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Another world IS possible

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Abstract

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a nonviolent international movement based on decentralisation, that actively tries to pressure local and national governments into taking immediate action against the climate crisis. The movement uses civil disobedience and self-organisation as a tool to create disruption and forward its requests. This thesis focuses on two important aspects of XR: its organisational structure and its Regenerative Culture, a founding pillar of the internal culture of the movement. These features will be presented from a theoretical and ethnographic perspective, using both quantitative and qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and self-administered surveys. The case study taken in consideration is the Extinction Rebellion group in Venice, one of the biggest and most active in Italy. The aim of this work is twofold. In the first part, it provides a militant analysis to bridge the gap in academic literature regarding Extinction Rebellion and its organisational methods. Secondly, using the transdisciplinary approach of the Environmental Humanities, the thesis draws a connection between self-organisation in XR and in ecosystems, reviewing the existing theory and proposing a practical approach on how to overcome the separation between humans and nature, and how to reposition humans within the same ecological rules of non-human species, using XR self-organisation systems and Regenerative Culture as an example.

Abstract

Extinction Rebellion è un movimento internazionale nonviolento basato sulla decentralizzazione, che richiede ai governi locali e nazionali di prendere un'azione immediata contro la crisi climatica. Il movimento utilizza la disobbedienza civile e i sistemi auto-organizzanti per organizzare azioni dirette e portare avanti le proprie richieste.

Questa tesi si concentra su due principali aspetti del movimento: la sua struttura organizzativa e la sua Cultura Rigenerativa, un pilastro fondamentale della cultura interna del movimento. I due aspetti vengono analizzati tramite una prospettiva teorica e etnografica, supportata da dati quantitativi e qualitativi, raccolti tramite interviste semi-strutturate, osservazione partecipante e questionari autosomministrati. Il caso studio preso in considerazione è il gruppo locale veneziano di Extinction Rebellion, uno dei più grandi e attivi in Italia. Lo scopo di questo lavoro è duplice: nella prima parte, la tesi fornisce un'analisi militante allo scopo di colmare il gap nella letteratura accademica per quanto riguarda lo studio del movimento Extinction Rebellion. Successivamente, usando l'approccio transdisciplinare delle Environmental Humanities, la tesi delinea una connessione tra i sistemi auto organizzanti di Extinction Rebellion e gli ecosistemi. Analizzando la letteratura esistente e l'esperienza sul campo, viene proposto un approccio pratico su come superare la separazione uomo-natura e riposizionare l'uomo all'interno delle stesse regole ecologiche delle altre specie, tramite un cambiamento parallelamente sistemico e individuale.

Keywords: Social Movements, Self-organisation, Extinction Rebellion, Human-Nature Divide, Regenerative Culture

1. Introduction

I am truly afraid for my future, but I refuse to drown in fear and hopelessness. I want to strive for hope, I want to build now a better future. This is how and why I decided to join a climate movement, and that is also the reason I decided to write a thesis on Extinction Rebellion and the local group in Venice.

The academic literature on social and environmental movements is an “emergent field of research” of the last two decades in political anthropology (Koensler and Rossi 2012, 55), which focuses on the relation between activists and the socio-political structures they are trying to influence and/or change (2012, 47). However, as reported by different scholars (Boni 2006, 8; Deiana 2021, 38; Western 2014, 685, 693) the literature on social movements (SMs) often misjudges these entities, treating them as mere objects of research, without proper consideration of the individualities and elements that complicate the stereotypical fixed vision perpetuated on the outside. Even the public opinion is mostly interested in SMs during mass protests or disrupting actions, which disturb the quiet life of common citizens. This gap in literature is particularly accentuated when looking at Extinction Rebellion, a nonviolent decentralised and international movement born in the UK in 2018 (Cfr Chapter 2). As a young movement, the academic literature on its strategy, efficacy, and internal culture is still in its early stages of analysis, particularly in the Italian context. While researching for my thesis, indeed, I found only two theses on Extinction Rebellion Italy – even though one was mostly focused on Ultima Generazione, a movement born from Extinction Rebellion – (Bastianello 2022; Cosma 2021), and one on the global movement as an international network (Molinari 2021). Thus, I decided to focus my thesis on Extinction Rebellion (XR) and the local group in Venice to present the complexity within this movement and to show its activities outside the polarised public spaces under which they are stereotypically represented in TV shows, radio, and newspapers.

This thesis starts from a complex research question, which concerns the tools we can use to re-think the world we are living in, from an organisational and relational perspective, to fight against the climate and ecological crisis. For the sake of this work, however, I have focused on the organisational and relational practices of Extinction Rebellion Venice to demonstrate how they represent a fertile laboratory to experiment on how to build in the present new human and interspecies relationships, organising better human structures and moving away from the egoistic subjectivity promoted by capitalism towards a relational one, interconnected with other humans and non-humans. Consequently, this research aims at demonstrating how to promote change at the local level, using the organisational (i.e. decentralised structures) and relational (i.e. regenerative cultures¹) experimentations which are peculiar within Extinction

¹ As defined by Harms (2022, p. 518) regenerative cultures are “practical interventions geared toward [...] reworking what it means to be human in terms of responsibility and cyclicity”. In Extinction Rebellion, particularly, they represent a “set of

Rebellion Venice. The focus of this research is ultimately the study of power theory and practice of Extinction Rebellion, using the case study of the local group in Venice to understand the perks and obstacles to its realisation. Through distribution and thus decentralisation, I will evaluate how activists find a compromise between inclusivity of all participants and the necessity of taking decisions in a dynamic and ever-changing manner. This point is particularly important because the structure as well as the underlying culture can be exported in other contexts (for instance, participated research, public consultations, citizens' assemblies etc...) to improve the participation of those concerned or influenced by a specific problem or decision and ultimately improve the outcome of policies and mitigation and adaptation strategies.

In the next paragraph, I will introduce the methods used to convey and answer the research question and position my research in the wider context of militant anthropology.

1.2 Positioning and methods of research

In her research on the struggles of Latin American undocumented workers in Berlin seeking health care treatment, Huschke presents the advantages and obstacles of being an *activist anthropologist* (Huschke 2015, 56). She defines this kind of research as both “discursively and practically engaged,” with the attempt of giving back something to the people on which the anthropologist is researching. In a commentary of Nancy Scheper-Hughes' text, Adam Kuper describes the complex territory of continuous negotiation between activism and research: “Whatever its moral justification, activism does not generally go hand-in-hand with good research. If there is a trade-off between ethnographic enquiry and political activism, should we always choose activism? (Adam Kuper's commentary in Scheper-Hughes 1995, 425). This struggle in performing barefoot anthropology and using my body and experience as a concrete research tool was evident from the first sentences of my field diary:

From the beginning, I'm already aware of how being part of this group hinders my research, and how performing the observation doesn't allow me to fully participate in the processes and discussions in the group (Zanoni, Field Diary, July 31st, 2022. Translated from Italian).

Both Huschke and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) also describe the numerous “blindness that researchers wear when conducting research, for example, related to one's positionality along the lines of class, gender and ethnicity” (2015, 63); militant or engaged anthropology poses peculiar difficulties in remaining self-

practices thought to enable the well-being and emotional or bodily stability of activists in the runup to, during, or in the aftermath of mobilizations” (CFR Chapter 4).

reflexive and not disproportionately influenced by one's own experience as an activist. Thus, while working on my research, elaborating, and writing the thesis, I tried as much as possible to reflect on my personal biases and avoid the downplaying of negative or harmful elements in Extinction Rebellion.

Unlike Huschke and Scheper-Hughes, on the other hand, I was already an activist before deciding to research on Extinction Rebellion Venice: it was precisely the stereotypes and lack of analysis that I continuously encountered in both academic literature and in the public discourse on Italian newspapers, TV programs, and social media that convinced me to discursively engage with anthropologists, sociologists, and other scholars to evaluate the methodologies and strategies of Extinction Rebellion. Also, to avoid practical (i.e., the possibility of performing continuous engagement) and ethical implications (i.e. the critique often posed to anthropology on treating subjects of research as “creatures, as experimental objects, as givens; Cfr. Medicine and Jacobs 2001, 289), I decided to do research ‘at home’, as I was already part of the Extinction Rebellion group in Venice, but I had had performed actions and attended meetings in other groups (Berlin, Trento, and Bologna) that I could use to present a more encompassing view of the movement.

For the research on the field, I focused on different aspects of the movement and then centred the analysis on the most important elements that emerged during the observation and in the interviews held in the following months: the perception of power and hierarchy; the pressure on activists to perform at the point of hindering their physical and mental health; the sense of trust and the ways in which individuals had built a community through regenerative cultures; and lastly the personal and collective growth that had happened in Venice through participation in regenerative practices. The ethnographic research officially started at the end of July 2022 until the end of January 2023, even though some aspects reported in the thesis happened before, as I have been part of Extinction Rebellion since October 2021 and firstly met the movement at the beginning of 2019 in Trento.

Regarding the methodology of research, the most important source of analysis has been the participant observation, which included the attendance to plenaries, meetings of working groups, direct actions in both Venice and other groups in Italy, presentations, informal events, group chats and personal messages, and even dinners held in my own house or in other activists' houses. Moreover, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with different members of Extinction Rebellion Venice, even though the original number was to be 20, but 5 of the requests were not accepted (Cfr. Chapter 2). For seven of the fifteen interviews, I used a judgement sampling, interviewing all members of the Anchor Circle, the pivotal part of the structure of the group in Venice (Cfr. Chapter 3 note n. 4). For the remaining interviews, I decided to use the method of random sampling, drawing 12 individuals from the informal WhatsApp group of

Extinction Rebellion Venice, whose members are usually the most active ones in the group (approximately 100 members when I performed the random sampling). This technique, together with the decision of administering a questionnaire (Cfr. Annex to this thesis) to all members of the WhatsApp group, was fundamental to remove some of my 'blindness' and thus interact with activists I did not know, or with whom I did not have a friendship. The interviews were loosely based on rebels' personal experiences in the movement, their viewpoint on the structure, and their idea of regenerative cultures in the local group in Venice.

For the questionnaire, on the other hand, I focused on collecting as much data as possible regarding the demographic of the group (gender, age, work situation, experience in the movement...) and on evaluating some of the elements I gathered through interviews and observation. In particular, I used multiple choice answers (i.e., strongly disagree, disagree, nor disagree nor agree, agree, strongly agree) to understand the positioning of activists on claims that concerned their opinion on power distribution, inclusivity, the role of regenerative cultures, and the sense of individual change when looking at their experience in Extinction Rebellion Venice.

From an overall perspective, the case study chosen was intensive, as I spent an average of 10 to 25 hours per week doing activities related to Extinction Rebellion Venice, both in person, online, and remotely. Lastly, for the safety and will of activists, I decided to change their names, apart from the mentioned training instructors in Chapter 3 and 4.

The most important value I always had in mind while researching and writing the thesis was that of an "active politically committed, morally engaged anthropology" (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 415), performing a *work of recognition* towards a movement that has given me a way to follow my moral compass, as well as trusted relationships and multiple tools for self-growth. Thus, this work follows the research performed as an "anthropologist companheira" (Scheper-Hughes 1995), with the ultimate objective of producing useful knowledge for Extinction Rebellion and the local group in Venice (Chesters 2012).

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 recounts a brief historical and theoretical introduction to social and environmental movements at the international and national level, to draw connections between the history of Extinction Rebellion Venice and previous experiences. In the same chapter, I also introduce for the first time an analysis of the demographics of the movement and the voices of rebels (as XR activists call themselves) to compare their experiences in XR and other social movements. Chapter 3 analyses the organisational aspects of the movement, focusing on the relations between social and ecosystem engineering, through a transdisciplinary and holistic approach. The fourth Chapter compares theories on how to build relational subjectivities with my ethnographic observation and interviews, evaluating the

capacity for transformation embedded in the regenerative cultures practices of the movement. Both Chapter 3 and 4 are developed through a continuous dialogue between authors from different subjects and the observations on the field, with the help of interviews and the questionnaire. Lastly, the conclusion collects and evaluates the overall topics argued within the thesis, leaving the door open for future research and external applications, while evaluating the weaknesses of this thesis.

2. Social movements and Extinction Rebellion

As Diani argues (1995), social movements are a “distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engage in collective action”; Della Porta and Diani (2006, 20) identify three main characteristics that distinguish social movements from other forms of collective organisation: a conflictual relation with clearly identified opponents; the presence of dense informal networks; the presence of a distinct collective identity.

Social movements (SMs) promote or oppose social change against one or more actor/s to seek the control of the same political, economic, or cultural power. In addition, SMs are different from other forms of collective action because they evolve outside protests and mass events, and are thus coordinated within specific boundaries, roles, and structures defined by its members. Naturally, these structures can be more or less formalised, with periodic events and activities organised by members outside protests and actions. Lastly, a collective identity is fundamental for the recognition of participants and the internal cohesion of a SM. Collective identity brings a common sense of purpose and a set of distinguishing values in which activists recognize themselves in solidarity and cooperation with other companions.

From an anthropological point of view, SMs are a peculiar element to analyse and study, because they do not reproduce a social or cultural norm, but rather work towards a rupture of norms, proposing a collective, organised alternative to the current socio-political system (Deiana 2021, 39). Moreover, even though SMs are defined under a common collective identity, this does not mean that they are homogenous. On the contrary, their numerous underlying visions and perspectives challenge the sense of apparent unity and can be uncovered only through a detailed ethnographic lens (Melucci 1995, 54). Movements are thus *fluid phenomena* which can be properly analysed outside the most mediatic spaces only by posing greater attention to daily practices and how their work influences its members, especially outside the spaces of public activism. Moreover, with the rise of globalisation and opposing anti-corporate globalisation movements, SMs have become transnational and more self-reflexive, with an increasing number of scholars which perform activism but also provide in-depth analyses on movements' values and strategies (Juris 2007, 164). These militant ethnographers and sociologists, such as Stefano Boni, Andreas Malm, David Graeber, Tazio Müller, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes contribute to the growing complexity and break the traditional distinction between the participant and the observer, the scholar and the activists. Moreover, their contribution is fundamental in spreading the knowledge on social movements and defusing traditional stereotypes revolving around activism.

Because of the challenge they pose against a particular aspect of society or politics, SMs are often critical of conventional ways of doing politics and experiment within their spaces on alternative ways of

implementing decisions, organising their structures, and performing political activities. These experimentations are pivotal and represent a way of working within the cracks left open by capitalism and conventional politics and are especially worth analysing to understand how to scale up new forms of participatory politics and decentralised structures.

The most important motive for joining or creating a SMs stems from discomfort with the status quo, as Della Porta and Diani describe:

[w]hen traditional norms no longer succeed in providing a satisfactory structure for behaviour, the individual is forced to challenge the social order through various forms of non-conformity. A social movement develops when a feeling of dissatisfaction spreads and insufficiently flexible institutions are unable to respond (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 13).

This chapter introduces the history of environmental movements in Italy and how they influenced climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion. Lastly, by looking at the history of ecologism in Italy and Extinction Rebellion Venice, I will compare these experiences to highlight the positive and negative differences and similarities that XR Venice includes in respect to other SMs, drawing from the experience of the activists I observed and interviewed.

2.1 A brief history of environmental social movements in Italy

As Müller and Bullard explain, “when tracing the emergence of a movement, there is always one impossible question to answer: when and where does the first act start?” (2012, 5). According to the two authors, the birth of the *emerging global environmental justice movement* happened through a convergence of three different entities: the alter globalisation movement (e.g. ATTAC and the People’s Global Action), the Environmental Justice Movement born during the 80s in the US as a “repudiation of the mainstream environmental movement’s focus on merely ecological concerns”; and lastly the network of internationally active NGOs created after the Rio model of environmental governance. The interaction between these three currents of civil society happened particularly in the period 2005-2009, with the COP13 in Bali where the network Climate Justice Now! was born, and later in 2009 with the following COP in Copenhagen, where more than 100 '000 activists marched against the economic interests of most countries, who were hindering the possibility of reaching transformative negotiations on climate justice.

The root of contemporary climate movements can be traced even further in the new forms of political participation which arose in the Sixties when the focus of social movements shifted on environmental

protection and feminist issues. In addition, a close relationship between the New Left of the early 70s and the rise of ecological movements in the following years can be drawn in the types of actions and motives behind climate movements (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 6, 24). In “Green Networks. A Structural Analysis of the Italian Environmental Movement” Diani (1995) describes the birth and evolution of ecology in Italy, starting from the Seventies where the roots of political ecology began to spread, especially with important studies such as “Limits to Growth” published by the Club of Rome in 1975. In this period, indeed, workers began to protest for better salaries, but also against pollution and unsanitary working conditions, as the numerous protests organised by petrochemical workers in Venice demonstrate (Chinello 2002). Moreover, the 70s were a period in which countercultures spread among the Italian territory and liberal-democratic theories were developed by new parties, such as the Radical Party (Diani 1995, 23–25). It was the first to introduce nonviolent actions to protest for more environmental preservation in Italian politics together with conservation groups such as LIPU (Italian League for Birds Protection). The approach towards environmental issues shifted from solely conservationist preoccupations as in previous decades towards the political and social implications of the methods of production and their environmental impacts. Most importantly, environmental movements and parties shifted the focus from individual and institutional behaviour asking “rather a drastic transformation in the distribution of social and political power [...]. [E]nvironmental action was to aim at creating a decentralised, self-governed society, where small social and economic production units could be run directly by citizens and workers.” (Diani 1995, 26).

In this first wave of environmentalism, a huge issue was that of nuclear policies enacting an increase in nuclear power in Italy. Many anti-nuclear movements and committees (League for Alternative Energy and Anti-Nuclear Fight, People’s Control over Energy Policies) were created with the cooperation of politicians from the Radical party, activists, and scientists from the energy field. This first phase introduced many characteristics that are still present now in climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and Rise Up for Climate Justice. For instance, the use of nonviolent direct action and the need for more participatory politics, present in contemporary movements through popular assemblies, organised spaces for discussion, and XR’s citizen assemblies. Another crucial point of contact is the critique of vertical and bureaucratic organisations; as emphasised by Mario Diani, past and present environmental movements have long rejected formal leadership in favour of *polycephalous* or even *acephalous* styles of participation (1995, 108). Unfortunately, as argued by Stefano Boni, the request of decentralisation has sometimes led to a low effectiveness in transforming the polity of a territory or socioeconomic context. Without a central authority or agreed processes for decision-making, decisions are usually reached within extended periods, and more active and authoritarian members can take the leadership without the consensus of all members (2006, 40).

After the first phase of Italian environmentalism, many associations and movements were founded from the late 70s until the end of the 80s; for instance, animal rights associations (Anti-Vivisection League in 1977 and Anti-Hunting League in 1978), Legambiente in 1980, Arcipelago Verde in 1981, and Greenpeace in 1986 (foundation in Italy). This second stage was based on the values of *post-material societies* outlined by Diani: the decreasing importance of class conflict; the growth of professional groups supporting social movements, the importance of post-materialist values such as quality of life and self-realisation, the disenchantment with conventional politics and political parties. In 1983, two national meetings in Milano and Urbino were held with various ecological organisations to enhance cooperation on the Italian territory. In 1986, after Chernobyl, between 150 and 200 thousand people marched in Rome against the Italian nuclear program and, the following year, the anti-nuclear referendum won all three referenda, representing the conclusion of this second phase of environmentalism.

Green parties were an important ally of this phase of environmentalism, strongly supporting civil society's campaigns on environmental issues, particularly on the topic of nuclear energy. Moreover, the request for more decentralisation was forwarded by green parties as well as social movements: since the seventies, in many European countries, they experimented with administrative decentralisation using open assemblies, consensual decision-making, rotation of chair roles etc... (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 148, 234)

Experienced movements (e.g., NoTav) and associations (e.g., Greenpeace) from the 80s and 90s are deeply connected with younger climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future. These two, for instance, have learnt from controversies and successful mobilizations of previous environmental campaigns, and have developed their tactics modelling them on their antecedents' actions (Chiaramonte 2020, 939). This aspect was emphasised by one of the most experienced activists I interviewed:

Naturally, XR has some new dynamics and has a *[good]* quality of being in a group [...]. Then, it's also true that...this aspect...let's say it wasn't invented by XR and...it hasn't a hegemony on it. Of course, yes, I was aware for example of the movement Occupy Wall Street and of other dynamics such as the consensus method, which was already present in those years. And so, there is a cultural foundation which is present and has influenced more or less all movements. (Antonio's interview 2022)

In the last decades, after the alter globalisation movement, the climate movement has focused more on the "think globally act locally" strategy, for instance on the fight against polluting transnational companies (e.g., Greenpeace campaigns against Nestlé) and local cases of environmental exploitation or injustices (No Grandi Navi in Italy, COPINH in Honduras, protests against the Keystone Pipeline XXL in Canada and USA etc..). This strategy, indeed, has also been introduced in Extinction Rebellion, where the

international network is divided into local groups covering the most important cities for each state in more than 80 countries.

2.2 Extinction Rebellion: history and comparison with other climate movements

Extinction Rebellion is a decentralised nonviolent international movement with 1178 local groups in 86 different countries², born in 2018 in the UK. The theory of change of the movement is based on mass civil disobedience actions in which a percentage of the population (between 1% and 10%) disrupts economic networks of capitals and big cities, to pressure governments into taking action against the climate crisis. The movement forwards three demands (Extinction Rebellion):

- Tell the truth – governments must work in cooperation with media outlets to declare the ecological and climate crisis and inform citizens on the entities of its present and future consequences.
- Act now – governments must reach the net zero of greenhouse gas emissions by 2025.
- Go beyond politics – the decisions of governments on how to tackle the ecological and climate crisis must be led by a Citizens' Assembly.

