marcuse (1969), who provided their visions of hope based on the

emergence of a major characterological change, a new articulation of social character that they saw as emergent, albeit mostly among the younger generations.²³

For Fromm (1947), elements of a “productive character,” or for Marcuse (1969) people with aspects of a “new sensibility” as new modes of subjectivity were preludes to the emergence of a post capitalist, “sane” society, in which technology would serve human needs rather than corporate profits, would free humanity from capitalist domination and the toil of alienated labor to enable creative self-fulfillment, genuine community, social harmony, and harmony with Nature.²⁴ For Fromm (1947), “biophilia” meant the love of life in general, love for all that was living, including Nature. The emerging “productive character, was biophilic, kind, generous tolerant and empathic.” Indeed, Fromm saw the love and awe of Nature as providing a “pantheistic mysticism,” a humanistic alternative to authoritarian religions that demanded submission and obedience to authority. Instead, he argued that a humanistic framework that incorporated Nature could provide meaning and creative self-fulfillment, essential human needs that when thwarted, turned to “necrophilia” the love of death and destruction typical of authoritarian characters.

For Marcuse (1969) college and minority youths, with elements of a “new sensibility,” were at the forefronts of the “great refusals,” the progressive and emancipatory movements of the 1960s seen as the initial steps toward freeing humanity from capitalist domination and rejecting the repression of both thought and desire. The “great refusals” prefigured the emergence of a sane, post-capitalist society in which people would harmoniously find a sense of belonging in egalitarian, democratic communities in which the dominant norms would stress freedom and self-fulfillment. These “great refusals” were not simply attempts to change the ownership of the means of production or even to end class domination but sought to usher in a new articulation of subjectivity in a post- capitalist society in which people who were liberated from capitalist domination were the most typical types. The “great refusals” were led by actors with an emancipated subjectivity who would transcend capital and establish a post-capitalist society. These activists were harbingers of an emergent character type with an “ascension of the life instincts over the aggressive instincts” (Marcuse 1969: 23) They embraced a “new rationality” that was free of the uncritical and one-dimensional thought that sustained domination. Marcuse saw that ecological problems reflected the ways that social production was organized in private hands to produce profits rather than benefits for society.²⁵ By living in harmony with Nature that exploitation would end and free Nature from exploitation. Technology, instead of a means for private profit, would serve human needs by providing freedom from alienated labor and spaces that would enable creative self-fulfillment.

²³ Harkening back to the earlier discussion, this emergent character change among the young envisioned by Fromm and Marcuse, can be thought of as a Hegelian “concealed front,” that will become more evident.

²⁴ Marcuse’s critiques of the “one-dimensional” nature of capitalism strongly resonated with many of the progressive activists of the 1960s—and he was considered a guru of the youth movements.

²⁵ For fuller discussion of Marcuse’s writings on the environment, see, Reitz (2022).

Environmental Movements

The growing dangers of pollution, environmental degradation and global warming portend a bleak future unless we have major social change. As Xu Chi (2020) and associates point out, the ecological niche in which human beings have adapted for the many thousands of years has changed little until the last several decades as temperatures have risen in many areas that are less able to support the agricultural basis of providing adequate food supplies. The consequences have been the rise of migration, which has itself, as was noted above, fostered many people to fear demise and replacement and to support reactionary mobilizations to halt the migration. But this response ignores the pollution produced by the more advanced countries including China and India as major polluters. Nevertheless, the adverse conditions of today have led many people to embrace environmentalist movements. Especially the young are organizing several environmental justice movements. A special issue of the *Journal of Youth Studies* was devoted to “a youthquake in political participation—with vast, dynamic and largely horizontal flows of youth activism” (Sloam, Pickard, and Henn 2022). These movements tend to consider themselves radical, but most abjure violent tactics (Pickard, Bowman, and Arya 2020). Young people have been at the forefront of many of the major environmental activist organizations such as the Climate Cardinals, the School Strike Movement (Fridays for Future), Greenpeace, 350.org, Oil Change, Stop Oil, Sunrise, Zero Hour, Plan for the Planet, and Via Campesina.²⁶ Think of the youth activists who stopped the Keystone pipeline. And let us not forget that the then teenager Greta Thunberg was *Time Magazine’s* Person of the Year in 2019. Other notable youth activist-leaders include Xiye Bastida from New York, Dominique Palmer from Birmingham, England, and Vanessa Nakate from Uganda.