Moreover, the action of rebels – the way activists call themselves – must be in line with the 10 values and principles of Extinction Rebellion (Image 2.1)

² To learn more about Extinction Rebellion groups: <https://rebellion.global/groups/#countries>



Image 2.1 – Principle and values poster. 2022. Image by Alex-and-ra. Rebel Toolkit of Extinction Rebellion

From a theoretical point of view, the movement can be defined according to the category identified by Diani and Della Porta as a “mass protest organisation” (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 147–49): this label entails that a movement brings attention to participatory democracy procedures for decision making, while also implementing certain levels of formalisation in its structure.

Extinction Rebellion was founded from the work and experience of a small group of activists and academics, in particular Roger Hallam (an organic farmer with a PhD on social change through radical movements and civil disobedience) and Gail Bradbrook (a molecular biophysicist with experience on social justice campaigns such as the Occupy movement). The idea behind the strategy was to target not only progressive citizens on topics such as equality and social justice, but also conservatives focusing the narrative on national security and the protection of present and future generations (Taylor 2020). In the

summer of 2018, a small group of activists began to travel around the UK, giving the “Heading for Extinction and What to Do About It” presentation. It outlined the emergency of the crisis, the consequences of political inaction, and how nonviolent civil disobedience could overturn the situation.

On the 31st of October 2018, XR formally launched its first campaign with a Declaration of Rebellion outside the Houses of Parliament, with more than 1’000 activists who decided to occupy the road outside the buildings. In November, the movement blocked five bridges in London across the Thames for an entire day. The first rebellion was held in April 2019, where many sites in the capital were occupied for almost two weeks, with more than 1’000 people being arrested. In the next few weeks, the UK parliament declared a climate and ecological emergency. (Taylor 2020). In this rebellion, XR local groups organised nonviolent civil disobedience actions across the world in Buenos Aires, Paris, Sydney and many other cities in France, Germany, South Africa, Ghana India, New Zealand, Chile etc..

In September 2019, Roger Hallam and a few other activists attempted to close down Heathrow airport, but the action failed, and the activists were all arrested. In this period began the internal fracture of the movement and the critics from outside. XR was criticised for the use of arrest as a privileged form of protest, but also because its decentralisation was easily manipulated by dominant white and middle-class men. In general, the topic of privilege and social justice was seen as absent in the movement and its actions. In October 2019, an international Rebellion was launched and in London more than 1’800 people were arrested, even though it is consensus that this rebellion was not able to meet the public approval as had happened in April.

During this Rebellion, some actions were strongly criticised by both rebels and activists outside the movement, as well as by the public opinion. On the 17th of October, a small group of rebels decided to climb a tube train at Canning Town, thus disrupting the workday of working-class and low-wage citizens. Also, XR was strongly condemned because of its lack of support of the Labour party during the UK general elections. The party wanted to advance a set of policies for the decarbonisation of the economy, but it met the actions of XR who targeted it with hunger strikes and performative actions. These critics stress the risk that Polletta defines as “tyranny of emotions”, where the most committed activists – the founders for instance – profit from the decentralisation and lack of procedures to control decision-making processes and impose their view on the movement. This is particularly evident when looking at the action at Heathrow airport, against which XR youth and other activists were opposed, but that still took place because Hallam forced his opinion and convinced a number of rebels to join him.

In February 2020, XR released a new strategy document, moving away from occupying sites towards organising civil disobedience in other cities around the country. The Coronavirus pandemic, unfortunately,

stopped the campaign and XR had to pause every in person activity because of lockdowns. Finally, on the 1st of July, the website of the movement posted a statement in which it apologised for its lack of reflection regarding arrest tactics and its relationship with white privilege. On the 1st of September, rebels disrupted the Parliament to debate on the group's three demands. As of now, Roger Hallam, Gail Bradbook, and most of the original founders have stepped behind or left the movement, to give space to others or to create other movements, more focused on high-risk civil disobedience.

All national and international rebellions were organised in cycles of mobilisation, rebellion, and regeneration, as happens with many social movements:

[d]epending so heavily on their members' voluntary participation, grassroots organisations' capacity to act with continuity over time is obviously limited. Many of them actually see an alternation of phases of activism and latency (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 149).

It must be noted that, besides rebellions, local groups around the world and rebels have also participated to all Conferences of Parties organised since 2018, as well as to global strikes organised by Fridays for Future and other marches born from the convergence of various climate and social justice movements (e.g. the GKN collective protests and Climate Camps in Italy).

Thanks to his decentralised nature, demands and tactics of Extinction Rebellion UK have been adapted by local groups around the world, especially in countries with repressive regimes or dictatorships (Farrell et al. 2019). The local group of Venice, for instance, was created at the beginning of 2019, and organised its first rebellion during the Carnival in Venice of the same year. However, the group could active only with the approval of its constitution and the 100K³ project in 2021. This project differentiates Venice from other local groups inside and outside Italy, as it created a “cephalus” in the acephalus structure of Extinction Rebellion, called the Anchor Circle. This circle reunites all external coordinators of working groups and through the constitution it was delegated with most decisional powers, with the consensus of all members during the approval plenary. This decision was taken, as Antonio – the facilitator of the Anchor Circle – explained, to guarantee more dynamism and less bureaucratism in deciding how and where to take decisions. However, when analysing the process of the tyranny of emotions, many critics were moved against this structure, especially because new rebels have found it difficult to keep up with the complexity of roles and structures, and how decisions are taken within the local group.

³ The 100K project aimed at reaching as many Venetians as possible through continuous mobilisation of activists. Every month the Outreach working group had to choose a neighbourhood and knock on as many doors as possible to have a conversation on climate change with citizens. Moreover, weekly presentation, informational boots, and outreach actions were performed during the one month cycle. In total, the Outreach group was able to cover 6 neighbourhood in 6 months.

But why does Extinction Rebellion rebels against extinction? What is the core of its strategy to trigger a change in society, politics, and economics? As Plumwood argues (1993, 71), we humans are subjected to natural laws, and cannot escape the idea that infinite growth on a planet with finite resources (even though capable of regeneration at different time frames) is not possible in the long run; Extinction Rebellion recognises that “[w]e need fundamental shifts in values that ensure transition from a growth-centred society to one acknowledging biophysical limits and centred on human well-being and biodiversity conservation” (Martin, Maris, and Simberloff 2016, 6105). This recognition is developed throughout the ten principles and values, as well as the foundation of regenerative cultures and the idea that self-care, community-care, and planet-care are profoundly connected and dependent from each other (Cfr. Chapter 4). Consequently, the movement recognises that nonviolent civil disobedience is the most strategic decision to trigger change, especially if performed by a significant and informed part of the population.

When government and the law fail to provide any assurance of adequate protection of and security for its people’s well-being and the nation’s future, it becomes the right of citizens to seek redress in order to restore dutiful democracy and to secure the solutions needed to avert catastrophe and protect the future. It becomes not only our right, but our sacred duty to rebel. We hereby declare the bonds of the social contract to be null and void (Farrell et al. 2019).

From a philosophical point of view, XR is strongly based on the concept of social contract developed by many authors of the Enlightenment period, particularly Locke. Activists passionately believe that their actions are morally justified by the lack of action of governments, who are defined by Hallam and others as “genocidal” (Taylor 2020).

2.2.1 Demographics of the local group in Venice

For my research I interviewed 15 people in total, 7 filled a role within the Anchor Circle and are thus the most active members in the local group; the remaining were randomly sampled from the WhatsApp group of XR Venice, numbering all members of the group and then using a random number generator to extract those who would be interviewed. The original number of interviews was to be twenty, however one person did not want to release an interview, two people were not available through messages or phone calls; one was working abroad and did not have time, and lastly one was ill and not interested in giving an interview. Moreover, fifty activists responded to the questionnaire I sent personally to all members of the WhatsApp group in Venice (approximately 90-100 members). Looking at the demographics of both samplings, the local group is composed in majority by women (9 women of 15 interviews and 24 women of 50 respondents) (Image 2.2) and most of them are workers above the age of 30, as the average age of those

interviewed is 30 and those who responded to the questionnaire is 33.3: the age range of activists was from 19 to 45 for the interviews and from 19 to 66 for the questionnaire. Moreover, the survey and the interviews demonstrate how the movement is predominantly composed of workers (employees and researchers for the most part) (Image 2.3). During my interviews, in addition, I had the chance of directly asking the work that activists were performing: 6 of those interviewed were students and two of them were both working and studying; only one person was unoccupied, while the others were working in public or international institutions, for food-related associations, or for companies. Also, most individuals have been in Extinction Rebellion either more than 2 years or less than one year (Image 2.4); thus, from an overall perspective, members of XR Venice are still unexperienced, apart from some exceptions: Filippo for instance, who is considered the founder of XR Venice, has been part of the movement since its birth, and is now going into his fourth year of activism in Extinction Rebellion. On the other hand, many activists I interviewed were militant in other associations or movements before joining XR in Venice. Sara, the former external coordinator of Regenerative cultures, was part of an animal rights movement as Francesca; Antonio was active in the alter globalisation movement and joined many anti-fascist and alter globalisation marches and protests.

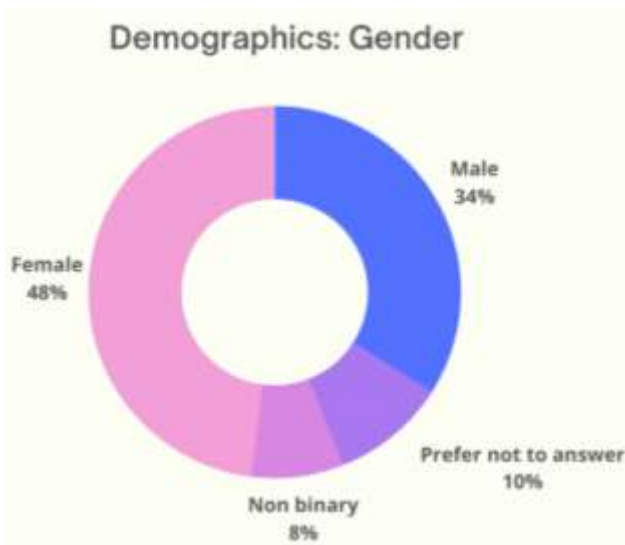


Image 2.2 – Pie chart from survey administered to Extinction Rebellion Venice members. Pie chart elaborated from the question “Which gender do you identify in?” 2022, October 11

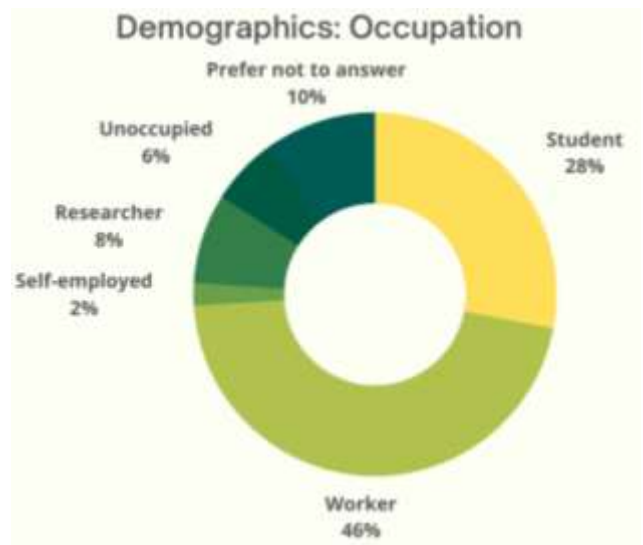


Image 2.3 – Pie chart from survey administered to Extinction Rebellion Venice members. Pie chart elaborated from the question “What is your job?” 2022, October 11

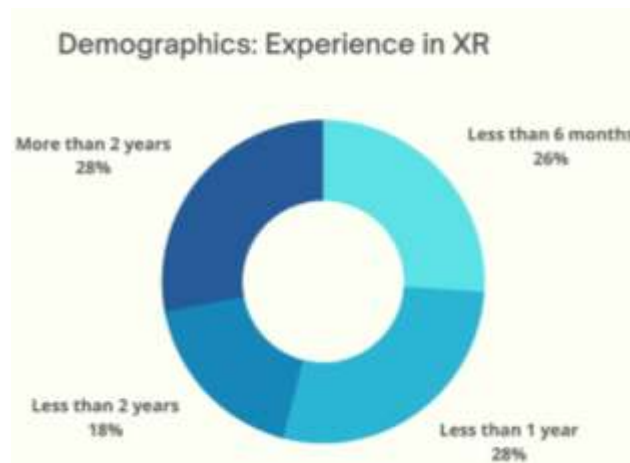


Image 2.4 – Pie chart from survey administered to Extinction Rebellion Venice members. Pie chart elaborated from the question “How long have you been in Extinction Rebellion Venice?” 2022, October 11

2.2.2 Ethnographic comparison with other movements

During interviews and as a participant observer, I gathered various perspectives coming from rebels on how Extinction Rebellion Venice was positively and negatively different from previous experiences with other social movements and associations, particularly feminist and animal rights groups.

The most important distinction, which was strongly emphasised in interviews, was the perception of authority in other spaces of civil society. Carla, the former internal coordinator of the Anchor circle, describes harshly her experience in Legambiente, which she joined briefly before Extinction Rebellion:

In the case of Legambiente, the thing I was finding more difficult was the strict top-down structure and how it was almost impossible to have personal initiative for things that had not been decided yet. [...] In Legambiente I saw someone who was feeling great, and he/she was feeling like...wow...super cool and this person was pushing everyone, but others hadn't the possibility of participating because [*the decision-making process*] was impermeable...the person was doing everything...it was difficult to understand how to participate, they never asked me to participate, and when they ask I never felt included (Carla's interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Carla has been one of the most active members in the local group in Venice, and she worked for months on the 100K project, as well as on action campaigns and the mobilisation of new citizens. When I asked her how she had perceived the *strict top-down structure* and the sense of hierarchy in Legambiente, she described it as lacking all the instruments that Extinction Rebellion uses in the field of Regenerative cultures: facilitation, active listening, and sharing collectively the strategy. Thomas, who was one of the first activists in XR Venice, describes similarly his experience in Opzione Zero, a committee in Venice who uses environmental impact assessments to oppose polluting private and public projects. He described this group as strongly centralised: “[o]ften even when you had ideas or wanted to commit to the group you couldn't, because everything was corrected or ostracised...in XR I understood, since the beginning, that there was more freedom of action and that you could decide for yourself and contribute [*to the group*] (Thomas' interview 2022. Translated from Italian). However, it is important to emphasise the fact that, as it will be argued in chapter 3, Thomas also recognized how the decentralisation of Extinction Rebellion is not pure as its theoretical definition. In reality, the structure tends to be decentralised, but those who spend more time working on actions, campaigns, crowdfunding etc... have also a greater advantage in how their vision and opinion is translated in the overall strategy of the movement.

Carla's view was similar to other activists' experiences with various movements and associations, such as Francesca and Filippo who were both part of Anonymous for the Voiceless, an international movement that fights for animal rights and spreads awareness on veganism and anti-speciesism, and other animal rights groups. They both described Anonymous as a "military organisation" with defined rankings such as chief, vice chief etc...and where personal initiative had to be communicated and approved from the highest rank in the local group. After a period of militancy, indeed, they both decided to continue the "Cube of truth", a typical form of direct action of Anonymous (standing up in public squares holding screens who reproduce videos and footages from Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) but under other groups and with different types of interactions with the public (Image 2.5).



Image 2.5 – Cube of Truth, Manchester, UK. Image by DiggIt Magazine.
<https://www.diggitmazine.com/articles/truth-behind-anonymous-voiceless>

Francesca and Filippo identified another crucial mistake that many spaces of activism commit: the lack of defined structures which hinders the group's inclusivity and capacity for societal transformations. De Nardis uses the term *spontaneism* (2020, 362) to describe how movements without proper organisational modalities tend to quickly lose the initial drive and thus lack the capacity to influence the polity of a territory. For instance, Francesca described this problem in an animalist group in Parma, which she joined when she was younger:

...not always the 'frontman' of the group deserved it or could make the right decisions for the rest of the group. And so there were always conflicts on 'why are you giving orders? Why did you make the decision when we agreed that we had to decide together?'. Even when we decided together it was always downward, choosing actions...let's say...making a lot of mistakes (Francesca's interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Another common viewpoint between Francesca and Filippo in their experiences as animal rights activists is that of *unidirectional communication* inside and outside these spaces of activism. Activists from Anonymous for the Voiceless use actions such as the Cube of Truth with the aim of highlighting the underlying fallacies which people commonly use to justify the consumption of animal products. Extinction Rebellion, on the contrary, has governments and mass media as main targets, and its communication is polyhedric, informal, and also more centred on emotions and feelings that can trigger the sense of urgency and actions in citizens. A pivotal role in the communication of Extinction Rebellion is the principle “We avoid blaming and shaming”, which often distinguishes the narratives and interactions that rebels have with citizens and political or public targets. A positive example of the application of this value is the relationship that XR Venice has with D.I.G.O.S, the department of the Italian police which investigates social movements (but also on other societal phenomena, such as terrorism and mafia). Contrary to many social movements, Extinction Rebellion Venice regularly interacts with this institution and, even during actions, there is always a person in charge of communicating with the police, to inform them on what is happening and the reasons behind the action (Cfr. Chapter 3). On the contrary, the previous experiences of rebels in other spaces of activism were quite different; Eleonora, one of the most experienced activists in Venice who has also done actions with No Grandi Navi, Rise up for Climate Justice, LiSC (Liberi Saperi Critici, a student collective in Ca’ Foscari university), and with Ultima Generazione in Vatican museums in Rome, recounts her experience in some climate movements as traumatic, especially concerning the relationship with the police. During an informal dinner at my house, she spoke about how she was crushed between activists and policemen during an action. Afterwards, she needed comfort from her fellow activists, but she only received a “pat on her shoulder.” Based on her experience, she said that these movements often have a “herd mentality” where negative emotions are instrumentalized by most experienced activists to trigger a reaction against the police; there is never a verbal confrontation or facilitated discussion between members on the traumatic experience of violence that are quite common during actions (Zanoni. Field Notes. August 2nd, 2022. Translated from Italian).

Another example where facilitation and polite communication are missing is the episode that Filippo described during a conversation, about one of the protests he attended against the Palio of Siena:

In the moment we got off [*the bus*] ...I mean...they started to...we were in a little square and they [*the animal rights activists*] started to sing really bad choruses, they had banners on which they had written something like ‘Sienese you must die’. They were speaking with a megaphone and a person said ‘Sienese are worse than paedophiles’ and he had a strong ‘Nazi approach’. So much that I had a conflict with this person because I took away from him the megaphone and confronted him saying ‘what the fuck are you saying?’ and it was a disaster. [...] I was quite

irritated because I didn't think that this was activism and there was really...a search for a fight against the people from Siena that were much more than the activists and...the activists were really provoking them even though the policemen were in the middle (Filippo's interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

The concept of '*screamed communication*' was also mentioned by Arianna, a 19-years-old rebel and student of sociology, who is one of the youngest members of the local group in Venice. I met her during a workshop on Regenerative Cultures and we started chatting when I was introduced to her girlfriend and we did acroyoga together, a practice that is quite frequent in Extinction Rebellion Venice and other local groups, especially during actions to bond with activists and create spaces to move freely. During a conversation she told me about her experience with Non Una Di Meno in Treviso, an intersectional feminist collective which is present in various cities in Italy. She attended a few meetings and in particular a book presentation, where activists from the group were interviewing the author, even though they did not give her enough space for talking. This approach was present also at meetings, where Arianna felt that people with strong personalities dominated the conversation, without allowing shy or introverted activists to express their own opinion (Zanoni, Field Diary, September 12th, 2022. Translated from Italian).

This type of communication is reprimanded by Daniel Christian Wahl in "Designing Regenerative Culture" (2016):

There is a widespread tendency among activists to 'fight against' something, rather than extending our hands and opening our hearts to those whose unsustainable practices and attitudes we are hoping to transform.

Extinction Rebellion and the group in Venice, on the contrary, include the practices of regenerative cultures based on Wahl's ideals, and can thus create inclusive spaces for both activists and people outside the group with whom activists interact during actions (See Chapter 4). Luigi, a 31-years-old environmental researcher, told me during an interview that his local WWF group slowly lost momentum because there were never activities meant to create cohesion between its members as happens in XR Venice (Cfr. Chapter 4). Also, during my observation, I witnessed many activists feeling included even though they were new to the group. This sense of inclusivity was highlighted by their decisions to spontaneously open about their gender identity, sexuality, or personal problems. For instance, three activists in the group have come out as either non-binary or transsexuals, even though they have not performed this coming out in other spaces of their life. Moreover, on many occasions people who attended a meeting, training, or workshop for the first time explicitly disclosed in emotional debriefings how XR Venice was different from other

committees, associations or movements they had previously met because they felt part of it without having to try to fit in (Zanoni, Field Diary).

Naturally, Extinction Rebellion Venice is not exempted from critics, problems, and tensions within the structure and between its members. A compelling argument against the movement was advanced by Francesca and Giorgia (the external coordinator of the mobilisation group). Both activists were dubious about the overall objective of XR. Francesca, for instance, has now formally left the movement and has gone back to participate in anti-speciesist groups; during our interview she compared the goal of these movements and that of Extinction Rebellion: for instance, Anonymous for the Voiceless wants to end animal exploitation through anti-speciesist policies in every country. Extinction Rebellion, on the contrary, does not propose solutions for the climate crisis, but only the instrument of citizen assemblies as a form of democratic participation and decision-making to develop and implement locally based and inclusive adaptation and mitigation policies. Moreover, because of the complexity and intersectionality of the climate and ecological crisis, every scientist, citizen, and activist has a different opinion and XR does not take sides and prefers to ask for a reform of politics and the overall system that has led humanity towards this crisis. This ‘weakness’ in the strategy of Extinction Rebellion came up during a presentation ‘Heading for Extinction’ held in Venice on the 15th of December. After the presentation a woman asked multiple questions trying to assess what solutions the group in Venice was proposing to solve climate-related problems in the city. At the beginning, activists were embarrassed and did not respond properly; in the end, however, Giorgia was quite straight-forward in explaining the tactic behind such a generalist goal. She explained that the climate crisis is too complex for a small group of citizens to propose effective solutions. Moreover, suggesting defined policies often entails the risk of excluding activists who have different opinions, so the decision was taken strategically by the founders of the movement. In addition, the group in Venice and other groups in the world believe in ordinary people who can be informed by experts and discuss with the help of facilitators; rebels believe that everyone can act with a common good in mind, when he/she/they is/are correctly informed and empowered when given responsibility of others (Zanoni, Field Notes, December 15th, 2022. Translated from Italian). The demands of Extinction Rebellion, as many other climate movements, follow the tendency of distancing from grand narratives and ready-made solutions (Harms 2022, 520); on the contrary, instead of proposing straightforward solutions and thus risk the polarisation of members and outsiders, XR strategically criticises the economic, political, and social system, and then proposes a set of instruments (i.e. regenerative cultures, decentralisation, citizens’ assemblies, civil disobedience etc...) to open up spaces for citizens to impact the polity of a country and discuss on how to envision better futures.

Lastly, Francesca highlighted an urgent difficulty concerning the Anchor circle. This element of the structure was initially thought to create a cohesive and dynamic group of activists who could be substituted every six months, to allow the movement to grow, while still ensuring that everyone was included in decisions. After more than a year from the approval of this structure through the constitution, however, the Anchor Circle has become “that place where no one wants to go, because it means more responsibility, more duties, boring meetings where you cannot understand what people are talking about” (Francesca’s interview 2022. Translated from Italian). As of December 2022, two members of the Anchor Circle have definitively or temporarily left the structure because they felt overwhelmed by the number of tasks and duties. Moreover, every past and present member of the circle has struggled to find a substitute, both because it requires extensive free time, but most importantly because, as it emerged from my research, rebels struggle to commit to the movement in the long-term, and mostly prefer to engage in informal channels and meeting, to use Extinction Rebellion Venice as a place for socialisation rather than for activism.

However, it is also important to emphasise the fact that the movement is still young, and its branch Ultima Generazione (part of the A22 network) has reached great mediatic exposure and has been able to influence the public opinion at every level, using most of the theoretical foundation of Extinction Rebellion. Thus, this group has the capacity to create great momentum and convergence between all climate movements in Venice, using nonviolence and direct action to advance changes on the Venetian territory.

3. Self-organization systems, Holacracy, and decentralisation

Why is the structure of a movement so important? To begin with my ethnography, I decided to focus, above all elements, on the structure of the local Extinction Rebellion group in Venice. The structure of XR in general is unusual when compared to other social movements, but the one developed in Venice is a peculiarity in the Italian context. XR can be generally labelled as a grassroots organisation as its members are unpaid and working voluntarily towards a common objective; some elements of the mass protest organisation, however, can also be recognised in its formal structure and decision-making procedures which are not entirely bottom up but are more structured and defined a priori than other grassroots organisations (Della Porta & Diani, 2006).

XR is aligned with the structural creative tendency of the last decades in the history of social movements (Graeber, 2002, p. 11), as it has worked towards reinventing its structure, and find a compromise between the efficiency of decision-making and the need to share the ownership of decisions and strategies with all its members.

From an anthropological perspective, studying the structure of a movement is pivotal in defining the identity of its members (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020, p. 42), but also for analysing future scenarios, particularly its capability of gaining consensus in the media apparatus, in society, and in the broader cultural context (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Identity, indeed, is a crucial part of a movement's mobilisation, as Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 21) note "it brings with it a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause, which enables single activists and/or organisations to regard themselves as inextricably linked to other actors, not necessarily identical but surely compatible, in a broader collective mobilisation" (Touraine, 1981).

So how and why is the local group in Venice so different? First, it is important to highlight that Extinction Rebellion is not an anarchist movement (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020, p. 13), even though it has learnt from the experience of previous anarchist movements for their social engineering and decision-making processes.

When Extinction Rebellion was created in 2018, the structure that was decided by XR UK had the main goal of avoiding one of the most harmful elements that can arise in social movements: the "crystallisation of leadership relationships" (Melucci, 1995, p. 46). To prevent the formation of hidden hierarchies and the centralization of power towards certain individuals excluding others' ideas, the movement decided to put in practice peculiar structures and processes that partially distinguish this movement.

To understand how the local group in Venice works, it is important to define the meaning of Holacracy and Sociocracy. As Robertson (2015) defines it in his book *Holacracy. The New Management System for a Rapidly Changing World*, Holacracy is “...a new social technology for governing and operating an organisation, defined by a set of core rules distinctly different from those of a conventionally governed organisation.” This system was firstly developed for his company to improve the efficiency of its employees but also to empower them and enhance the transfer of knowledge from more to less experienced workers. Holacracy as a method for social engineering requires the presence of a constitution which defines the structure of the group; the spheres of authority of each role identified in the structure; the decision-making process chosen by the organisation, and the methods through which these elements can be changed. Similarly, Sociocracy is a governance system that works through “decentralised, nested systems that are semi-autonomous” (Rau, 2020). These units are organised in circles with a defined objective or mandate and the members of every circle have full authority within their mandate. Also, every circle has a linking role that allows the communication between all the circles in the organisation.

In Extinction Rebellion and in the XR group in Venice, these governance methods coexist in equilibrium. To serve a role, an activist can be elected, mostly through the sociocratic method (by consent), which I will explain below, but rarely the election can also happen by a majority vote. A person can freely offer for a role or can be nominated by a member of the working group or the external coordinator, because his/her knowledge and competences are considered important by the whole group. In September 2022, one of the circles met in a public park inviting its members, as well as everyone who was interested in joining, to elect new activists to fill in four vacant and new roles. We all sat down in a circle and performed a check-in to break the ice and present ourselves, since many individuals were new to the group and had just joined Extinction Rebellion Venice. The previous external coordinator presented all the roles which were vacant or in need of exchange, explaining their mandates and domains of responsibility. Then, at turn, he asked everyone to propose a person for every role, motivating their choice. After everyone had expressed a preference or abstained from it, the external coordinator proposed himself a person, following the majority or recommending someone he knew could be suited for the role. Every final proposal was then immediately accepted by members of the circle or discussed to reach a final compromise and thus elect all the roles that were initially presented (Zanoni, Field Diary, September 15th, 2022. Translated from Italian). In XR Venice, when an activist fills a role, the person gains the authority to take any operative decisions within the domain of the role, for which he/she is also held accountable. Whenever a decision can influence another domain, the activist must discuss it with the people involved and collectively take a decision (Robertson, 2015).

The preferred decisional method in both holacracy and sociocracy is the *integrative decision-making process*: a person proposes a policy, a new role, or the creation of a sub-circle; the proposal must be justified, clarifying the purpose and why the proponent intends the proposal as necessary for the working group. Firstly, every member can ask for clarifications, then every person expresses his/her reactions to the proposal. The proponent can change his/her proposal and answer doubts. The facilitator asks whether someone has an objection, which must be expressed according to the role the person is representing, not his/her opinion, and to justify it considering the circle's purpose.

The objections are discussed and eventually the initial proposal can be modified, until there are no longer objections; lastly, the proposal can be approved and afterwards implemented by the responsible role or group. This method is used solely for strategic and determining decisions, because practical and operational ones are usually taken by the responsible role:

Martino points out the difference between operativity and defining the guidelines. What working groups do is that they define the workflow, the method through which someone takes the decision and how, who is responsible for that domain. Once the workflow is established, everything can be discussed in a more operational way. When someone doesn't know what to choose, he or she can bring her/his doubts to the meeting, and then be supported by the rest of the group to decide (*Martino's Interview*, personal communication, 12 October 2022, translated from Italian).

Martino is a member of the anchor circle because of his role as an external coordinator of the action working group; he used to work in the financial sector, but one day read an article of the Guardian about Extinction Rebellion UK, and slowly began to change his life. He now works for a food-related association and has become one of the most important and active members of Extinction Rebellion Venice, even deciding to relocate from Rome – where he was previously working – to Venice. His explanation emphasises how efficiency is promoted through the structure, which assigns tasks and decisions to specific roles, without the need of consulting everyone for every decision. The only decisions which are taken by the whole circle are strategic ones or that influence the domain of multiple roles.

In addition, the initial agreements, the constitution, the continuous inputs before a decision, and feedback loops after the decision guarantee the protection of the decentralised governance and the improvement of how members fill their roles.

The structure may seem complicated, as many newbies struggle to understand it at first, but it allows the group to be decentralised, transparent, inclusive but also efficient and dynamic. With the approval of the

constitution⁴ on the 16th of December 2021 during a plenary, the local XR group in Venice has defined its self-organisation-system (SOS) to allow quicker decisions, more adaptability, while still ensuring that no rebel feels left out from the movement. Most of the authority has been delegated to the Anchor Circle⁵ which reunites all the external coordinators of every working group and a designed facilitator, Antonio. Every working group or circle can have sub-circles: the authority is distributed, every circle has a defined scope, responsibility on which it is held accountable by other circles, and a domain (the resources and process which the circle is responsible of) (Figure 3.1). Many internal platforms are used to support decisional processes and to ensure the transparency of every circle. Every meeting, for instance, must be verbalised and made publicly available on Base, an internal platform in the server of XR Italy. Besides working groups, XR Venice also has one affinity group. Affinity groups are composed of activists who share the same affinity regarding the level of risk of actions, the preference for a type of action over another, and/or a shared friendship between its members. They comprise between 6 and 16 members, and they are a fundamental part of organising civil disobedience, as they usually have one person who represents the whole group. To organise mass actions and to take decisions during actions, representatives of affinity groups meet in what XR calls the “the council of affinity groups” to discuss important decisions and organise the logistics. However, in Venice most activists participate in actions in couples (buddies) and are not part of a defined affinity group; this means particularly that most actions are organised on a centralised level, or by the most active individuals who propose an action and invite others to join. The overall organisation of the movement is a nested structure in which authority is distributed and decentralised (Robertson, 2015), where every person takes full responsibility for his/her role and decisions as mentioned in the Constitution (Extinction Rebellion Venezia, 2021):

Through this structure, the movement trusts and empowers the working groups, which have the duty of taking the best decisions in a quicker and effective manner.

⁴ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1odLWj2aKa3VHc9AusX2AUaWa6OrilKSwMZKWm-X53_4/edit?usp=sharing

⁵ The *Anchor circle* is the space in Extinction Rebellion Venice where most decisions and strategies are developed. It reunites all the external coordinators from the seven working groups (Media, Action, Outreach, Regenerative cultures, Politics, Strategy; Bureaucracy) with an appointed facilitator (Antonio in the case of Venice) and an elected internal coordinator of the whole local group (the last one was Carla). The group meets once a week for two or more hours. Among the most important tasks of the Anchor circle there are: deciding the time and content of plenaries; organise general rebellions; guide the overall direction of the group; work together on improving the structure and strategy whenever feedbacks are delivered by other members; oversee the general health and functioning of the local group.

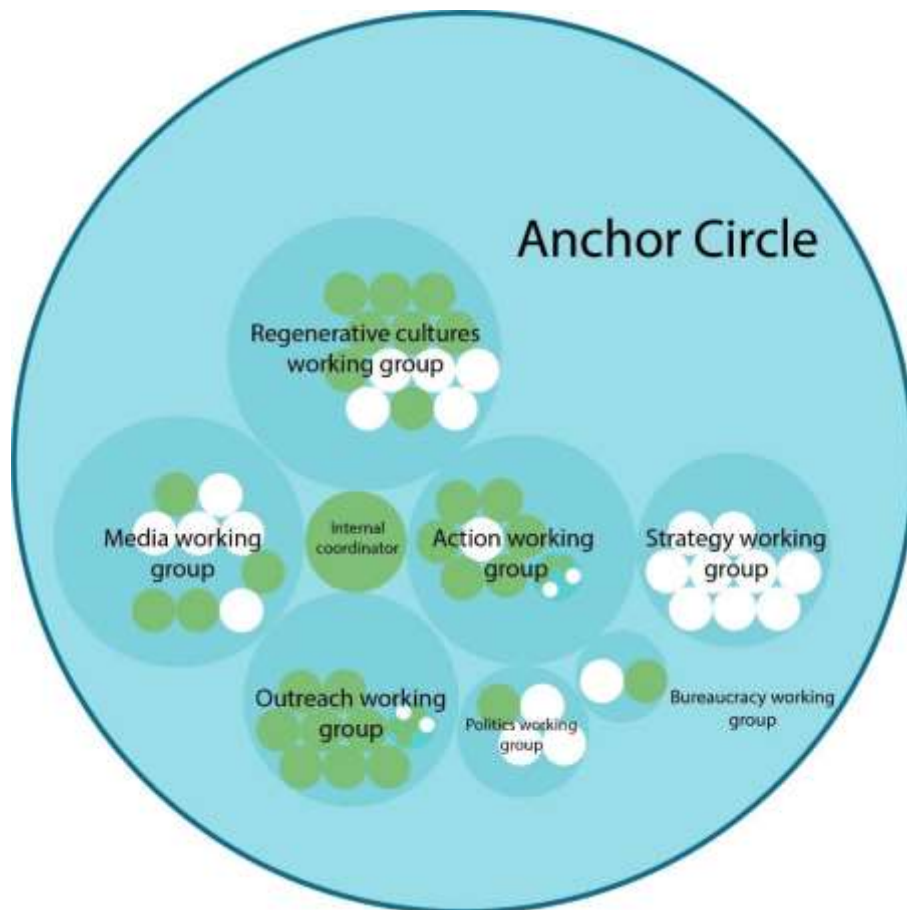


Figure 3.1 – Glassfrog of Extinction Rebellion Venice. Visual representation of its structure

Trust and empowerment, indeed, are pivotal for how the local group works as reported by different activists I interviewed and from my experience as a participant observer:

Filippo, during the Nonviolent Direct-Action Workshop, explains how the council of Affinity Groups (AG) works during an action. To make a quick and effective decision, every affinity group *trusts* [emphasis added] a member to take part in the council of AGs. The council takes a decision, but every person or group can ultimately decide autonomously, respecting the principle and value of XR (Zanoni, Field notes, 10/23/2022, translated from Italian).

The sense of empowerment is commonly studied in the theory of social movements by anthropologist and sociologists, and it is considered to originate from collective action (Boni, 2006, pp. 9, 13; Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 91; Melucci, 1995), particularly from sharing a common desire towards change, but also common values and views of the world. Performing direct actions requires enormous trust between its members, and it gives them responsibilities and a strong sense of empowerment.

Sara, the former external coordinator of Regenerative Cultures, has been part of XR Venice since the Carnival Rebellion in 2019. Previously, she was part of antispeciesist movements, but never got involved with them as she has done in XR Venice. During her interview, she opened up on the importance of trust in the Venetian local group:

I trust that everything you do, even though sometimes our opinions are different, I know that what you do, you do it...for a common purpose. So, in this I trust you, because we are both doing something without any monetary return, we are fighting for our life. So, besides how you do things, the common ground is the same (Sara's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

The self-management of Extinction Rebellion Venice fundamentally requires trust, because every person who decides to serve a role is free to decide within its mandate; moreover, decentralisation enhances greater adaptability of action and mobilisation strategies, especially when compared to most hierarchical structures in society (Bernstein, 2016, pp. 42–44). Holacracy and Sociocracy promote quicker decisions, in contrast with the “slowness of social movements” who have not defined previous agreements through a constitution or another written document (Boni, 2006, p. 33). XR Venice has thus “dropped many horizontalist practices” (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020, pp. 48, 52), in particular regarding the decision-making process, which has moved from a consensus-decision-making to a consent-decision-making (approved if no objections) and a post-consensus approach through feedback loops which are continuously organised by the Regenerative Culture Working Group, and ensure an additional level of inclusion of members' ideas and perspectives. In a feedback workshop I attended, for instance, members were invited to sit in a circle and express to those present their feedback. At the beginning, Sara, the chosen facilitator, explained that a feedback must be honest; expressed with the intention of enriching the group or helping a person; come from an observation about reality (you must provide an example); contain no judgement about the receiver/s of the feedback (Zanoni, Field Notes, July 31st, 2022. Translated from Italian). Once the initial agreements regarding consent, respect, and the purposes of feedback were settled, members sat in a circle and expressed their opinion on how the decision or behaviour of present rebels was hindering participation and inclusion of others, or if it was against the aim of the movement/working group. With the help of Sara, I was able to give a feedback to Martino, inviting him to speak clearly starting from his own experience, avoiding quoting books he had read, as the conversations with him always resulted in me not understanding his point of view and what he was trying to explain. He welcomed my feedback and instantly became aware of how he was speaking. Indeed, in the next minutes, he immediately corrected himself because he was starting again to quote books and papers to support his argument, without using his experience. This sudden realisation was met with the laughs of other activists, resulting in a more relaxed environment, as everyone thought that Martino had not accepted the feedback and was thus feeling

resentful. This preoccupation within the group happened because Martino is the external coordinator of the action working group, and he has had various tensions with other members, particularly because of his strong character and way of expressing proposals and ideas. Moreover, he is one of the oldest members of Extinction Rebellion Venice, both in terms of age and experience in the movement and is commonly perceived as retaining more authority and legitimacy over other rebels.

The perception I observed during the ethnography of a mostly decentralised power was confirmed by the survey, where 50% of the total respondents agreed on the sentence “XR Venice is a decentralised movement” and 28% strongly agreed with this statement, while the remaining 22% did not agree nor disagree with the claim (Figure 3.2).

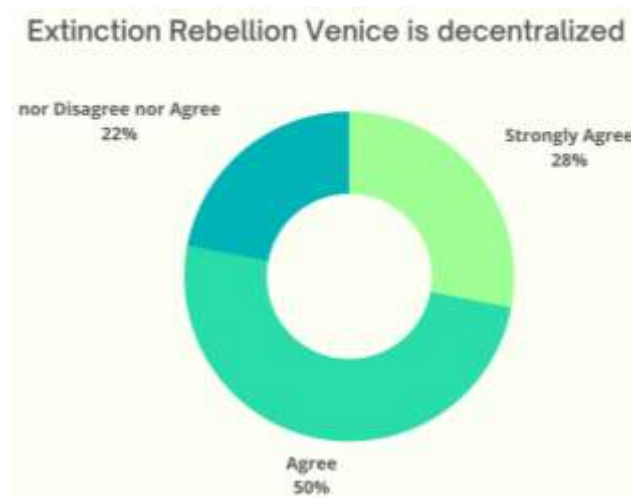


Figure 3.2 – Pie chart from survey administered to Extinction Rebellion Venice members. Positioning on the prompt “Extinction Rebellion is a decentralized movement.” 2022, October 11

This perception found a confirmation in the positioning to the statement “People who have a formal role inside Extinction Rebellion Venice have too much decisional power”; of the total respondents 50% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed with the assertion. The remaining participants to the survey did not disagree nor agree with the statement, and only two respondents agreed with the claim.

It is interesting to note that most of the people who did not have an opinion on this statement have been part of the local group for less than a year or less than six months. This problem recurs in some of my

ethnographic notes and interviews, where there is clearly a difficulty in understanding the structure of the local group and, without a proper introduction and explanation, new activists can easily misunderstand how decision-making processes work and where decisions are taken within the structure. During the plenary of August, for instance, two external facilitators were invited to investigate a future action campaign of the local group. They were students of an Italian facilitation academy which has been teaching also to various Venetian rebels how to bring this knowledge into the group. Even though they thoroughly knew the movement and its principles, they still struggled during the reunion to keep up with how Extinction Rebellion activists were describing roles and domains in investigating possible developments of the action campaign (Zanoni, August 27th, 2022. Translated from Italian).

But why is decentralisation and the concept of distributing authority so important? Administrative decentralisation has been implemented in European countries since the 1970s, especially due to the experimentation of social movements throughout the years, starting for instance with the experiences of direct democracy at the beginning of green parties' history (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 234). In the last decades, social movements have experimented with diverse ways of reaching political decisions and have produced practices and structures that represent the foundation on which new movements like Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and Rise Up for Climate Justice have been built on. From the experience I gathered through the research, the structure of XR Venice empowers individuals independently from their level of experience and knowledge of the movement. Vanessa is a 24-year-old student in political science, who joined the local group at the end of April 2022 after attending a “Heading for Extinction and What to do about it” Presentation. In August, just after 4 months joining XR Venice, Carla recommended her as the new external coordinator of the Political group, especially because of her academic background. She described her feelings after deciding to serve this role:

There was surely a boost in my self-confidence when the others showed me respect. Many people told me...Ok, even though you have never done this, try, because if you do it, it will be good. [...] And then I wanted to do other things, for example...like...with the press statement...it wasn't my responsibility, but I tried because I had never written one and I wanted to try and so I told myself 'Let's try new things' (Vanessa's interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

This is particularly important, because when people give up their free time for a collective purpose, they want to feel the ownership of decisions and proactively participate in the strategy and growth of the movement they are part of. What Holarchy and Sociocracy create is a “network of autonomous self-organising entities, distributed throughout the body” (Robertson, 2015).