At the June 2022 United Nations Stockholm+50 conference in Sweden, climate change activists met with indigenous peoples and called for a binding Fossil Fuel non-proliferation treaty to stop global warming. During a press conference in Stockholm and at subsequent marches in the streets outside the UN event, youth leaders said that a growing body of scientific evidence points to the necessity of a sweeping treaty that commits nations around the world to halt all new fossil fuel extraction, phase out existing production, and an immediate just transition to renewable energy. “Fossil fuels are destroying our Earth, and we do not have time to negotiate on whether we need this anymore, because the science is blatantly clear that we do” said Farzana Faruk Jhumu of 350.org Bangladesh. “We want a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty to be a platform that not only talks about phasing out fossil fuels but how we can do that in a way that is fair and fast for everyone.”²⁷

²⁶ *Via Campesina* is a collection of 182 organizations of small and medium-sized peasant farmers struggling for peasant rights in food sovereignty and against industrial agriculture that displaces people, and promotes chemical fertilizers, privately owned seeds, and so on. See <https://viacampesina.org/en>

²⁷ Youth activists played an important role at the UN COP 26 environment conference in 2021. The *Journal of Youth Studies* devoted a special issue to the involvement of youth at that conference, who are having a large influence on politics and policies.

Given what has been said about resistance movements, it should be clear how and why many contemporary young people have become agents for progressive social change in general and environmentalism in particular—their socialization, character and identity, plus the impact of 2008 and myriad other crises. Confronting grim economic realities as adolescents, they experienced the adversities caused by neoliberal globalization and soured on capitalism and its political cheerleaders which made them especially sensitive to such issues as the dangers of pollution, environmental degradation, and global warming (Millburn 2019; Volpe 2020). These youths envision a bleak future unless we have major social transformations. Accordingly, many have become the spearheads of progressive social change, mobilizing the “great refusals” of today to not only end dependence on fossil fuels, but to transform capitalism and live in a different kind of political economy in which competition over wealth and status and obscene levels of inequality and precarity have been relegated to the dustbin of history. Given the technologies already available, in a post-capitalist world people could live more fulfilling, creative lives in harmony with each other and with nature, finding far more satisfaction in creative self-fulfillment and being with people than in accumulating goods (Fromm 1976).

It should also be mentioned that there are other environmental movements and programs besides those of young activists. Joe Bidens Build Back America bill offered \$320 billion in tax credits to companies using clean alternative power. Such programs offer little more than drops in the bucket, paying companies to publicly advertise how environmentally sensitive they are—when what is required is a major material and cultural transformation away from consumerism—especially when it is dependent on fossil fuels. Similarly, “greenwashing” fines for environmental polluters, typically car manufacturers, usually become just costs of doing business but far short of the major transformations needed to move away from fossil fuel. Finally, several progressive, often left-wing academics and critics have argued for de-growth strategies, to reduce standards of living and levels of consumption via what the Japanese Marxist philosopher Saito (2024) has called “de-growth communism.” Saito argues that Japan should adopt this strategy. While supported by many left-wing progressive academics and socialists, besides the young activists discussed above, the idea of lower standards of living via de-growth along with socialism have little current resonance. But if social change is mediated generationally as suggested above, in a generation or two this strategy of survival by degrowth could very well become mainstream.

Gaza Occupations

Just as organized warfare is as old as civilization, there have always been antiwar groups who see through the transparent justifications of warfare as a “noble duty” as a cover for efforts to gain power and/or wealth. It is estimated that almost a billion people have died because of wars over the past millennia. There is a long history of antiwar protests led by young people. Most notably in recent history there have been the massive French student protests against the colonial Algerian war and the massive protests especially on college campuses against the American military intervention in support of a puppet anti-Communist regime in Vietnam. The Vietnam War led to

numerous protests, marches and mobilizations and the Chicago 1968 demonstrations in which tens of thousands of protesters faced violence at the hands of the police and the National Guard.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a violent and deadly attack on Israeli civilians, including many peace activists who were killed. But the Israeli military response has been overwhelming, with the slaughter of well over 50,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children at the time of this writing.²⁸ The Israeli Defense Forces have been accused by the International Criminal Court of genocide, using starvation and weaponizing aid. As the details have become more evident many people became more aware of the history of Israel and of the Nakba—the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and lands and the brutal treatment of Palestinians as charted by Israeli historians like Pappe (2007).

Demonstrations and occupations on American campuses in 2024 were similar in many ways to the anti-war protests of the 1960s and the anti-Apartheid protests of the 1990s. But what should be noted for the present article is that much of what has been said about the environmental movements helps us understand these protests against the Gaza war. Most of these Z generation students not only have progressive views but the capacity for empathy with the underdog and the endless images of starving, wounded, and dead civilians have evoked massive outrage. These recent campus mobilizations rekindled the comments that Herbert Marcuse made regarding the connections between genocide and ecocide:

Genocide/ecocide in Vietnam must be revisited. Marcuse understood the observable fact of these massive protest movements more fundamentally and philosophically—as expressions of humanity’s political Eros. (Erotic energy) Marcuse explained, accounts in no small measure for the radical politicization of individuals within movements for emancipatory social change presenting also new goals, new behavior, a new “language.” As political, Marcuse understood this Eros in a libidinal, yet Platonic way. In sharp contrast to mainstream society’s sexual hierarchies, toxic masculinity, and the aggressive sexualization of its commodity culture, the political Eros is neither genital, nor-gender-binary; it is a generalized sense of energy and exuberance “signifying the affirmation of life . . . the logos of life...The political Eros appears as a determined and joyous passion for collective liberation... the political Eros seeks protective care for living things ..an intuitive revulsion against the brutal destruction of nature or human beings. (Reitz 2025: 1)