But does this mean that in XR Venice there are no such things as leaders, centralization of power, and conflicts regarding who has the power and who takes decisions? Naturally, as perfectly highlighted by Martino during one of our conversations, it is impossible to avoid the centralization of power, even with a perfect decentralised structure:

Look at our democracy, there is a democratic structure, but the centralization of power is still there. Power exists, the only thing is that it must be used, in my opinion, through a change of culture, through a more feminine approach to power, through compassion. And there is the problem of ‘who does things,’ it’s not that...yes...no one is perfect, everyone makes mistakes. But if we don’t give people the chance of failing and we control all their choices, a person won’t have the chance of owning the decisions, because at the end we would do what the majority says, because we are like this, so at the end you don’t leave the choice to make a mistake and take the responsibility of doing things. [...] Trying to include everyone in a decision is a utopia that works when you have long processes, when you have clarity...a material limit on what you’re doing...but when you’re trying to grow [*as a movement*] at the end you need a centre that ‘pumps’ energy and takes decisions, even risky ones (Martino’s Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Martino has recently become the external coordinator of the Action Working Group and he is developing the strategy for the ‘drought and agriculture campaign’ which started at the beginning of October 2022. As a participant observer and during the interviews with other members, he was often mentioned as a person with a strong dominant character, with whom working seemed difficult at times. Giulio, for instance, who was a former member of the Action Working group but then decided to leave and move into the Regenerative Culture group for Martino’s behaviour, centred most of his interview on this topic, even showing at times signs of distress through his body language, when talking about his experience while working with Martino:

He doesn’t have much interest or respect for the collective decision-making process, particularly for the things that concerns him; he wants to decide, and he uses the group, local group or working group, not as a space to...take decisions or put things into perspective, but to sharpen his ideas or find legitimation so that he can present a decision that he has taken as a collective decision. [...] Often he presented some ideas to the Anchor Circle as taken collectively in the working group, when they were taken by him and another person who was new and couldn’t have a particular opinion on the matter. (Giulio’s Interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

Fotaki and Foroughi (2022, p. 226), for instance, strongly criticise Extinction Rebellion as a movement who proposes itself as being leaderless. For the authors, the idea of *leaderlessness* can easily become a

justification to avoid any reflection within a social movement on the topics of power, hierarchy and on the image of the leader. The risk indeed is for dominant individuals to enact forms of *stealth leadership*: “when leadership is denied and hidden, while some form of organised leadership undeniably takes place” (Western, 2014, p. 687). In my opinion, it is important to stress the nature of Extinction Rebellion as a decentralised movement, which means that values, principles, strategies, and theories of change can be freely interpreted by the more than 1’000 local groups all around the world. Thus, the claims against XR being a hierarchical or leaderless movement are different across countries and cities (Images 3.3 and 3.4).

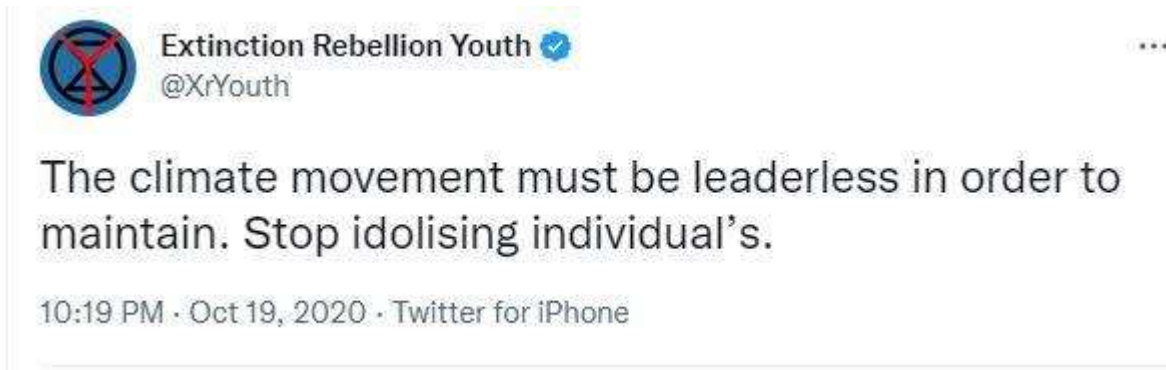


Image 3.3 – Extinction Rebellion Youth [@XRYouth]. (2020, October 19). Twitter. <https://twitter.com/xryouth/status/1318285689172205>.



Image 3.4 – XR Slough [@XRSlough]. (2020, October 19). Reply to a tweet. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/xryouth/status/1318285689172205574?>

This ambivalence is present also in public documents from Extinction Rebellion Global Newsletter (Extinction Rebellion, 2020a, 2020b), where the movement defines itself as a “leaderfull, decentralised, international, nonpartisan network”.

From my experience in the Venetian group, I witnessed the presence of different leaders, who are perceived as such only as long as they cover a role. Carla (former internal coordinator of the whole group) and Filippo (former external coordinator of the outreach working group) were two of the most active

members in Venice, participating in the organisation of actions and trainings, as well as in direct actions. After I started my observation, they both have stepped out of their roles and are now less involved in the activities of the movement. When I asked information about a decision taken in the Anchor Circle to both Filippo and Carla through Telegram, they did not know anything about it, they were not aware of what was being discussed and the strategic decisions taken within the group.

In the Venetian local group, on the other hand, I have seen the emergence of a twofold tendency: newbies who have joined the movement in the last 6 months perceive it as hierarchical and often feel as if they cannot influence the decision-making process. More experienced activists, on the contrary, see conflicts and tensions regarding power and authority in a more moderate manner. When looking at interviews, field notes, and even the questionnaire, they feel more positive regarding who takes decisions and how they are taken. Filippo, for instance, is a crucial individual in the local group as well as the activist with the longest and strongest experience in civil disobedience both outside and inside Extinction Rebellion. During his interview, he recognized that in Venice and in other local groups founders have the most power at the beginning, but he also argued that once the movement grows and more members become experienced themselves, then the overlap between founder and leader fades away (Filippo's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian). For instance, as of now, he is no longer part of the Anchor circle and holds no formal role in the local group, besides organising workshops when needed. Another example of leaders becoming 'just members' at the global level happened in XR UK, where two of the founders, Roger Hallam, and Gail Bradbook, were both strongly criticised nationally and globally for their actions and their strategies were declined by the movement in the United Kingdom (Smoke, 2020). During my field experience, for instance, plenaries were often missing members from the Anchor circle, but nonetheless the activists who were present worked together to investigate on future strategies and to define the work of each working group for the 'agriculture and drought action campaign' (Zanoni, Field Diary, August 27th, 2022. Translated from Italian).

For some activists such as Vanessa and Martino, it is normal that individuals who spend more time working on strategies, action planning, and long-term scenarios are the ones who take more decisions; Vanessa defines them as *landmark figures*. For Martino, including everyone in every decision can become bureaucratic and can hinder circles and sub-circles from doing their activities, when buried by too many questions to decide upon, which do not directly regard their domain.

This misunderstanding appears strongly in the academic literature on Extinction Rebellion (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020; Fotaki & Foroughi, 2022; Smiles & Edwards, 2021) because "Networked Autonomist Leadership can make these movements appear 'leaderless' to those looking for orthodox leadership

structures” (Western, 2014, p. 681). This misconception can easily happen also within the local group in Venice, especially when members become part of a working group without having firstly experienced regenerative cultures and without knowing how the structure works and the reasons-why behind such an organisation.

Antonio is 33 and works for a Community Interest Company in the field of sustainable agriculture and food production. He has more than a decade of experience in activism and engagement in civil-society groups. Moreover, because of his previous experiences and work, he has attended courses and workshops on facilitation, and is one of the most skilled members in the regenerative culture working group. He described how Extinction Rebellion is leaderless, but is externally perceived as a hierarchical movement:

Every chosen structure, every method...ehm...of organisation that is embraced has pros and cons so...we don't think that we have perfect structures...ehm...that are poorly put in practice; there is also the fact that we are studying imperfect structures in theory, that in practice are always...it's no facts...it's a path...also because groups are living systems, also with their internal dynamics (Antonio's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

When talking about the existing tension between Giulio and Martino, he defines it as a matter of perspective:

It's wrong to see the individual as the cause of...a tension, and the rest on the other hand is working. If there was a group that works well, that can say things straightforwardly...the individual who is problematic would be managed immediately by the group. [...] It is often useful to move the focus from individuals, seen as fixed, univocal entities, to group dynamics; so, it is necessary to understand what unleashes this type of behaviour, what is missing to manage tensions and conflicts in a proper manner.

Thus, the key point when considering leadership, authority, and power in the local group in Venice, is the critical approach that the group undertakes towards who has the power and who takes the decision. His viewpoint is also representative of how individuals who have spent more time in the movement are at ease with the topics of power, governance, and authority, and are able to face conflicts with a holistic and more mature approach. Western (2014, p. 676) defines it as a *critical leadership approach*, in which “conflicts become developmental rather than aggressive”. Development is key for the movement, intended as the growth in quality and quantity of its members. To develop in the context of Extinction Rebellion means to become more aware of how to practise Regenerative Cultures, to accept with greater calmness conflicts and tensions that might arise in a group or between different local groups; it also means accepting the consequences of civil disobedience, and become more comfortable in doing nonviolent direct action,

despite the legal consequence it entails (Zanoni, Field Notes, October 19th, 2022. Translated from Italian). Development is necessary because it promotes the growth of activists within the movement and teaches them how to learn from their mistakes (Extinction Rebellion, 2019), as the fifth principle recites: “We value reflecting and learning. [...] This is an active and ongoing process, requiring time and input for individuals and groups to think about what has gone well and why, what would be better to be done differently” (Extinction Rebellion Global).

To understand better the perception of power distribution and inclusion in the group, I analysed in depth the questionnaire (Tables 3.5 and 3.6), focusing on four of the thirteen prompts regarding rebels’ viewpoints on the local group of Venice. I then organised the answers under cohorts of experience in the movement (i.e., less than six months; less than one year; less than two years; more than two years), and synthesised the data collected by averaging the positioning on these answers and comparing the different viewpoints depending on how long a person had been in the movement.

Time in Extinction Rebellion Venice				
	Less than six months	Less than one year	Less than two years	More than two years
<i>Extinction Rebellion Venice is a decentralized movement</i>	4 people - 4 7 people - 3 2 people - 2	3 people - 4 8 people - 3 3 people - 2	3 people - 4 4 people - 3 2 people - 2	4 people - 4 6 people - 3 4 people - 2
<i>I feel that my proposals, ideas, and opinion are heard in Extinction Rebellion Venice</i>	5 people - 4 4 people - 3 3 people - 2 1 person - 1	3 people - 4 11 people - 3	4 people - 4 3 people - 3 1 person - 2 1 person - 1	3 people - 4 8 people - 3 2 people - 2 1 person - 1
<i>The people that have a formal role in Extinction Rebellion Venice have too much decisional power</i>	1 person - 3 4 people - 2 7 people - 1 1 person - 0	1 person - 3 6 people - 2 5 people - 1 2 people - 0	2 people - 3 1 person - 2 5 people - 1 1 person - 0	4 people - 2 8 people - 1 5 people - 1 2 people - 0
<i>Participatory spaces are too rare to allow for the inclusivity of everyone in the decision-making process</i>	1 person - 4 3 people - 2 8 people - 1 1 person - 0	1 person - 3 2 people - 2 11 people - 1	2 people - 3 1 person - 2 5 people - 1 1 person - 0	3 people - 3 4 people - 2 4 people - 1 3 people - 0

Legend	
4 - strongly agree	1 - disagree
3 - agree	0 - strongly disagree
2 - not disagree nor agree	

Table 3.5 – Prompts on power distribution and decision-making in Extinction Rebellion

Time in Extinction Rebellion Venice (average of answers)				
	Less than six months	Less than one year	Less than two years	More than two years
Extinction Rebellion Venice is a decentralized movement	3.1	3	3.1	3
I feel that my proposals, ideas, and opinion are heard in Extinction Rebellion Venice	3	3.21	3.1	2.92
The people that have a formal role in Extinction Rebellion Venice have too much decisional power	1.33	1.42	1.44	1.14
Participatory spaces are too rare to allow for the inclusivity of everyone in the decision-making process	1.38	1.28	1.44	1.50

Table 3.6 – Analysis of the prompts on power distribution and decision-making in Extinction Rebellion Venice. Average of the answers

This evaluation was necessary to assess my observations on the field and during interviews, particularly regarding how most experienced members (in terms of how long they have been in the movement) seemed to be more comfortable in the distribution of power and felt more included in the overall decision-making process. Firstly, a common ground in the perception of Extinction Rebellion Venice as a decentralised movement emerged on every cohort, with an average score of 3 (Agree). Another interesting point is the feeling of inclusion and the sense of empowerment from experiencing that personal proposals and opinions are valued and heard in the local group. Interestingly, the two cohorts with a higher score are that of “Less than one year” and “Less than two years”; an explanation might be that these two categories are enough experienced to understand how decision-making processes in XR Venice work, they feel part of the movement, and do not perceive any gateway barrier against expressing their ideas (i.e. feeling uncomfortable in a new environment; not knowing anyone; being a new entry and not feeling entitled to talk).

On the other hand, more experienced activists scored slightly lower on this prompt because, perhaps, they have incurred in long-term burnout and have distanced themselves temporarily from the movement to regenerate. These two hypotheses, indeed, were confirmed by the observation on the field and in interviews. Maria, for instance, has been part of XR Venice since February 2022 and during a plenary in August she expressed her sense of exclusion towards how decisions were taken in the group during a feedback circle (Zanoni, Field Notes, July 31st, 2022. Translated from Italian). After this episode, however,

she decided to step up and take the coordination role of the Expansion sub-circle⁶. When I interviewed her, she admitted deciding to fill this role to participate in the decision-making process and feeling more included in the movement (Maria's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian). On the other hand, during my research many people who had been part of Extinction Rebellion Venice for more than two years were feeling tired and decided to take a break from activism to focus on other aspects of their life or to regenerate. Regarding the third prompt, respondents mostly disagreed with the claim that those who have a formal role in Extinction Rebellion Venice have too much decisional power. This viewpoint found a confirmation in a few of the people I interviewed, even though other activists claimed that on many occasions the authority was centralised in some individuals, even outside their roles' domains.

Lastly, the fourth prompt on participatory spaces in Extinction Rebellion Venice shows how the overall group is satisfied with the number of spaces open to everyone for decision-making. However, as it will be analysed more in depth in the next paragraph, some have still requested for more transparency and involvement in how and where important and strategic decisions are taken.

Naturally, people who spend more time in the movement are the ones who have accumulated more experience and information, producing a power imbalance (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020, pp. 49–50). However, when compared to other movements, the group in Venice has institutionalised a hierarchy of scope through the constitution, the principles and values, and the agreements that are taken before any meeting or action. In other groups, when an activist spends more time and fills a more or less important *informal* role, he/she becomes more influential in the strategy and decisions that the group forwards. Berglund and Schmidt (2020, p. 6), for instance, describe how “horizontalist movements have often been accused of making hierarchies invisible rather than doing away with them”; Boni (2006 pp. 31–32) highlights how only charismatic individuals can consolidate their authority, and the mobilisation within purely horizontalist movements passes mostly between peers and the coordination is fragile and intermittent. In Extinction Rebellion and the local group in Venice, on the contrary, hierarchies of scope are always made clear to others and the instruments used in the movement promote role changing and knowledge transfer; this happens in three main ways: during welcoming dinners or similar events, within the buddy program, and through the free access Glassfrog of XR Venice. Welcoming dinners are part of the mobilisation cycle in week number two (Welcoming Social & Training; Image 3.7), where those who have participated to a presentation “Heading for extinction and what to do about it” in the previous week are invited to a collective dinner where the structure and power distribution of Extinction Rebellion Venice are explained, and then everyone can eat together bringing and sharing food with others. The buddy

⁶ under Outreach working group, oversees the weekly organisation of door-knocking, informational booths in highly frequented public spaces, and mobilisation during actions.

program is a project born with the intention of integrating better new activists within the structure. Individuals who have more experience in the movement are invited to become buddies of those who have just attended the welcoming dinner or the presentation and want to become active in the movement. During three or four meetings, those who are more experienced discuss and explain the three pillars of Extinction Rebellion: how to perform outreach, civil disobedience and the theory of change of the movement, and Regenerative cultures. Lastly, the structure is presented in all its roles and tasks, so that the newbie can decide whether or not to participate in a working group under a role or only as a member, depending on his/her/their passions, interests etc... Lastly, Glassfrog (<https://www.glassfrog.com/>) is a website where companies and movements organised on the principles of Holacracy and decentralisation can visualise their structures in circles and render public all the roles, responsibilities, and circles of a group.

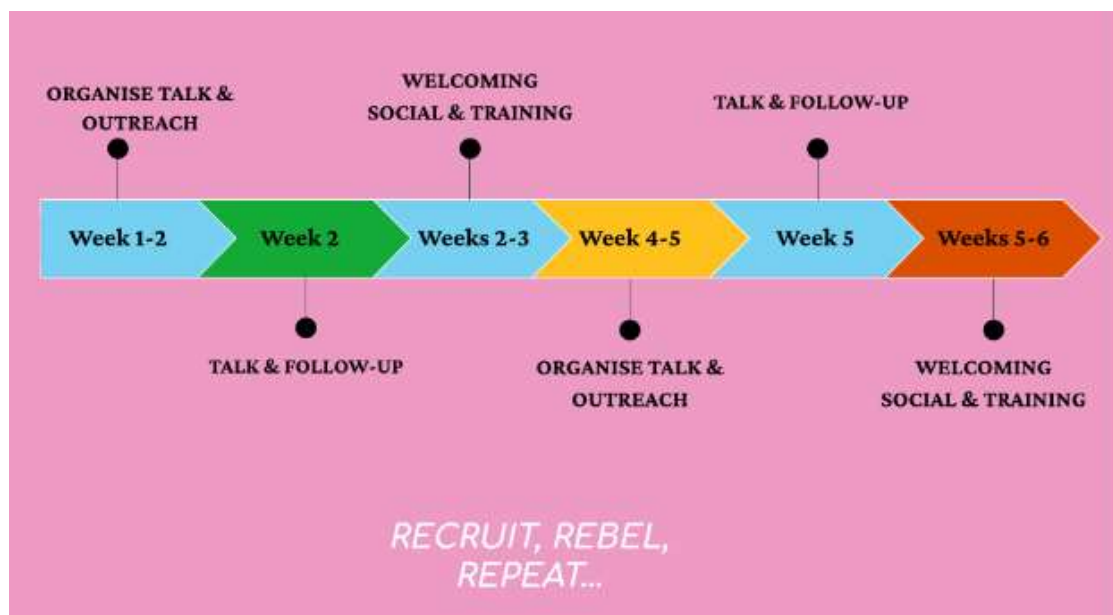


Image 3.7 – Recruit, Rebel, Repeat. Timeline of the mobilization cycle. Image from the document “XR 3.5: Project Overview. The vision and plan behind Project 3.5” by Extinction Rebellion UK

In addition, the social engineering of the movement and its principles have also adopted different instruments to deal with authority and power issues: in particular, facilitation, plenaries, transparency principles, continuous reflection and improvement through feedbacks, and restorative circles⁷. These

⁷ Restorative circles are an instrument of conflict resolution within the framework of restorative justice, developed in the 1990s by Dominic Barter. They were firstly applied by the founder in favelas in Rio de Janeiro, and has now become a practice in many movements, organisations, and groups. For more information, consult the website <https://www.restorativecircles.org/>

instruments and others are all part of what Extinction Rebellion defines as Regenerative Cultures, under the third principle “We need a regenerative culture.” All these practices and mechanisms are used and were developed as a tool to mitigate the effects of the toxic system and the negative, oppressive effects that it brings into the movement. Transparency and openness are proactively promoted in Venice: all minutes are always available and accessible on Base (platform on XR cloud, which you need an account to access); the structure and the people filling a role are always available for consultation on the Glassfrog; the topics to explore in every meeting are always defined collectively by the group and shared in advance. For working groups, indeed, the internal coordinator or the designated facilitator (if present) collect inputs through Mattermost (the preferred social platform for rebels) from all members who have a defined role and mandate, concerning what should be discussed in the following meeting, on both operational and strategic matters. The person who fills a role and the internal coordinator then establish the urgency of the topic and how many minutes should the group spend to discuss it. Lastly, three to two days before the reunion, the agenda is published in the Mattermost group so that everyone can ask for clarifications, propose a modification, or simply prepare with further inputs. In plenaries, on the other hand, the agenda is defined by the internal coordinator of the whole movement, with the help of an external facilitator outside Venice, or with the most experienced facilitators in the group, considering what are the most important matters to discuss collectively or to investigate on strategic matters.

But how does the structure of XR Venice works in practice, especially during nonviolent direct actions where hierarchies and toxic power relations can easily emerge? On the 13th of November, the group was invited to the TedX talk in the Toniolo theatre in Mestre, as this year's topic was “Apocalypse”. Besides the participation as listeners to the talks, the Action working group decided to use this event to perform outreach actions, with the goal of collecting as many contacts as possible. These contacts would then be invited to presentations and events to join the movement and its actions. The logistics was organised by the action working group; a day before the action, all rebels who wanted to participate received a *rebel kit*, a document with all the needed info: legal risks, what to bring for personal self-care, time of meeting etc...The document also contained another shared online document in which every person could insert him/herself for a specific role in action. At 1:30 pm we met in the “Ugo Molinari” green area near Corso del Popolo. At the briefing were present between 25 and 30 people, considering that some activists were late. During the briefing, the coordinators who developed the action explained once again the content of the *rebel kit* and then proceeded with a quick training and explanation on how the action was to be performed. The action working group had decided to do an intermittent blockade on the street: in this type of action the road is completely blocked by activists holding a banner or sitting on the streets for 3 to 5 minutes. Other activists distribute flyers to drivers and pedestrians (Image 3.8), to collect their contacts and make other people join the movement. The blockade is usually repeated for 2 or more hours, leaving

a couple of minutes in between to let the traffic flow. A person oversees the communication with the police, to inform them on what the group is doing, for how long and why. Other roles are that of peacekeeping, in which trained activists de-escalate the tension when pedestrians and drivers are distressed and are putting in danger the people blocking the road. Activists from the media working group take pictures and videos of the action and interact with journalists that are often present. Lastly, two or more people take care of other activists' personal belongings and have a bag containing food and beverages, first-aid supplies, and whatever a person could need in case of physical or emotional distress (wellbeing role).



Image 3.8 – an activist talking with a driver blocked on the road. 2022, November 13. Photo by Nicolò Zanatta

The training for action roles or other expertise required by the movement are usually held at the local or national level by internal or external experts. Expertise can come from studies and backgrounds or from the knowledge acquired within Extinction Rebellion and other movements. For instance, nonviolent communication trainings in Venice are usually held by Ortensia, an expert on the topic because of her background and working experience, who is not formally part of XR Venice; public speaking trainings are organised by Andrea Facchin in Venice, a musician and expert in communication and oratory, thanks to

his musical background and the trainings he has attended as the responsible person for civil service in Venice. Furthermore, for height action trainings (i.e., learning how to perform action in height, such as hanging from bridges, hanging a banner between two light poles etc.) there is a small number of activists who organises trainings because they have brought the techniques developed in other countries in XR Italy (Image 3.9).

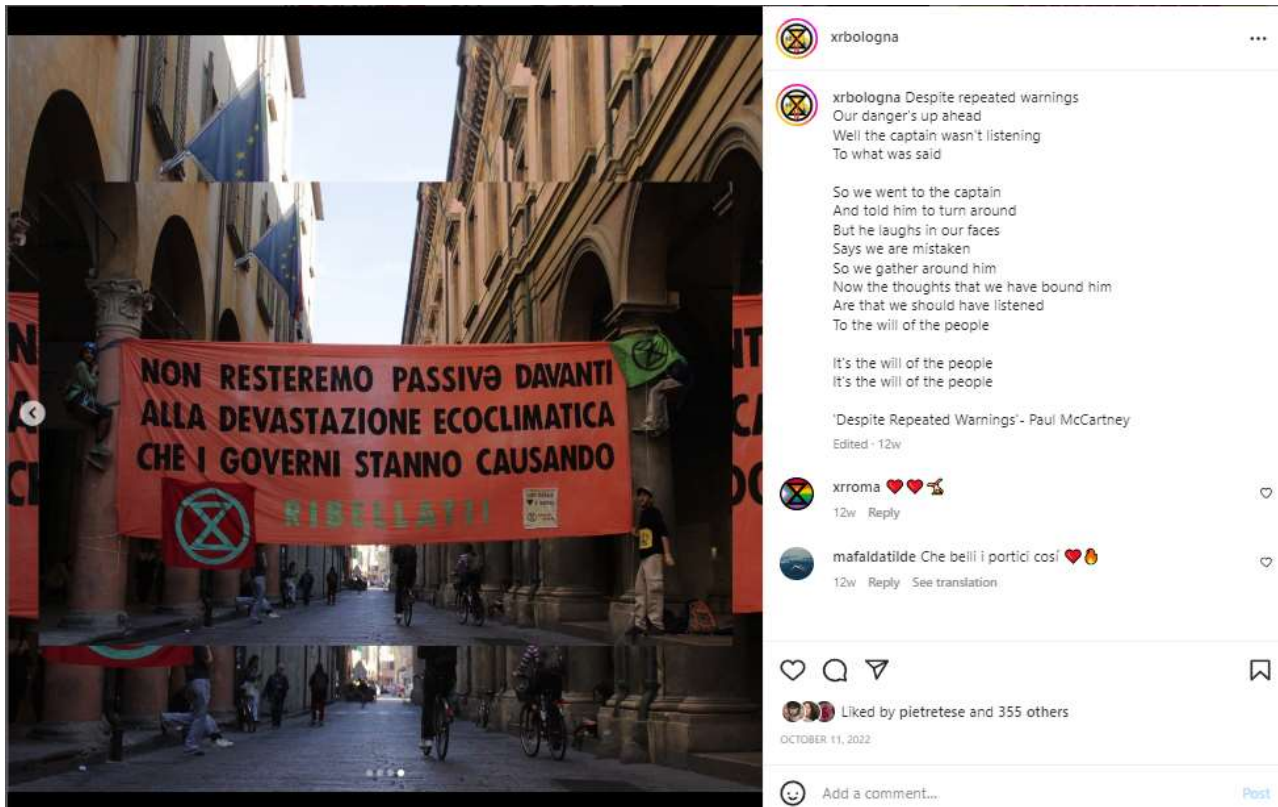


Image 3.9 – Activists hanging a banner from two columns in Bologna [@xrbologna]. (2022, October 11). Instagram Post. https://www.instagram.com/p/CjU_NwKAqK/

At 2:30 pm we were ready to start: Filippo, the coordinator of the action that day, was in charge of taking the time and informing rebels holding the banner for when to enter and exit the road. I and another person oversaw the safety of banner-holders, to ensure that no car would try to force the blockade. Inside the “safe space” created between banner-holders, pedestrians were invited to write on the street their preoccupations and hopes for the future, regarding the climate crisis. Many people stopped to write with colourful chinks, and the road quickly was transformed into a public space open for discussion between activists and bystanders (Image 3.10).



Image 3.10 – a pedestrian drawing on the road. 2022, November 13. Photo by Nicolò Zanatta

After 20 minutes, a car breached the blockade, forcing one activist to move from the road; the people inside the safe space were put at risk, but fortunately no one was hurt. After discussing with the banner-holders how they were feeling about it, me and the other activist in charge of their safety decided to sit on the road to cover the opposite lane. In this way, other cars and vehicles who tried to force the blockade could not pass, and thus the peacekeepers had to further de-escalate the situation. A driver on a scooter was trying to pass between me and the activists holding the banner, but a peacekeeper quickly reached out to this person and explained what was happening. Even though the biker was visibly nervous and angry, the peacekeeper was able to calm him and convince him to pass the blockade with his scooter. During this action, we collected 40 contacts (telephone numbers or emails) of people interested in the movement.

This action was repeated after the ending of the TedX event. Unfortunately, because it was dark and raining, the action lasted only 40 minutes. This decision was taken collectively, using the decision-making process by consent. Filippo and the wellbeing group, seeing signs of distress in activists, proposed to end the action before what had been agreed, and I asked everyone whether they agreed or resisted this decision.

No one was resisting Filippo's decision and we ended the blockade before initially agreed. There was a collective moment of joy because this was the first swarming (intermittent blockade) after a lengthy period of regeneration. As commonly happens in social movements (SMs), the voluntary participation and the strong identification with the motives and urgency of the group leads activists to become stressed and incur into burn out, as they struggle to maintain a healthy balance between activism, work, and personal life. As Melucci argues (1984), SMs alternate "phases of activism and latency": XR Venice held a local rebellion in May 2022, where activists from Europe and Italy attended three days of civil disobedience in Mestre and Venice. This rebellion required an enormous amount of time and energy for its organisation, and after rebels took a long break in the summer to regenerate for new actions.

At the end of the swarming, we divided in small groups and did an emotional debriefing in which each person had two or more minutes to describe how they felt during the action. In my group, all the people were joyful and proud of the organisation and how everyone acted in respect of each other and the roles they were serving. Only one person felt surprised by the cars who forced the blockade, which endangered all the people who were drawing on the street.

3.1 When decentralization does not work: analysis of weaknesses and possible solutions

The local group in Venice is a young group and most of its members are at their first experience in a social movement; problems, tensions, and contradictions commonly arise within meetings and actions. A tension that clearly emerged from my ethnography is that of leadership and authority. Even though the instruments of Regenerative cultures are continuously put into practice and improved, tensions regarding authority are still present. Moreover, because the group is so young, activists such as Filippo and Carla are still considered the leaders of the movement and are often drawn into the decision-making process for their knowledge, even when it is outside their domain.

I observed the crucial role that Filippo still plays in Venice during a swarming on the 6th of August organised by Martino, where the overall logistic was very chaotic: activists were confused and frustrated, as they struggled to follow Martino's commands on when to enter on the road to initiate the temporary blockade. The action was performed in Mestre, at the intersection between Fradeletto and Garibaldi streets. The coordination between the activists blocking every direction of transit was particularly difficult, because the intersection is always busy and traffic lights are not coordinated so every group of banner-holders must be precisely instructed on when to enter the road to avoid the risk of accidents. Many were expressing their frustration, as Martino was not coping with the stress of coordinating the action. Since I

was personally feeling demotivated and was observing how others were becoming unmotivated to continue the action, I turned to Filippo, because of his experience in XR Italy and UK, but also because I personally know him, and he is usually very calm even in stressful situations. Me and another rebel asked him to step up and coordinate more efficiently the entering and exiting of rebels from the intersection. Nonetheless, the action was not very successful, and during the following emotional debriefing many were feeling frustrated and uncomfortable (Zanoni, Field Notes, August 6th, 2022. Translated from Italian).

When looking at the survey administered to all rebels of the local group, 54% of them reported not being part of any working or affinity group. This means that most of the activists gravitate around the movement without taking roles and responsibilities in the growth and care of group. The structure profoundly impacts and guides every step in the decision making process and in the actions taken by its members; consequently, not being integrated in the structure implies a sporadic participation, which can lead to feelings of exclusion and distancing from the movement.

One episode explains how these tensions are sometimes hidden and only emerge as implicit within collective meetings: during the plenary of October, the group discussed about the newly born Strategy working group, created with the aim of establishing a common strategic policy to use as guidelines for working groups, actions' narratives, and campaigns. During this collective moment, a tension arose between Martino and other members – in particular Giulio – concerning the assignment of mandates for this working group. After Martino explained the domain and purpose of the group, Giulio asked the rationale behind the way roles would be assigned; Martino explained that they were open to everyone who wanted to propose him-/herself. At this point, Giulio was becoming restless, and he argued that many people that were in the anchor circle had already proposed themselves for the Strategy group, thus creating an excessive centralization of power. To find a compromise, Antonio, who was facilitating the plenary, advanced the proposal to allow no more than two people in the strategic group that were already in the anchor circle. The proposal was welcomed by everyone, and Sara invited the newest members to join the group, even if they were feeling insecure (Zanoni, Field notes, October 2nd, 2022. Translated from Italian). When a movement requires as much time as Extinction Rebellion does, indeed, more trained activists can easily make others feel as deprived of the sense of ownership in what the group is doing or deciding, especially when the leadership is not centralised (Mansfield, 2020, p. 380).

This became notably clear during my conversation with Laura, the new external coordinator of Regenerative Cultures. She joined the group at the end of May, just before the Rebellion. She is a working student in psychology and has quickly become one of the most active members in Venice:

A lot of work is done also outside meeting, this also because...a little bit because of the difference in rank that are present in working groups, between the people who are in them (Laura's interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

The term *rank* was mentioned various times in meetings and conversations I had with activists; they defined it as the ensemble of social, cultural, and biological privileges. It stems from the idea that a person can have more experience and time than others, so he/she gains the trust of others and the authority of taking part and influencing decisions outside their domain. The term rank was recently introduced by Antonio, the elected facilitator of the Anchor Circle at the beginning of October, when he organised a workshop for the members of the Anchor Circle to discuss power, privileges, and how we make decisions in the local group. He used this word to describe how various levels of communication exist in Venice, both formal and informal, in official meetings as well as through messaging and in person conversations outside Extinction Rebellion spaces. The term however does not necessarily entail a negative connotation, it is rather an acknowledgement of one's privileges and the importance of working towards more inclusive spaces of activism. Rank is acknowledged because the movement is dynamic and fluid and many proposals and ideas are constantly discussed on messaging apps, in person, and during phone calls. Different layers of communication exist also because Extinction Rebellion is more than a group of activists: individuals who actively spend more time in the movement are more likely to become very fond of each other and create long-lasting relationships (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 91; Melucci, 1995). These informal networks promote communication about decisions, ideas, and projects of Extinction Rebellion Venice even outside the formalised group's spaces.

Lastly, a great problem I identified when researching on the local Venetian XR group is that of the lack of exchange of roles. Even though the Constitution establishes that every mandate should last 6 months and then an election must be organised (the same person can be elected again for the role), most of the time this election does not take place and roles are exchanged in a more informal manner. What happens is that activists who are interested in taking a role work side by side as observers with the person currently serving the role. After a month, the person is ready to fulfil the new role, with the possibility of asking for support to the former role-filler. In other cases, external coordinators create a new role in accordance with the need of their group and the formal approval of all members of the working group, and then ask to one or more activists if they want to fulfil these roles, based on their competence and the perception that the

external coordinator has of them. In my experience as a participant observer, I attended the election of roles only in a general meeting of the Outreach group, as the result of a new structuring of the group.

3.2 Self-organisation in nature: holism and transdisciplinarity

The decisions that scientists have made throughout history to study humans and non-human species have always been shaped by a *conceptual model* used as a key to investigate the problem at the core of research (Acker, 1990). According to the biologist Andreas Weber, Darwinian evolutionary biology strongly reflects the “social practices” and economic theories of the pre-Victorian era in England (2013, p. 24). Concepts such as competition, fitness, and struggle for existence were instrumental in justifying the colonialist and enslaving practices of the government. Moreover, he argues for a strong connection between economic ideas such as the invisible hand by Adam Smith or the fixation of Malthus on scarcity and Darwinian ideas of fitness of the strongest.

In perennial rivalry, fit species (powerful corporations) exploit niches (markets) and multiply their survival rate (profit margins), whereas weaker (less efficient) ones go extinct (bankrupt). This metaphysics of economics and nature, however, is far more revealing about our society’s opinion about itself than it is an objective account of the biological world.

This statement becomes crucial when looking at the works by Barbara Noske and Val Plumwood (2022; 1993). Both the authors emphasise the biases in the scientific approach towards ecosystems, especially regarding the topic of hierarchy and the social engineering of individuals within species:

In modern times, science has defined a hierarchy of nature based on richness of experience. Natural world is still considered as inferior to the human mind (Plumwood, 1993, p. 130).

Animals, instead of being social, were just gregarious, their societies being no more than sums of isolated individuals. Animals had no social relationships according to Marx and Engels (Noske, 2022, p. 75).

For the authors, on the contrary, ecology should recognise and celebrate again the continuity and agency in non-human species, to repair the *cultural severance* (Bridgewater & Rotherham, 2019) that has produced the ideological foundation for the climate and ecological crisis.

The scientific academic literature, particularly that which focuses on ecosystems and organisation in species, has shifted towards an interest in decentralisation and non-nested structures, thanks to authors such as Acker (1990) Chase et al. (2002) and Kauffman (1996).

In his books “At Home in the Universe” and “The Origins of the Order: Self-Organization and Selection in Evolution” (1993, 1996), the biologist Stuart Kauffman analyses decentralisation and self-organisation as an inherent characteristic of all forms of life on Earth:

Whether or not I am right that life started with collective autocatalysis, the mere fact that such systems are possible should make us question the dogma of a central directing agency. The central directing agency is not necessary to life. Life has, I think, an inalienable wholeness. And always has (Kauffman, 1996).

The author points at the concept of *receiver-based communication* as the fundamental driver of self-organisation: all agents coordinate their behaviour by communicating with each other and decide based on others' communication. The result is an achieved coordination between agents at the micro and macro level of life, in all species on Earth.

Chase et al. (2002, p. 5749) go even further in associating human and non-humans social structures. In their analysis on how dominance hierarchies are formed in animals they argue for a continuity between humans and fish species, proposing future research on this topic applied to other non-human species:

And if fish can form true social structures, why not other animals? Thus, our results suggest that there may be no fundamental discontinuities between social structure in humans and animals. Finally, our results suggest that dominance hierarchies in fish, perhaps other social structures in “simple” animals might serve as models to help us understand the development of hierarchies and other forms of social organisation in humans. Ordinarily, the absence of higher-level cognitive ability, behavioural complexity, language skills, and elaborate cultural forms argue against applying lessons learned from studying social organisation in simple creatures to the investigation of social systems in humans...

Their research can be seen as an attempt to bring back humans under the ecological rules which all life on Earth follows, to ultimately ensure the preservation of all lives.

The analysis of continuity can also provide an example on how humans can better organise their societies and groups; the concept of patches indicated by Kauffman (1996) as the fundamental mechanism of life is defined as the underlying system for “adaptive evolution in ecosystems, *economic systems, and cultural systems*

[emphasis added]”. For the author, this acknowledgment can be useful for developing new instruments in humans social engineering, using nature as a model.

In ecology, the concept of *complex adaptive systems* (CAS) coined by Levin (1998, 2005) can be seen as a continuation of Kauffman’s ideas of organisation starting from patches. The concept has been used by various academics in the field of sociology, economy, and ecology since the beginning of the 90s. To define it, Arthur et al. (2018) identified six properties: “dispersed interaction, the absence of a global controller, cross-cutting hierarchical organisation, continual adaptation, perpetual novelty, and far-from-equilibrium dynamics”. Also, Levin highlights similar properties in his article “Ecosystems and the Biosphere as Complex Adaptive Systems” (1998, pp. 432): “sustained diversity and individuality of components; localised interactions among those components; an autonomous process that selects from among those components based on the results of local interactions, a subset for replication or enhancement”.

These theories are synthesised and supported by Daniel Christian Wahl in his book “Designing Regenerative Cultures” (Wahl, 2016). Wahl is a trained marine biologist and zoologist, with a MSc in Holistic Science and a PhD in Natural Design, during which he developed the concept of Regenerative cultures as a solution to answer the question of how to live sustainably on this planet. He strongly embraces the idea of holism in science, using the perspective of *socio-ecological systems* as the unit of analysis.

Since nature is fundamentally scale-linking – connecting the molecular to the planetary and the local to the global – adaptive cycles of any particular system at any particular scale (e.g.: local community, bioregion, nation or planet) are linked to multiple adaptive cycles that are taking place simultaneously for smaller systems contained by that system and for the larger systems within which that particular system is embedded. This nested hierarchy of systems within systems – or holarchy of interconnected wholes within wholes – is also referred to as ‘panarchy’ [...]. The word ‘panarchy’ describes nature’s (w)holistic hierarchies and the complex dynamics that link different spatial scales and their fast- and slow-moving processes into an interconnected whole. The framework offers a deeper understanding of transformations in systems of humans and nature more deeply and this in turn might help us to navigate more wisely into an unpredictable future (Wahl, 2016).

In light of the previous analysis on Extinction Rebellion Venice’s structure and approach to organisation, many of the properties identified by the aforementioned authors are also present in the local group and in the overall global movement. Interactions between activists are dispersed because of the nature of its decentralised system, adaptation is continuous, and the organisation is fluid and constantly changing with the creation of new circles, sub-circles, and roles whenever needed. In Venice, many sub-circles have been

created and destroyed to suit the occurring needs of rebels. For instance, the action working group has incorporated the art group in the summer of 2022, because it was too small and did not have a defined coordinator. Moreover, to support the Outreach phase of the mobilisation cycle (Image 3.4) the outreach working group approved unanimously the creation of the Expansion sub-circle, which is in charge of mobilising activists to perform outreach on the streets and door-knocking to invite citizens in Venice to join XR Venice presentations and actions. Since the mobilisation cycle is now in the process of being modified because XR Venice wants to focus more on civil disobedience, the sub-circle Expansion has been removed from the Glassfrog.

It's a living organism [*Extinction Rebellion*], so you need to maintain a certain pulse, don't overdo it because then you finish the energy and then there is no energy for other things. [...] A working group does a lot in a period, then the tensions goes down and another working group does its things and then the energy goes down....so you leave space for everyone and...so...you create a little bit of dynamicity...ehm...a living organism when it grows...it grows always more in a part because it gives more energy to that area, that group expands and sucks energy to the bigger group that sustains this growth (Martino's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

This passage from Martino's interview is particularly in line with Kaufman's thought (1996), who believes that "our social institutions evolve as expressions of deep natural principles". The idea that social movements, as well as other examples in human societies are continuously changing is profoundly in contrast with fixed and rigid democratic structures. Acknowledging the continuity and "mixing the cards" between humans and non-humans species leads to new ideas and innovations. For instance, the third demand of Extinction Rebellion, citizens assembly, was developed from the observation that uncompromising and inflexible institutions are incapable of dealing with ever-changing, uncertain, and urgent matters, such as the climate and ecological crisis or the Covid19 pandemic. The connection between social institution and the theory of nature as complex adaptive system is also reinforced by Shafi & Ran, (2021, p. 13-14):

Social movements may be viewed from the perspective of complex adaptive systems where citizens act as autonomous agents engaging in collective sensemaking of information gleaned via social media to generate emergent patterns of self-organisation. [...] In the proposed system, individuals act and make decisions on the basis of information gained through collective information processing.