We should also note the common aspects of environmental movements with these antiwar movements. The environmental destruction caused by the war in Ukraine and genocide in Gaza constitute military ecocide—the systemic intentional destruction of the environment because of warfare. The weapons commonly used today tend to be very destructive of the environment. Intense combat such as what has taking place in Gaza and Ukraine devastates infrastructure impacting the availability of potable water destroying sanitation systems leading to pollution. Some experts suggest that if the combat in Gaza ended today, it might take 50 years to rebuild and

²⁸ Editor’s note: this number represents “deaths from traumatic injuries and does not include deaths from a lack of healthcare or food, or the thousands believed to be buried under rubble.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/10/gaza-death-toll-40-higher-than-official-number-lancet-study-finds>

recover. The important point is that most of the young activists discussed above, by virtue of generation, character, and the events in the world are acutely aware of the overlap between military ecocide and the vast number of civilian deaths that can only be genocide—the intentional destruction of a cultural, national, or religious group. Some of those who engage in, and direct genocide and ecocide are sadomasochistic, necrophiliac authoritarians who delight in death and destruction. This characterological bifurcation structures the kinds of protests and mobilizations in which people that people choose to express themselves.

Conclusion

As this article has attempted to show, the world-systems theory critique of the capitalist neoliberal world-system that is riven with contradictions, economic inequalities, reactionary governments, and the externalities of pollution that threaten the very viability of humanity fosters progressive anti-systemic resistance, which is complemented by the progressive traditions of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory associated with Bloch, Fromm, and Marcuse. This tradition of optimism and hope ironically emerged from a generation that needed to escape from Nazi Germany and witnessed the Holocaust and atomic bombings. The legacies of hope that grew out of the Renaissance and the emancipatory side of the Enlightenment continued to live despite the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century. But this contrasts with the pessimism, despair, and cynicism of Adorno and Horkheimer who believed capitalism was always prone toward fascism. Moreover, as cultural elites, with standards set by Goethe, Thomas Mann, and Berthold Brecht, they disdained their lives in the United States with its crass conformity, a decadent materialism/consumerism, anti-intellectualism, and what they saw as its low-brow mass culture, such as jazz, Hollywood movies, and TV. They moved back to Germany away from a radical emancipatory critique to purely philosophical issues, a trend seen in the second generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory scholars like Habermas or Honneth who moved away from Marx and an emancipatory critique of political economy toward a mainstream liberalism (Langman 2014; Thompson 2016) But, that said, what remains salient has been the early concerns with crisis, emotions, social character, values, and visions that underlie this resistance.

The economic, cultural, and political contradictions and environmental adversities of today portend the overcoming of neoliberalism, which faces many challenges. It could be followed by a different kind of climate capitalism or by a post-capitalist mode of accumulation. But this does not mean a that peaceful, ecologically sane post-capitalist society is about to emerge. No, this will not “just happen.” This would require motivated, dedicated actors who would join progressive social movements and engage in long-term, bottom up, drawn-out “wars of position.” Most existing governments do little more than take half measures, many of which are simply greenwashing. But as we have also said, the truly progressive movements do not simply want to change the policies of the existing system, but to enable a general character change that would enable the liberation and emancipation of humanity. It would take a qualitatively new system to overcome capitalist alienation, exploitation, and the freeing of nature from exploitation. A pipe dream? No! For

perhaps 80,000 years or more, people lived in small, radically egalitarian communities that valued sharing, caring, and gift-giving living in harmony with each other and with Nature. Many environmentalists have suggested various agendas from de-growth to ecofeminism as alternatives to the human catastrophes ahead.

Given the perspective developed herein, notwithstanding reactionary efforts to thwart progressive lifestyles, values, and politics, the various iterations of progressive, democratic character and identity have been ascendant among young people. As Millburn (2019) has said:

History will be most harsh on those who embrace climate denial because they do not like the solutions, but only due to their age, will not face the worst consequences. We sit at a rare crossroads in history. Generation Left must win and extend its ethic of care to the planetary commons. The future cannot afford the defeat of another Left generation (Millburn 2019: 124).

Surely such movements will be fiercely opposed by many capitalists and their political allies who themselves and their dependents profit from the production of pollution and global warming. The spearheads of progressive change are the activist youth who engage in actions protests, marches, occupations and education campaigns to mobilize public support for a better tomorrow. And the older generations can and should follow, support, and provide suggestions regarding goals, strategies, tactics, and courageous hope to the young protagonists.

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