The connection between social movements and living organisms emerged frequently during the ethnographic research: Antonio describes the group as a "living system" whose organisation is made of continuous improvement in which the single patches (circles or individuals) adapt to external and group

dynamics and find new ways of working towards the purpose of their mandate, always keeping in mind that, because they are part of Extinction Rebellion, we are all working towards a common vision of the future. The ways activists refer to their organisation in meetings and also on social platforms is as if they are talking about living organisms, even referring to new groups formations as “per gemmation” (Image 3.11): for affinity groups in XR Turin, a general affinity group welcomes new members and organises actions to include them and let them adapt to the idea of performing civil disobedience. When the affinity group reaches sixteen members, it splits in two different groups, creating a new affinity group born from the relationships created during actions in the general affinity group. Then, the process starts again, always maintaining a general affinity group from which new ones are created.



Image 3.11 – Screenshot from the Mattermost group of the Action Working group, 2022, October 10. Personal communication. Mattermost.

The file rouge behind all these authors is to meddle the language of science with other disciplines, and to meddle human with non-humans perspectives and ways of living, co-existing and inhabiting this planet. Wahl (2016) frequently uses the words *learning from nature* to understand “how humanity can become a positive life-sustaining influence on ecosystems everywhere and the planet as a whole”. For instance, he lists “resilience lessons” that humans can understand by looking at nature, such as the use of decentralisation and modularity; the importance of diversity for greater adaptation and of redundancy to

increase self-reliance and resilience in ecosystems. Naturally, as argued by many scientists who decided to meddle their scientific discipline with others in a more holistic manner, learning from nature does not entail a separation between humans and nature, but rather move from the focus on the micro to the macro level of analysis, to understand important principles that humanity has forgotten when it moved towards hyper-industrialization, mass consumption of goods and nature's products, and hyper-focus and hyper-separation in scientific disciplines.

3.2.1 The power of diversity

Without incurring in the mistake of anthropomorphising non-human species, I think it useful to define better how the recognition and celebration of continuity can help our species to redefine its limits and to learn positively from nature, also reconnecting scientific and humanistic disciplines in the process. A powerful example comes from the analysis of the concept of diversity in the field of ecology, agroecology, and anthropology and sociology of social movements. According to Gliessman (2022, pp. 329–330) diversity from all points of view is key in understanding ecosystems and their complex interactions and processes, and it represents the foundation for stability and resilience of their overall functioning:

As diversity increases, so do opportunities for coexistence and beneficial interactions between species [...]. It reduces risk of crop loss due to climatic factors such as drought or frost, as well as unpredictability of markets, food chains, and other supply-side factors. Social, economic, and cultural diversity goes hand in hand with nature as diversification promotes and permits food sovereignty and social justice in food systems. Linking ecological diversity and social diversity can create strong forces for food system transformation.

The concept that diversity increases the resilience and stability of ecosystems has long been argued by various researchers (Elton, 2001; MacArthur, 1955; Rooney & McCann, 2012, p. 45), even though the academic consensus is still debating whether diversity represents a primary or secondary driver for stability (Ives & Carpenter, 2007, p. 61). The relationship between diversity and stability, indeed, began with the birth of ecology as a discipline, discussing how diversity also brings complexity in nature.

Complexity goes along with diversity in ecosystems because when food webs increase in diversity they also grow in complexity and can become more stable and resilient (Rooney & McCann, 2012, p. 45). Complexity and diversity, in some cases, can also lead to instability and weakness of ecosystems. When applying this topic to a social movement as Extinction Rebellion Venice, the idea that complexity strengthens a group, even when it creates conflicts, becomes particularly important:

The relationship between these very different energies isn't usually present in other [social] movements. Because usually in the others [movements] they attract people who want to do a specific thing with that approach and so there isn't much internal diversity, also...when you look at what to do and what is the priority of things to do. [...] And so this generates [in *Extinction Rebellion Venice*] tensions, misunderstandings, obviously there is also the dynamics of...ehm...I don't know, probably because of...eco-anxiety; a pressure, a bulimia for doing things at every cost. All these subjective visions have not found a place with other subjective visions yet and how to find an equilibrium. This equilibrium, [...] it's real and it's sometimes different from what the person thinks, and it's difficult to find (Antonio's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Antonio, as part of the regenerative culture group, but also as an individual with more than a decade of experience in activism, civil society, and the power of facilitation, is cautious when analysing the power of diversity and complexity. From his words, it emerges the complexity of cooperation in Extinction Rebellion because of its diversity. Nonetheless, a common vision persists in the values, demands, and instruments that the movement uses to change the system and its people. Whenever divergences arise, regenerative cultures facilitate compromises and common grounds, by understanding other perspectives, and creating empathy against the risk of polarisation and exclusion. When different views contrast on how to perform a specific action or campaign, facilitation mediates the differences and helps activists to compromise and agree on a shared vision. As argued by Kauffman (1996) when analysing self-organisation at the level of evolution “[d]iversity begets diversity, driving the growth of complexity”. For the author, diversity in the evolution of life has also policy implications, and these implications could have powerful consequences, such as forcing the Global North to truly support the Global South for social, ecological, and sustainable growth, precisely because diversity of ideas and developments could matter for human survival. Because Extinction Rebellion and the local group in Venice are fundamentally inclusive (the sixth principle recites: “We welcome everyone and every part of everyone” (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2019), it allows for complexity and diversity to naturally emerge. People from profoundly different life experiences come together to rebel against the system; everyone brings his/her/their energy within the local group and promotes self-reflection of the overall movement and the emergence of successful strategies that make in turn the movement more resilient and stable. The movement is particularly diverse compared to other SMs because of its outreach strategy; many SMs attract individuals with similar opinions or backgrounds: the antispeciesist movement attracts vegans; the student climate movement attracts mainly students because it performs mobilisation only in front of schools and university etc...Extinction Rebellion Venice, on the other hand, invests greatly in outreach whenever and wherever possible. For instance, the mobilisation cycle entails that rebels must knock on the door and try to establish a conversation with every

citizen living in a chosen neighbourhood. Moreover, during actions, outreach roles distribute flyers to every person, independently from race, age, gender, political preference etc....as shown in Chapter 2, the group is quite homogenous in terms of age, gender, and employment status. Even during my interviews, I witnessed the diversity of the people who came from different cities, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and most importantly had different perspectives on the climate crisis and how Extinction Rebellion should perform activism.

When talking with Arianna, she highlighted this aspect as one of the most important reasons she decided to join Extinction Rebellion when she was just 19. The complexity brought by individuals who are different but still working together allowed her to analyse in depth the meaning of the ten principles and values of Extinction Rebellion (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2019). Naturally, this complexity of visions can also have negative impacts on a group or movement, as the sense of unity, according to Melucci (1995, p. 44), is firstly subjectively created starting from the ends, means, and environment of members, which then *struggle* to recognise themselves under a common collective identity.

Another example of the connection between natural and sociocultural diversity was evaluated by the IPCC, which recognised the importance of including different voices in the discussion about mitigation and adaptation to climate change, inviting indigenous people at the table (Ford et al., 2016). For instance, the study performed by Cámara-Leret and Bascompte (2021) found how the loss of indigenous languages implies losing the possibility of developing new medicinal knowledge and services. Every indigenous language comprehends in its culture unique wisdom regarding medicinal plants in the ecosystem of their territories. UNESCO (2018) clearly emphasises how maintaining diversity in both cultural and natural terms can also help the growth of mutual respect between humans and how humans approach life on this planet.

Even in social movements, diversity and an open-minded approach contribute to the creation of a community of individuals who remain together even outside the common cause they are fighting for. But how can a group promote diversity and inclusion at the same time? In the next chapter, I will analyse the theoretical and empirical consequence of XR Venice's Regenerative Cultures and how they improve space of activism. Besides this, regenerative cultures are also fundamental for their contribution to the concept of self-organisation and decentralisation. During my ethnography they were defined by various activists as the founding pillar of XR Venice; they are not only a foundation, but the precise element that allows the structure to be decentralised and self-organised. The care for each individual inside and outside the local group in Venice pushes rebels to openly discuss heated topics and face conflicts with the purpose of truly understanding the other person's point of view. It is interesting note, for instance, that one of the activities

organised by the Regenerative cultures working group was directly connected to ecology and relationships in nature. During one of the events, we walked together in one of the few woods in Mestre. The walk was guided by Antonio, which has been working in the field of sustainable agriculture and permaculture for years. He explained how ecological succession works, how different plants can thrive on the same soil avoiding the use of pesticides and herbicides, and discussed what was happening on the soil of the intensive soy crops near the wood we were in. People were then kindly invited by Antonio to share their knowledge on the topic of agriculture (Zanoni, n.d.-a, n. 21st October 2022).

Many activists reported how in the movement polarised and opposed people can have long and rich discussions about heated topics in contemporary society. In the Venice WhatsApp group, for instance, it is very common to discuss the meaning of pacifism, the rightfulness of vaccines, and the political implications of how the pandemic was handled by the Italian government. When looking at the experiences that activists had in other social movements, the difference of Extinction Rebellion becomes particularly meaningful. Francesca, who is no longer actively present in XR Venice because she lives and works in Verona, describes her difficulty in discussing with activists in her antispeciesist movement:

When we [*talking about the antispeciesist group*] have a drink together, before or after...a protest, there are unbelievable silences, I didn't expect it. And I went many times to try to make friends, but we have nothing to say to each other. The only thing we have in common is to be vegan and caring about animals and their rights. In XR, on the other hand, they have...ehm...more topics to discuss about...topics that you can approach without problems. [...] It happens a lot, it happens quite a lot that we do actions [*talking about the antispeciesist*] in the Bra square in Verona, and there we meet other protests, happening at the same time as ours. Sometimes they are no-vax, others...they are pro-LGBT+, other times there is a march for something else. There was never once someone in the group that wanted to even talk about these topics, we have completely opposite ideas...if we start talking about these things...we have only black and white conversations that don't bring anything to us, very dichotomic. (Francesca's interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

The transdisciplinary approach I tried to argue in this chapter is an attempted example on how to bridge the gap in the analysis of human social engineering, taking the organisation of ecosystems and other species' societies as a model. The concept of diversity and its consequent complexity, moreover, forwards *naturecultures* (Haraway, 2003) and the idea of *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2016): in the spirit of Haraway's writings, it is important for academics to work in a transdisciplinary manner, to embrace the muddling between humans and non-humans, between culture and nature and to "live along the lines", to cultivate collectively *response-ability* and collectively-produced ecological practices:

[D]iversity of genes, species, ecosystems and landscapes allows us to develop a matrix of human activities while maintaining those benefits of nature that are important to human well-being. Diversity of culture in its different expressions contributes to the sustainability of human interactions and therefore provides an important contribution to the human element of sustainable development (Bridgewater et al., 2007).

4. How to live again under the ecological rules: a practical approach

The most important fight against the climate crisis is that of ideas, of imagining a future, a different world, and working everyday collectively to put this world into practice. Ernst Bloch, in his *Principle of Hope* (Bloch, 1995), describes the importance of educating individuals to dream and hope better, to define what is the concrete part of their personal utopias and how to work every day towards them. The most important failure in the climate movement and in the history of environmental and climate fights is the lack of visioning using emotions and people's hopes.

As Cotugno (2022, p. 115) argues, the role of activists should be of raising the bar of the possible, through public actions that put in practice, even if just for a day, the world we would like for ourselves and future generations. However, the communication of climate and social movements is often centred on anger against the system, catastrophism, and rage. As an activist myself, I embrace this rage, I understand it perfectly, but we should also move forward from the dread and terror towards hope as a superior motivator: the climate movement needs to work on visioning, on educating people to hope, and on creating new ways of subjectification, that connect people with others and with non-human species.

Val Plumwood (1993) emphasises how the denial of dependency from nature – term which I use as encompassing all non-human species for the purpose of this thesis – and the idea of humans as *masters of nature* has led us to an ongoing process of self-destruction, an evolutionary cul-de-sac (Bateson, 1999). I emphasise *evolutionary* because Western culture and the dominant capitalistic system of production (of goods, culture, economics etc..) have invested so much on the distancing of humans from nature and the expropriation of value from it to increase the production, that this separation is now hindering new alternatives that could potentially help humanity, if not to solve, at least to face the ongoing climate and ecological crisis. This denial comes from an underlying and omnipresent dualism, which hyperseparates, objectifies, and homogenise nature, spreading the perception that nature can be constantly tamed and manipulated through geo-engineering and technology. This *occidental hubris* (Bateson, 1999, p. 345) comes from more than two centuries of human history, in which we have modified, destroyed, and manipulated rivers, forests, lagoons, mountains etc...to ultimately increase the profit and wealth coming from nature and those considered part of it.

Daniel Wahl even goes further arguing that the “multiple crises we are facing are symptoms of our pathological habit of understanding and experiencing ourselves as separate from nature, from each other and from the community of life” (2016). He particularly problematizes the reductionism and separation of scientific disciplines, which ignores the *fundamental interconnectedness and interrelatedness* of human life:

[t]o move on from the dominance on the ‘narrative of separation’ and into the ‘narrative of interbeing’ we have to heal the ‘Cartesian split’, embracing our experience of being separate individuals not as proof of separation but of being undividable from the wholeness of nature.

Because culture has been drastically separated from nature, in Western countries as well as in other parts of the world (Dickinson, 2016, p. 32), climate movements need to work on two parallel fights against the system of expropriation and ecological destruction: the one to reform it through political and organisational changes, and the one to reform its people, experimenting new ways of staying together within our and with other species.

Even though it is not the purpose of this essay to explore the historical development of the relationship between humans and nature, the previous short paragraph is important to highlight the historical development of humans’ knowledge and how this led to the justification of nature’s exploitation. Moreover, with the rise of capitalism and the last five decades of neoliberalism, this conceptualization of nature has developed towards the belief that resources are infinite, and that technology solves everything.

Culture and how subjectivities are formed in a society play a fundamental role as causes of the climate crisis; as Haraway explains: “[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledge know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.” (2016, p. 35). If we assume that the ongoing ecological and climate crisis is caused by capitalism and its bulimia for profit accumulation, then we also must recognise that capitalism has not only focused on nature and less-than-human beings to produce as much surplus value as possible. In the last decades, its focus has also been on “the whole of culture, sexuality, and human relations, including even fantasies and individual drives” (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 191). The idea that capitalism is capable of channelizing our thoughts, ideas, and ways of creating our own subjectivity has long been supported by various scholars (Bateson, 1999; Baudrillard, 2012; Fisher, 2009; Guattari, 2005); Guattari argues that *Integrated World Capitalism* has moved from controlling the modes of production, to controlling the ways in which meanings, ideas, and subjectivities are created through media, advertising etc.... Thus, when looking at how to face the crisis we are in, we should create and experiment on new modes of subjectification, in line with Earth’s boundaries and other species’ needs. The only powerful and truly liberating ecology will be the one who challenges both the capitalistic formation of subjectivity and power through ideas, and the modes of production through innovative organisational and political structures.

If culture has been *enter-prise'd up* (Strathern, 1992, p. 38), we should also remember that through hope and imagination it can also become a powerful tool which can influence people's action and thus the functioning of the overall economic system:

[t]o protect the nature that is all around us, we must think long and hard about the nature we carry inside our heads (Cronon, 1997).

The belief that system-change and subjectivities change go hand in hand was evident from my interviews of activists in Extinction Rebellion Venice. Maria, for instance, approached the movement because she found that its people were contrasting the atomizing tendency of society, and they were instead promoting self-care practices and teaching how to take better care of others (Maria's Interview, personal communication, 3 October 2022). Laura, the external coordinator of the Regenerative culture working group, is even more straightforward in drawing a connection between subjective and systemic change:

Even though we were to achieve our demands, we would not obtain something until we continue to reproduce the same system from which we are trying to escape. [...]...the system would not change from one day to another, we need a cultural change, and only if we create a change of culture, maybe on a local level, without having global claims...only in this case then we could avoid to replicate...the dynamics that have led us here (Laura's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

4.1 Extinction Rebellion Venice and its Regenerative cultures

How then can social movements work on people's identities, on both a systemic and individual level? How do we learn to think better ideas and imagine better worlds?

To answer these questions, I look at Extinction Rebellion, and the local group in Venice, as an actor which is working – through regenerative cultures – towards practising the identity-reformation theories of various scholars such as Haraway, Guattari, and Bateson. Regenerative Cultures (RCs) are all the engrained (i.e., at the core of the movement) and daily practices that “bring a different approach to climate and other activist movements. They are about how we move towards practising and demonstrating the change we want to deeply experience in life in all society.” (Christie Wilson, 2020). The concept of RCs is fundamental in the theory and practice of XR because it “informs the movement's ideology, organisation and strategy, and has the potential to be extremely subversive, fostering a new subjectivity for an ecologically sustainable society.” (Westwell & Bunting, 2020, p. 2).

The term Regenerative cultures appeared firstly – as a proper set of theories and practices under this name – in the homonymous book by Daniel Wahl “Designing Regenerative Cultures” (Wahl, 2016), developed after 2005 while he was researching for his PhD in Natural Design. The author draws inspiration from multiple authors, concepts, and theories: Bill Plotkin; the *Integral Theory* (Wilber, 2007); biomimicry, mycomimicry, and green chemistry; food sovereignty movements such as La Via Campesina; de-growth theories (Assadourian, 2012). At the basis of his definition of Regenerative cultures is the answer to the question of how to live sustainably, paying particular attention to the precautionary principle and the approach of system-thinking (Reed, 2007, p. 674). Wahl also mentions Indigenous practices to learn how to live more sustainably: the Iroquois Nation, for instance, takes important decisions considering the possible effects on the seventh generation to come. He defines the creation of regenerative cultures as a *process of re-indigenization*:

Indigenous worldviews around the planet share a common perspective: the world is alive and meaningful and our relationship with the rest of life is one of participation, communion and co-creation [...]. Another common characteristic of Indigenous cultures everywhere is that they tend to have modes of communication that involve respectful listening and sharing from the heart in a council circle. In my own experience of working and communicating in this way, when we sit in council and offer the gift of attention and heart-full listening to each other, we are given the opportunity to directly live and experience the reality of interbeing. [...] A third mental model or belief system that Indigenous cultures the over world share is that the rest of the natural world is in continuous communication with us if we only learn to listen. We are capable of learning from plants, bacteria, fungi and animals with whom we share this experience of being life on Earth. (Wahl, 2016)

However, from an overall understanding, Regenerative cultures are deeply *multimodal* and they echo other theories and authors in various fields. According to Harms (2022, p. 518), the two terms – Regenerative and Culture – re-introduce two pivotal debates of anthropology: the debate on the “regeneration of life as ubiquitous practice to be found in rituals” and the idea of “culture as bounded concept”. In addition, as I will analyse deeper in the next pages, the author draws a connection between regenerative cultures as practices to “prepare the ground for striving for less-bad and still-hospitable futures in the everyday” and writings such as those of Ernst Bloch, Bateson, and Guattari (Harms, 2022, p. 519). Another important influence in this concept is the “work that connects” of Joanna Macy (Macy & Johnstone, 2012), based on the notion of *engaged Buddhism*, which includes all the practices and routines also present in Extinction

Rebellion's wellbeing techniques (i.e., check-ins based on meditation; visioning activities; progressive brainstorming etc.)⁸

The notion of Regenerative cultures, with its deep roots in the aforementioned authors, Indigenous cultures, and other practices of sustainable living, has been long used in the context of alternative farming, in non-mainstream economics, as well as by environmental movements (Harms, 2022, p. 517). Climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion have brought great attention towards activists' wellbeing, taking from the experience of feminist and antiracist movements, which firstly introduced this peculiar concern in activist spaces (Ray, 2020).

When looking at the questionnaire, 80% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the claim "Regenerative cultures are fundamental in Extinction Rebellion Venice". When segmenting and analysing the answers, it is worth noting the fact that there is an equilibrium in the respondents in terms of experience in XR Venice (i.e., less than six months 25% of those who agreed/strongly agreed; less than one year 27.5%, less than two years 22.5%, more than two years 25%) and this type of distribution is also similar for the gender cohort. Thus, the evaluation shows that regenerative cultures are homogeneously considered important in the group in Venice.

RCs put in practice the idea of educated hope and the proposal made by Guattari in his *The Three Ecologies* for a new *resingularization* based on the *ecosophical perspective* (2005, p. 34): as I will argue later, the rhythm of repetition of these techniques based on spirituality, psychology, and empathy changes the individual approach to relationships, from egoistic to communal, from dominant to relational. In the theory of the movement, RCs include six main practices (Christie Wilson, 2020):

- Earth Emotions – periodic discussion within the group on how the climate crisis affects individuals' mental health;
- Intersectionality – a continuous process in which RCs work on recognising and moving away from the forms of oppression and domination which are coded in our toxic institutions and that can also be present in the group;
- Self-Care – practices to help activists against eco-anxiety, personal mental health problems, and everyday struggles living in a toxic system;
- Burn-out – prevention and healing of the prolonged stress that can be caused by overloading and oversteering to perform always at best as activists;

⁸ To learn more about the connection between Joanna Macy and Regenerative cultures in Extinction Rebellion: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4hUEkkJGBBxCUK4RflsfwE>

- Action Care – training and practical work to help activists during nonviolent direct action from an emotional and physical point of view (e.g. learning to take care for someone experiencing a panic or anxiety attack; knowing what to bring for an action depending on the season and location that activists could need...);
- Emotional debriefing – a moment after a nonviolent direct action in which activists are divided into small groups and discuss how they felt during an action to disentangle their emotion, with the help of a trained facilitator.



Image 4.1 Extinction Rebellion Global,
 [@extinctionrebellion].2020, March 7.
 Instagram post.

https://www.instagram.com/p/B92NV_H5kg/

These elements coexist and are co-dependent from the non-hierarchy of XR. In decentralised systems, individuals “unlearn’ dominating behaviours previously rewarded in hierarchy. Human skills supporting decentralised working cultures begin with listening, curiosity, and respect.” (Houseman, 2019). Thus, decentralisation and XR’s social engineering are fundamental for RCs, as they start from creating a positive environment over which the elements of RCs can thrive. For instance, Carla describes her experience during a restorative circle (the chosen structure of XR Venice for conflict resolution, Cfr. Chapter 3, note 7) as “humanising of the other”: “you recognise that...maybe of the person you made an enemy...that person has needs, a history, feelings, and ways of thinking, and so do you” (Carla’s Interview 2022. Translated from Italian). Carla’s words are important because they highlight how the experimentation of XR Venice is reconstructing individualities on a *microsocial level* regarding the *modalities of group-being*

(Guattari, 2005, p. 34). When we compare the three elements of the ecosophy of Guattari (social ecology, mental ecology, and environmental ecology) they can all be encompassed as the three concentric circles of RC: self-care, people-care, planet-care (Image 4.1).

The most important pillar that distinguishes Extinction Rebellion and the local group in Venice from most social movements – even though it is not a feature unique of XR – is facilitation, an ecosystem of tools and concepts that can help activists in five main areas: the transformation and growth of both the individual and of individuals in a group; the work on cohesion between members and the celebration of this sense of community; the care for emotions and the transformation of conflicts that can arise between two or more members; the protection of governance and decision-making processes as agreed through documents or verbally (a constitution in the case of XR Venice); the collective research over the future of the group and the common vision of change that the members have of it.

These areas of concern are taken care of by facilitation through different tools: in XR Venice every space is usually facilitated by members of the RCs working group, who help the formulation of the meeting agenda and make sure that every point is discussed, respecting time agreements, and ensuring that all information and energies in the group are discussed and able to emerge freely. Other instruments are the restorative circles by Dominic Barter, “a community-based and owned practice for dynamic engagement with conflict” (European Forum for Restorative Justice) and the utilisation of nonviolent communication, an approach developed by Rosenberg (2015) which “maximises liberty, enhances understanding of the relationship between feelings and needs, promotes equality, and creates compassion” (Heartland Community College)⁹. In practice, it entails a series of structures that individuals use to communicate with each other, rooted in the objective of connecting feelings with needs for both the interlocutors.

The experimentation of practices of RCs in XR Venice is thus vast and dynamic; during my ethnographic research and experience as an activist I witnessed many activities and workshops aiming at promoting all the different facets that a regenerative culture can have. For instance, the RCs working group organised a walk in a local small forest, to regenerate and promote bonding between activists, but also to discuss together on how different species coexist in a territory and what are the differences between regenerative and traditional agriculture. We walked together in the wood of Campagnazza near Dese, using the activity of walking as a way of reconnecting with the environment, using all senses to experience the biodiversity of a local, mostly unknown natural place in our territory.

⁹ For more information on how Nonviolent communication works:
[https://www.heartland.edu/documents/idc/What%20is%20violent%20comm%20and%20nvc%20\(Winters\).pdf](https://www.heartland.edu/documents/idc/What%20is%20violent%20comm%20and%20nvc%20(Winters).pdf)

The participation and reconnection of RCs in XR Venice is also a strong bodily experience: on many occasions I observed facilitators using space and movement to promote a dialogue between activists. During the plenary in August – organised in S. Giuliano Garden in Mestre –, for instance, one of the external facilitators guided a discussion on a sensitive topic: the financial sanctions that many had received after blocking a street in Mestre during the Spring rebellion. Facilitators wanted to know how members felt about it and how to support the sanctioned rebels; she asked whether the group wanted to pay these sanctions partially or entirely, or whether it was up to the single person to pay his/her/their sanction. To start the discussion and help the dialogue between different perspectives, she asked activists to position themselves in an ideal spectrum with their bodies, feeling free to move at any point (Zanoni, Field Diary, July 31st, 2022. Translated from Italian). Also, during a nonviolent direct action training in Carpenedo, Filippo organised an activity to explore the spectrum of difference between violent, nonviolent, and pacifist actions. The activity was facilitated by Filippo who proposed different examples of actions and scenarios, asking people to position themselves on a space delimited as a triangle, in which the three vertex were the adjectives violent, nonviolent, and pacifist (Zanoni, Field Notes, October 23rd, 2022. Translated from Italian) (Image 4.2).



Image 4.2. Veronica Angelucci. (2022) Image from the nonviolent direct action workshop organized on the 23rd of October.

The connection between body and mind is promoted by XR Venice as a tool for self-care, focus, for investigating the opinions of its members, as well as a way to “break the ice” with newest members. Before every meeting, workshop, training, or activity the RCs working group organises “centring activities” which encompass various exercises: when they sense that the energy of activists must be deflected to focus on decision making or deep discussion, they allow for 5 minutes of completely free movement in a space to vent all excessive energy; when there are many newbies who struggle to integrate with other members, RCs organise trust games, such as running with closed eyes in a human-made corridor, trusting that one or more people will stop you and avoid you from falling on the ground etc.. Again, before important meetings, such as the ones of the anchor circle or before plenaries, the facilitator prepares a short, guided meditation, to allow every individual to enter in a focus zone and be ready to discuss and participate in the meeting. As a pillar of the movement, it is “at the core of XR, in the sense that what rebels want “is to move from a society of domination to one of participation, from conquest to co-creation, from extraction, to regeneration, from harm to healing, and from separation to love” (Smyth & Walters, 2020, p. 622).

Another interesting activity I observed was the centring moment organised during the plenary of October, prepared by two external facilitators. The plenary was focused on investigating the future action campaign and the role of every working group in supporting the activities of this campaign. At the beginning, the people who were present were given two small pieces of paper; they had to write with few words how they felt on the first piece, and what were their expectations on the second one. Then, they were all invited to walk freely around the room, and whenever they crossed their eyes with another person, they had to stop and explain to each other, at turns, the meanings behind their words. I also participated in this activity, which was mainly centred on the principle of deep listening. By giving one or more minutes for talking at turns, facilitators ensured a high level of attention and listening, even for new individuals. These activities represent a strong icebreaker to know people on a deeper level, as you must watch them in their eyes and listen without intervening, practices that are commonly avoided in everyday life. While participating, I had the chance to see how new members were surprised by this practice and how their body language progressively relaxed through the activity, leading to laughs and smiles in the last minutes of the game. During the plenary, many other energising games were performed, to bring back the attention to an optimal level, whenever activists felt distracted or tired of discussing and participating (Field Notes, August 27th, 2022. Translated from Italian).

Nonetheless, all these activities are worthless without a proper education on how to listen to others, all the instruments and practices used by RCs can become just empty words without training and willingness to put in practice these tools. That is why the regenerative cultures working group has organised various training and exercises for ‘active listening.’

Deep listening, active listening, can be an antidote to the oppressive economic and social systems that lay at the foundation of racism, poverty, and the climate crisis. The environmental justice movement – really any movement – that endeavours to disrupt oppressive systems that exploit people and the earth for profit, must place listening at its core (Nicole, 2019).

In practical terms, active listening means learning to be silent when required, but also asking questions and trying to understand what the interlocutor needs: is she/he/they asking for support, showing up, giving something or expressing a particular need? It is an *intentional effort* that requires training and the willingness to exit from one's ego, attune and empathise with the person talking. In XR Venice, this intentional effort is exercised particularly through regenerative cultures workshops (Image 4.2), who unfortunately are not organised on a periodical schedule. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, expertise in the movement comes from both internal and external experts. For regenerative cultures in particular, many activists have acquired experiences in other contexts: Antonio has been studying facilitation for his work in a co-operative on permaculture and local Agri-production; Carla is also a yoga teacher who has offered in various occasions free lessons during meetings and actions to bring peace during stressful moments for the group. Other activists have directly experienced regenerative cultures in Extinction Rebellion UK, where it was first developed. Furthermore, many rebels in Venice have attended and are attending an Italian academy of facilitation, which teaches on a practical and theoretical level the founding pillar of facilitation in Regenerative cultures. Lastly, many books and documents are freely available on the XR Italy's cloud, for whoever is interested in learning more.

I had the chance of observing only one RCs workshop during my ethnography, organised in Marghera on the 7th of July (Image 4.3). It was organised by two members of the regenerative cultures group with 20 participants. One activity was striking for its focus on active listening: it was divided in two parts and its name literally translates from Italian as “jackal and giraffe café”. During the “jackal café” the two organisers put on the floor different barriers towards communication in the form of cards (e.g. judging a person's behaviour, giving an advice without considering the other person's experience, mocking someone etc...); a person was invited to volunteer for the activity and Laura, which at the time had just entered the local group, stepped forward. She was at the centre of the room, while everyone was invited to stand in front of her from different positions and use these models of communication that distance people from each other. Laura told her last happy memory, explaining how her boyfriend had bought her a ticket for a concert for her birthday. She also explained that this was one of her first concerts, because in the past she did not have enough money to afford a ticket. One of the activists, for instance, stepped up on the “judging someone” card saying with an interrogating tone “Why couldn't you afford a concert before? You must have been really poor”. After this, other people decided to step up and try the game, with Laura always

reacting honestly to what was said to her, thus reporting how these barriers to communication were affecting her. When Laura and those who participated were asked to express their own feelings about the experience, many reported how they understood the internal mechanisms that sometimes lead people to judge, misjudge, and even offend, without being aware of it. In the “giraffe café”, Laura was once again at the centre of the room, but the cards on the floor were now representative of models of communication that get people closer, such as “asking how the person feels” or “repeat out loud what you understood”. In this game, the goal was to perform a type of communication centred on the interlocutors’ feelings and needs, pushing the volunteers to step on cards and shift their attention from the self towards the other, avoiding judgments and unsolicited advice.



Image 4.3 Extinction Rebellion Venice, 2022, July 4th. Instagram post.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CflpECELxwI/?bl=en>



Image 4.4 Extinction Rebellion Venice, [@xrvenezia]. 2022, January 11. Instagram story. Screenshot.



Image 4.5 Extinction Rebellion Venice, [@xrvenezia]. 2022, January 11. Instagram story. Screenshot.

However, this workshop was just one example of what the regenerative cultures working group usually organises within XR Venice. For instance, during the research, Filippo and other activists held a three-day workshop on ecopsychology and genuine relationships, in collaboration with the project managers of an Erasmus project on relationships they attended in Estonia (Image 4.4 and 4.5). Also, other events were a regenerative walk in a local forest in August 2022, three feedback meetings, a training on self-care in case of mental distress during actions (i.e. breathing techniques for self-help in case of anxiety, panic attacks, and emotional distress), and a general regenerative culture workshop on social movements organised at the climate camp in Venice Lido in September 2022.

Besides active listening, regenerative culture entails other practices to facilitate the dialogue and working together towards a common goal. For instance, to communicate activists use non-verbal communication that is agreed upon when entering the local group. Hand signals are fundamental and constitute a parallel language between activists because they allow the flow of conversation, naturally creating an order based on priority between speakers (Image 4.6). During my observation, I noted how new members, when rebels continued to use hand signals, quickly started to use them, sometimes without being aware of it. These hand signals are used in every meeting, training, plenary, or workshop, and perfectly represent how “rhythms matter” (Harms, 2022, p. 52): through repetition and exposure to RCs behaviours and practices, they slowly and gradually become part of the everyday life of activists, even outside the spaces of activism. In addition, these and other hand signals are used during actions to facilitate distant communication and to transmit fast decisions or when de-escalation is needed.



Image 4.6. Extinction Rebellion UK. (2020) Image from the document XR People's Assembly Manual. Available at: <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Peoples-Assembly-Manual-Text-Only.pdf>

Unfortunately, these practices are not always present: Arianna, one of the youngest members in Venice, reports her experience on some occasions, where people did not respect the order of speaking, interrupting others to express and impose their personal views (Arianna's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian). Moreover, on the 2nd of December 2022, a conflict emerged on the informal WhatsApp group of XR Venice, when Thomas – one of the most experienced activists in XR, who attended the first hunger strike

of the movement in Rome in 2019 – linked an article reporting how the Italian constitutional court had ruled that mandatory vaccines were not against the Italian Constitution. Under the link he wrote: “Someone in this group said that mandatory vaccines were unconstitutional. The constitutional court, which is the most important decision-making organ on the topic, has rejected every appeal. Like hell it isn’t constitutional” (Thomas, WhatsApp chat, December 2, 2022. Personal communication). The conversation about mandatory vaccines, Green pass, and the pandemic in general frequently creates conflicts within the local group, and so far, these conflicts have not been addressed yet by the regenerative cultures working group. After this episode, many people decided to leave the chat and others responded harshly to Thomas, especially because he was asked many times in the past to stop using the space of the chat as an arena of discussion for these topics, but to address them in person. This is just one of the many examples in which the tools and instruments of regenerative cultures are not sufficient or can be manipulated; they are never enough when not properly taken in consideration, or when the person using them manipulates the instrument or process for his needs or desires. In the case of Thomas, for instance, he distanced himself from regenerative cultures during his interview:

But we are not psychologists, so...believing that if we take a walk in a park it will make us feel better seems to me like in a company...ehm...they do...I don’t know...the free tasting for all the employees to...or they go to the beach all together with the dinner paid by the company to know each other better. Yes, it may work, but from here saying that it [*regenerative culture*] makes a difference...I don’t believe it. (Thomas’ Interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

From his words, it is clear how the internal culture of Extinction Rebellion is not monolithic, and many visions try to coexist within the same group. This creates tensions and conflicts between members, and sometimes can also lead activists to distance themselves from the movement or momentarily pause their participation. In addition, it is pivotal to report how the topic of *manipulation* came up frequently in the interviews with activists, particularly regarding how some individuals can use the tools of regenerative culture (i.e. nonviolent communication, facilitation, active listening, hand signals) to forward their opinions and proposals in a dominating manner. For instance, Giulio labelled Martino’s way of talking as a manipulating behaviour:

But it’s the method, you understand? Of taking a little bit more space than what should be right and...of not taking in consideration also maybe the difficulties that a person that is not...ehm...an expert or well-integrated into the movement like Martino could have in interacting with him if he’s insisting...do you know what I mean? [...] Even presenting things in a certain way with a certain interpretation and discourse, and sometimes also with the work already partially done, because he’s never off from XR...maybe he arrives at the meeting, and

he has already prepared something even though we agreed on doing it together (Giulio's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

The idea of manipulation even came out during a plenary I observed, when the group was discussing nonviolent communication as a tool for improving the relationships between activists and empathise better with other's needs. Filippo used a hand signal to request to speak and then said that nonviolent communication is just a series of patterns and procedures, and that a person can still use it with the intention of winning or dominating the interlocutor. Antonio, who was the facilitator of the plenary, responded that the most important thing is to reconnect with our needs, with what is alive in us (Field Diary, October 2nd, 2022. Translated from Italian). These “negative aspects” will be analysed in depth from a theoretical and practical viewpoint in paragraph 4.3.

4.2 Working together towards a common future

As supported by Harms (2022, p. 520), the enormous *emotional labour* performed during Regenerative cultures activities is deeply rooted in envisioning new futures in everyday life. Differently from utopian perspectives which place the realisation of the individual in an imaginary future, regenerative cultures take from Ernst Bloch *concrete utopia* (Bloch, 1995) to work daily on *rehearsing utopian becomings* along what Deleuze and Guattari define *ordinary lives' lines of fight* (1977). Visioning is central in Extinction Rebellion Venice, both in working groups and during direct actions; it is pivotal for activists' life because it shifts their way of thinking of the future from the inhospitality of the climate crisis, towards imagining new futures which are independent from present and past limiting conditions. This work is frequently performed in Venice, to help activists put in practice and work towards objectives that may seem “utopian” but that can quickly become partially or entirely realised when not constrained by physical and emotional boundaries. For instance, working groups periodically (i.e., twice a year or more) organise a “visioning meeting”, where they investigate on imagining the ideal future if their working group was to reach all their objectives. This part on visioning is then reconducted to reality asking what we need to reach this vision in the short, medium, and long-term (Zanoni, Field Diary, December 12th, 2022). Wahl explains the importance of visioning as it “invites us to not be restrained by the limitations we perceive in the status quo and to let go of linear predictions of what our ‘unavoidable’ future will be like based on yesterday's and today's prevalent trends. Visioning opens up a space where we can have a multi-stakeholder conversation about the future we want, where we can design an ideal future and set clear intentions for what we would like to co-create.” (2016).

To evaluate the change in subjectivity in XR Venice, it is firstly important to acknowledge how activists in the group talk frequently of themselves using plural pronouns, which indicates how their perception is more than often collective rather than individualistic. This represents a contrasting tendency against the individualism from which capitalism profits on (Baudrillard, 2012, pp. 84–85). Furthermore, social movements have been shown in literature as strong drivers for individuals' change because they represent pivotal experiences for self-growth (Giugni, 2004), and they strongly impact the socio-political imagination as well as the identities of their members (Matera, 2015, p. 5).

Self-growth is fundamental for re-thinking one's identity, and RCs organises various practices to promote it under various conditions, particularly during stressing relational episodes such as conflicts, tensions, and contradictions that arise within the local group in Venice. These clashes of ideas and experiences, when approached through the instruments of RCs, allow the movement to be flexible and push its members to grow together, learning from others' emotions, experiences, and ideas. Feedback workshops, restorative circles, and RC training are spaces within which activists learn and practise important skills for group-being, self-reflection, and visioning. As Wilson argues (2020),

[*a regenerative culture*] is about how we move towards practising and demonstrating the change we want to deeply experience in life in all society. Its purpose is to nurture a new culture that is resilient and robust, and which can support us all through the changes we must inevitably face together.

The aspect of self-reflection is important because it changes individuals and their perspective on the world outside the movement. During my conversation with Carla, for instance, she described her personal vision of what a Regenerative culture is:

I have this certainty and this love that leads me to...preserve life, you know? And so, this for me is regenerative culture. Yes. Ehm...because...I don't...I see it oppositely...while doing integration [*of new members*], I talk with many people who say 'But humans deserve extinction' and in my opinion regenerative culture is the opposite of this sentence. So, no! No, no...we have to learn to love ourselves...for a moment...because we hate ourselves so much that we are destroying the world and so we have to fight for future generations to have a life with dignity (Carla's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Here we can see how the motive behind Carla's participation in XR is altruistic rather than self-centred: she performs activism out of love rather than fear and she hopes for a better future instead of viewing her participation as a "fight-against". Growth of the individual and the whole group comes as a logical consequence of "turning inwards" to form a "resilient self in the face of political inaction" (Von Storch,

2021, p. 207). Moreover, the idea of changing while being in Extinction Rebellion Venice emerged during the ethnography as a shared thought between both oldest and newest members:

At the individual and group level, if someone wants to improve the status quo, he/she/they must do it with a comprehensive approach, not just marrying a cause and doing let's say...specific actions, but also putting always in perspective and keeping in mind that we are the environment. So, improving things means also improving ourselves. [...] [XR Venice] [i]t's not just a group of people that have a common fight but is also a group of people that has a certain approach to life (Luigi's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Luigi is a 31-years-old PhD researcher in environmental studies, who joined the movement in February 2022. He recognizes the fundamental element of holism in XR Venice and uses the words *approach to life* to describe the whole of practices, values, and attitudes of the group. Although they may be considered naïve, these words are fundamental because they de-construct the mistake that Boni recognizes in the anthropology of social movements as the erasure of the “connection between protests in the streets and the modalities of governing the everyday” (Boni, 2006, p. 8). A movement, as the author claims, is its culture and how it influences the everyday life of its members. By looking at the *modalities of governing the everyday*, scholars can fight stereotypes on social movements, often perceived as extreme, lazy, or isolated from the problems of the “real people”. Secondly, the experiences of activists in Venice show how humans can practise *postcapitalist politics* in their personal and community life (Gibson-Graham, 2006), outside capitalism modes of subjectification (Guattari, 2005).

Social movements, XR Venice through regenerative cultures, are precisely laboratories in which to experiment different, better worlds:

[s]ocial movements are processes of identity formation, not only of action towards the outside, an attempt of creating solidarity and collective sentiments (Matera, 2015, p. 7 Translated from Italian).

Activists do not engage in prefigurative politics. Instead, they seek to relate differently and mobilise affective dimensions and temporalities in attempts to reach there (Harms, 2022, p. 522).

Rather than waiting for the conditions for utopian realisation, the practices of regenerative cultures engrain in activists' minds the possibilities of thinking collectively toward better futures in the everyday. Through the repetition and the continuous use of RC's instruments, the self and world-perception of rebels change inevitably in unexpected ways. The perception of a collective rather than a sum of individuals, with whom

to build these concrete utopias, was pointed out many times during different conversations held with members of XR Venice:

Giulio: In my own perspective they are [*regenerative cultures*]...the possibility of building a solid foundation, to have a strong community that supports its members and that tries to create something that will resist what is going to come, the...crisis I mean. It's a culture made to take care of us and the others and...we are working to...create various aspects of this culture, and practices...ways of being together (Giulio's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Laura: I see XR in my future as a community. [...] I am quite a defeatist on this perspective [*our future within the climate crisis*]. I think that we won't escape from our destiny. But I don't think that the solution is 'fuck everything let's not care about it, in the end we're all gonna die'. Ehm...I think 'ok, we are going in this direction, we need to be prepared.' And so in this sense for me XR is also an end, it's a mean because it allows me to be prepared, but it's an end because when we'll live in apocalyptic scenarios...ehm...having a community with whom I can cooperate, cooperation will make a difference instead of being an individual who competes with other for survival (Laura's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

From these conversations, the word community appears often and demonstrates how activism in XR Venice goes much deeper than the simple protest on the streets or the common perspective of 'doing activism against an unjust system'. Rebels in Venice are aware of humanity's future from a scientific and emotional point of view, and they have thus decided that, despite the sense of fear and dread that stems from eco-anxiety, it is more useful to work together to create a new individual and collective identity, to reform the system and the daily life, moving towards the future they are imagining and building together.

The perception of self-growth and the acknowledgment of a personal change and application of XR principles outside the spaces of activism is also evident in the survey, where 72% of the respondents agreed with the statement "Regenerative cultures have influenced my way of thinking and acting outside Extinction Rebellion Venice". I decided to formulate this statement to support the testimony of activists and the observations I gathered on how the work on individuality done inside the movement is not restricted to being an activist. When interpreting the answer considering other variables, the perception of change is well distributed in regard to age, with 50% of those who agreed or strongly agreed below the age of 30 and 41% between the age of 30 and 63 (9% did not insert their age). Looking at the variable of gender, however, the perception of personal change outside activism is predominant in individuals who identify as women (50%), while the rest is comprised of individuals who identify as men, non-binary, or that preferred not to answer to the question, even though it must be noted that the majority of people who responded to the survey identified as women (48% of the total respondents). When looking at the

intersection between age and how the person responded with this claim, it is interesting to note the homogeneity concerning age distribution. According to the *impressionable years hypothesis* and the *increasing persistence hypothesis* (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989, pp. 416–417), in the early socialisation phase individuals fix their attitudes, values, and world views, which are unlikely to change in the future. Members of the same generation present similar basic attitudes regarding economy, society, and politics. With ageing, on the other hand, individuals are less likely to change these elements, as their flexibility decreases gradually. Moreover, as supported by Krosnick and Alwin, “ageing entails social disengagement and a decrease in interest in events distant from one’s immediate life”. Thus, it is remarkable to see the emergence of a common ground regarding the attitude towards personal change on both young and old activists, demonstrating how RCs represent an effective tool for change, independently from age and gender.

These changes, obviously, happen in the course of months or years and through repeated practices of regenerative cultures: as Harms perfectly puts it, the “art of doing so repeatedly” (2022, p. 521) facilitates and engrains these approaches in activists’ everyday life.

Once established that processes of identity re-formation happen within XR Venice, and that its activists perceive the group not just as a movement, but rather as a way of living, it is then necessary to investigate how identity changes within this case study.

To think of oneself as part of a group is a way of claiming one’s own identity, outside the pressure of capitalism to conform with a brand, ideology, or product (Boni, 2006, p. 9). The fight against the *government of individualization* (Chiaramonte, 2020, p. 938) is a strong drive for recruiting members in social movements and in Extinction Rebellion Venice this particularly happens because nonviolent actions, as well as daily practices build radical trust, solidarity, and cooperation between rebels. Radical trust is particularly essential for a movement like XR, where nonviolent direct actions are organised with the purpose of creating disruption and violating the law publicly while taking full responsibility. Thus, individuals radically trust their fellow rebels and put their fate in those who have organised the action, as well as in the wellbeing group, which will take care of them if they need something during actions or while being arrested.

The practices of daily life are varied in XR Venice: being part of the group means always having a place to sleep in whichever city has a local XR group; for instance, I have hosted activists from other Italian local groups and from Germany. During a local or national rebellion, it is praxis for the activists living in the city where the actions are organised to host activists in their houses coming from other cities. Whenever external facilitators work on XR Venice, or when activists cook for everyone during a local Rebellion, everything is paid through the principle of the “economy of gift”, where everyone gives an amount of money proportional to his/her/their possibility. The members of a local group can also become a

community for emotional support, when individuals are experiencing emotional distress, outside and inside the spaces of activism. In Venice, for instance, the RCs working group has created a 'mental aid office', where activists trained through meetings with professional psychologists are available for those struggling with emotional and mental issues. Informal dinners are also quite common, when multiple activists meet at someone's house, and everyone brings food depending on their economic situation and disposable time for cooking. At first, during my research, I committed the mistake that Boni (2006, p. 9) describes as the 'simplistic stereotype' where a social movement is described and analysed only by looking at its most charismatic individuals, studying social movements only when they meet in a compact mass on squares and streets. I initially considered the 'ways of managing the everyday' (Boni, 2006, p. 8) as marginal parts of the bigger picture of Extinction Rebellion Venice. However, during the ethnographic research, I recognized the importance of looking at how activists approach daily life, and how this approach has been changing after they became rebels in Venice.

The previous mentioning of a collective perception that seems engrained in XR Venice's activists is pivotal because it is already a proof of a shifting happening outside the atomistic and egoistic tendency of the society we have created; as Bateson argues "[t]he unit of survival is organism plus its environment [...] the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself" (1999, p. 340). The three types of care (self-care, people-care, planet-care. See Image 4.1) invite individuals to look outside themselves towards other humans and non-humans. These shifts of perspective and the connection that it draws between humans and other species emerged particularly in Antonio's words:

It is an error of perspective to see the individual as the cause of...let's say a problem, while all the rest is working. I mean, if there was a group that works well, that is able to communicate...the problematic individual would be cared for by the group. In the sense that, when a strange behaviour appears, if we are able to recognise it, expressing it in a proper way, caring for it in the situation, then we can say that there is no longer this problem, or at least it no longer exists but changes. On the other side there is of course a limit to the instruments that we use in facilitation. [...] Often, it is useful to move the focus from individuals, especially seen as fixed and univocal entities, by looking at group dynamics; so we have to understand what triggers this kind of behaviour, what is missing for it to be cared for properly. (Antonio's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

Starting from his words, I think it is important to emphasise that in no way facilitation and the other instruments of RCs are perfect, because what matters is not just the structure or the instruments, but the attitude of individuals and the general group dynamic. However, from the research on XR Venice, I

noticed a general change in activists before and after joining the movement, precisely from the point of view of individuals' attitudes and values, especially towards others.

In the second chapter I talked about the limits that humanity is facing against the climate and ecological crisis. They are limits of thoughts (Bateson, 1999, p. 342; Cotugno, 2022, p. 53), because often we cannot imagine a way of living outside capitalism and the physical, economic, and mental processes that have led us here. These limits must be overcome through a change in subjectivity. Carla, for instance, talked deeply during personal conversations about the concept of reflecting on our individual and group limits; moreover, when XR declares that planet-care is as much important as self-care, it pushes activists to re-discuss their position and role on this planet, by taking in account all the physical, emotional, and mental limits that humanity must accept or face to live and survive the climate crisis.

According to Plumwood, it is pivotal to resolve the "alienation from the earth" (1993, p. 102) by seeking a continuity and difference with nature and others. To achieve it, she proposes a new "ecological identity" which remakes the relations of humans with and in nature. This new identity, similar to the processes of resingularization by Guattari or the ecologies of ideas by Bateson begins with the concept of a "relational self" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 155):

[w]hisping for the other's good for their own sake. Such a non-instrumental conception of relationship to the other, although not yet a full account of ecological selfhood, is an important ingredient in such an account.

The relationship with the other does not stop at caring for others' sake, because the author supports the overcoming of egoism and proposes altruism "interpreted as the pursuit of the interests of others and the setting of one's own interests aside in favour of theirs" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 143). This setting of personal interests behind group's interests was expressed by Sara during her interview:

We need to finish a meeting, but I have to go because I have an appointment. Then there I ask myself, ok, is it worth it to finish the reunion for the wellbeing of the group, or I make a request: I trust you, go on [with the meeting], I really have to go, but for the wellbeing of the group you can go on, you don't need me. So, there are some aspects that *put the other or the group, in this case, I mean you feel like the need of the group or something else, as your need* [emphasis added]. (Sara's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

In this passage she describes how, through the repetition of RC instruments, activists can gain a powerful sense of community, which can even lead to putting group's needs before personal ones. Naturally, this process was more evident in more experienced rebels such as Sara, who has been part of Extinction

Rebellion Venice since the Carnival of 2019. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise how this form of selflessness can degenerate into pushing individual boundaries and incurring into stress and burnout, as I will describe in section 4.3.

The concept of relational self-developed by Plumwood and found in Sara's interview is aligned with Bateson thoughts on social flexibility:

[a] single system of environment combined with high human civilization in which the flexibility of the civilization shall match that of the environment to create an ongoing complex system, open-ended for slow change of even basic (hard-programmed) characteristics. (1999, p. 347)

Bateson intends flexibility as the “uncommitted potentiality for change” which comes from a regenerative and open system (Bateson, 1999, p. 349), able to continuously adapt to the limits that the environment presents. To exercise this flexibility, individuals need to practise everyday forms of relational self, in which interactions are strictly non-instrumentalized, and where the ego is sometimes put aside, to tune in with others' feeling, emotions, and needs. In the next part, I will try to evaluate to which extent and how the identity of rebels in Extinction Rebellion changes, particularly following the theories developed by Plumwood, Bateson, and Guattari.

Even though it is not possible to establish, just from a six-months ethnographic research, whether Extinction Rebellion Venice truly creates a new ecological identity from a group and individual point of view, it is still possible to analyse the other theoretical points proposed by Plumwood and Bateson. Concerning the overcome of egoism towards a relational perspective of identity and self-perception, Sara describes the attention that XR Venice pays towards others and group relationships:

This is a thing that I've heard a lot when people meet XR [*Venice*] for the first time: I have never found anyone with this kind of attention...ehm...towards people. There is not just [*attention*] towards the objective. But this is because we forget that our objective is directly connected to people. [...] My way of talking is also shaped by my way of thinking. I've seen that I can communicate better my needs and propose, propose requests that are centred on me, without blaming the other. [...] When you recognise, in the other person, your same needs, you can empathise with the person. (Sara's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

Sara, who was the former external coordinator of the RCs working group (WG), describes how she changed her thoughts by changing the way she was speaking after joining the group, when she attended a workshop on nonviolent communication. The shift in the communication she describes – from blaming, judging, and framing the other based on own's assumption, towards a communication centred on needs

and nonviolence – depicts the practising of relational selves, which is detached from egoism, especially when the most important focus of communication becomes empathy and active listening.

Another example of overcoming egoism and recognising both continuity and difference with the other is the experience of Francesca during a restorative circle that was organised in XR Venice in 2019, when the Media WG was not able to find an agreement on the tools and policies under their mandate:

We had to solve these problems, organisational problems, and we couldn't even talk because every time we tried to talk we would get defensive and...Ortensia [*the person who holds nonviolent communication workshop in XR Venice and is an expert on restorative circles*] helped us. I liked a lot the fact that during this group work, Ortensia pushed us to repeat the message...the opinion of the other person, so we could prove that we had truly listened. Because during an argument there is not much listening, we are always very self-referential, we tend to be self-referential and to follow our own ideas, our own...way of seeing things and flow of thoughts. It's like we are puking in a toilet our hate, our dissatisfaction. [...] We have to make sure, in a way that is a little bit...weird, I mean it is weird, almost childish. I felt like a three-year-old when I was put in this mechanism, doing this task of repetition [*of what the other person said*]. However, it was necessary, it was necessary because we recognised that we couldn't understand ourselves, that my words weren't arriving to them and their words weren't arriving to me and that...maybe there was more...there wasn't that premeditation, that malice, that...negativity. There was a lot of willingness to cooperate from both sides, but there were difficulties to communicate. Let's imagine in our society how many times we would need these moments, that instead become a conflict, where the strongest wins. (Francesca's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

Francesca recognises that nonviolent communication, the help of a facilitator, but most importantly a simple practice as repeating the other's ideas changed the relational dynamics of her group. This elementary exercise is not only weird but also humbling, and moves the centre of speaking and thinking from one's needs, negative emotions, and dissatisfaction, towards listening and understanding the interlocutor. This approach is precisely the flexibility and relational self that Bateson and Plumwood describe. Shifting the centre away from one's ego allows the individual to become more open, regenerative, developing thoughts and ideas that become relational in nature, because they stem from cooperation rather than competition.

As argued by Wahl (2016), instruments such as nonviolent communication and facilitation *slow down the process* against unconscious mechanisms that push us to “jump from observations to interpretation and conclusions”. Nonviolent communication, as described in the experiences of Sara and Francesca, forces the person to firstly think about their observation, and how it is strongly influenced by their personal narrative, values, and ideas; by re-centring the conversation on feelings, needs, and desires, the

interlocutors can enact a *conscious questioning* of theirs and everyone's perspective towards a more *systemic understanding* which may not solve the tension, but can still help individuals to find a common ground. The most important shift I observed during interviews and field research is the shift from an individual towards a community perspective. Rebels in Venice perceive themselves as an *interbeing* (Wahl, 2016), in which every individual is fundamentally interconnected with other activists, but also with drivers, pedestrians, and even police officers.

As a rebel myself, I experienced a significant practical example of what interbeing means in the context of Extinction Rebellion Venice. On the 11th of December 2022, Filippo organised a Nonviolent Direct-Action Training with approximately fifteen new activists and 5 rebels, me included. After the usual theoretical and practical training, we immediately entered in action temporarily blocking Ulloa Street in Marghera. For this particular action, I was the coordinator in charge of deciding when to enter in the street and when to exit to let the accumulated traffic flow, and I was also the peacekeeper, since many of the activists were new and did not have the experience to cover such a role. As usual, roles were previously established (banner holders to block the street, wellbeing, outreach activists to talk with pedestrians and drivers and distribute flyers etc...). The second time we entered the street, however, a woman in her 40s with her two sons of approximately 20-25 years got out of their car and started screaming, while pushing away the activists who were holding a banner. Filippo immediately sat down in front of the car, and I tried to confront them with an open body language (hands raised and open chest), explaining what was happening and reassuring them that the blockade would last only a couple of minutes. However, as happens sometimes, they were not responding to my attempt to establish a conversation and continued pushing everyone and even violently dragging me and Filippo outside the street. Everyone nearby was watching us and, since they were also targeting activists who were at their first experience and this was not a high-risk action, I called the signal to make every activist exit the street. The woman driving her car continued screaming that she had an appointment with the doctor (even though it was around 7 on a Sunday night) and eventually left with her sons. We gathered together to ask rebels how they were feeling, because these experiences may be traumatic for someone who is not used to these kinds of interactions. In the following temporary blockades, we chanted together to regain a positive mood and create a welcoming environment for new activists. In these brief moments, indeed, when being "attacked" and when chanting together, I felt that *we* were chanting and being attacked as a community. The new girl who was pushed by one of the passengers felt as if I was also being pushed and feeling impotent, and when we were chanting, *we* were singing as a group, caring for each other and making constantly sure that no one was feeling overwhelmed by what had just happened. Also, during the moment of tension with the driver and its passengers, I understood and deeply felt their anger, the reasons that led them to become aggressive,

the pain and stress they were bringing on the street from their lives and experiences. (Zanoni, Field Diary, 12/12/2022. Translated from Italian).

The sense of *interbeing* is slowly spreading in other movements, as happened on the 10th of January 2023, when Ultima Generazione organised a praesidium in support of Simone, a 20-years-old activist of Ultima Generazione and previously of Extinction Rebellion Padova, against whom the superintendent (police headquarters) of Pavia had demanded the application of a special surveillance, a measure which is commonly used against terrorist and mafia groups. While Simone was in court, activists from Ultima Generazione, Extinction Rebellion, and many other climate associations, movements, and collectives joined outside the building to support him, sing, and play music together. Many of the banners and the general message of the convergence was, indeed, “The future of everyone is under special surveillance” (Image 4.7)



Image 4.7 Ultima Generazione [@ultima.generazione], 2023, January 1. Instagram post. Screenshot. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm4Y1fNt8NO/?hl=en>

Even activists who are more sceptical of RCs like Vanessa, the external coordinator of the political group, admit that being part of XR Venice is a “school of patience” because during a facilitated discussion you are forced to acknowledge opinions that can be completely different from yours. This muddling between different individuals and ideas is not always easy, as she confirms, because dominant behaviours can still emerge even though the structure of XR Venice rejects the centralization of power outside what agreed in the constitution. However, what is important is to recognise and work on them, also thanks to facilitation (Vanessa’s interview 2022. Translated from Italian). The diversity of ideas and worldviews is prominent in the group – differently from other movements – as appears from the analysis of its demographics (Cfr. Chapter 2), but primarily because of the peculiar methods of Outreach that XR Venice proposes. In the Outreach Working Group, activists have decided to perform periodical activities such as door-knocking, leaflets distribution, swarming, and educational carts placed in crowded places of the city. These ensure that activists have the possibility of talking with citizens of every age, gender, and class outside the performative and disrupting spaces of nonviolent direct action, for a more calm, empathic, and deep conversation with whoever decides to ask a question or get involved (Cfr. Chapter 3).

The second element of the ecological identity proposed by Plumwood is that of “remaking our relations with nature, and beings in nature” (1993, p. 124). This feature is only partially present in XR Venice, as much of the focus is still put on activists and their regeneration. Nonetheless, especially during the observation, I was able to witness the emergence of a common approach towards nature and other beings. Very often, those who organise the ‘centring moment’ before a meeting, plenary, or action use a short meditation centred on the idea of humans as part of the planetary ensemble of ecosystems. During the plenary of October, for example, the centring moment was organised by Antonio: we all sat in a circle in a small garden; he asked us to close our eyes, sat straight and breathe consciously. During this guided meditation, the participants were asked to visualise through images what they were hearing from his words. He described the sensation of humans as part of an ecosystem and asked everyone to imagine how humans can help the planet, while truly becoming part of it (Zanoni, Field Notes, October 22nd, 2022. Translated from Italian). Another example is that of the walk in a local forest, which was organised at the end of August. As Rebecca Solnit explains (2000) walking is a way of knowing ourselves and the environment; when done consciously, it becomes a way of repositioning humans as part of an ecosystem.

An important tool under which RCs change individuals and their subjectivity is the whole of practices regarding the body: during plenaries, activists are usually asked by facilitators to occupy the space and position themselves on a topic with their bodies; centring moments are often composed of free movements where the person is asked to vent their surplus energy through movement. The bodies of activists are also important during an action, as they use them to block vehicles, to interrupt the working

of corporate fossil fuels and investment banks, and to gain the attention of society, by sitting on a street and showing their emotions publicly. I argue that this work on the activist's body is fundamental for the connection with nature, as often the dichotomy humans vs nature is also embodied in the division between mind (perceived as pure, rational, civilised) and body (perceived as dominated by passions and uncivilised).

Unfortunately, the aspect of remaking the relationships with nature is not yet the focus of XR Venice. As a young movement, many of the practical applications of RCs are still left out or not exercised in depth. The few activities I observed regarding “planet-care” were still superficial and constituted more of a regenerative space for activists rather than one of reflection, dialogue on how to re-position activists in relation with other species. Moreover, when analysing the interviews and the survey, only 34% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the claim “Extinction Rebellion Venice has got me closer to nature” (Figure 4.8). Most of the people I interviewed had either no personal experience of an improved or deepened relationship with other species, or they were already working on this aspect of their identity before joining the group.

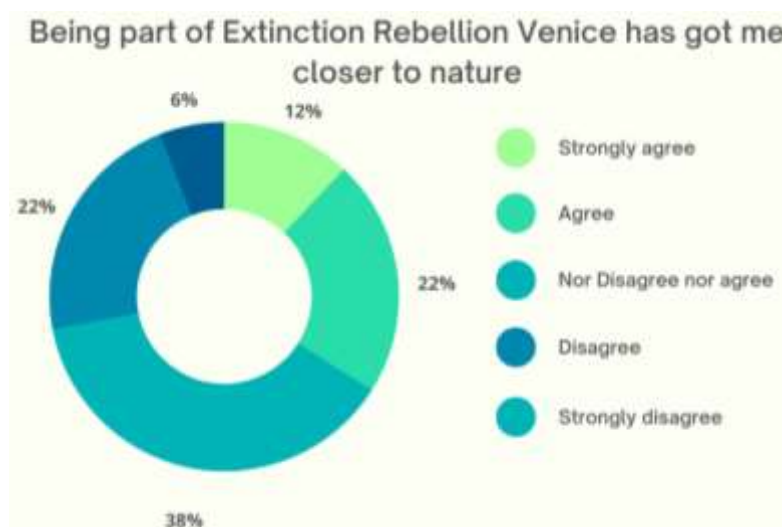


Figure 4.8. Elisa Zanoni (2022) Pie chart from self-administered questionnaire. 2022, October 11

This is one among many elements where Extinction Rebellion Venice lacks in experience and capacity to manage certain behaviours, tendencies, and modes of governance that reproduce the negative features of capitalism. In the next paragraph I will try to analyse with an ethnographic lens the negative points regarding this lack in RCs observed in the group of Venice.

4.3 Performing as an activist: pressure and lack of experience

One of the most pressing problems is that of the pressure to complete tasks and contribute to the growth of the movement. Francesca describes for instance how she was pressured into preparing graphics for the 2020 Rebellion in Rome, at the point where she had to buy glasses because her sight had incredibly decreased (Francesca's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian). Even Giulio recounts his experience in the first months within the movements, just before the Venice Rebellion in May 2022:

The rhythms are not that sustainable, we have few people that are super active within the movement. But the rhythms are unsustainable because of the way of how these super active people, because they want an exponential growth [of the movement] and so...it's a little bit like a dog who bites his own tail, you know? So at the end I couldn't keep up, I went into a burnout after the Rebellion in May. (Giulio's interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

This position clearly emerged in the survey, where 33% of activists agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "In Extinction Rebellion Venice I feel under pressure to do what the group needs". Moreover, in the claim "Sometimes I ignore my needs to join activities and do tasks of Extinction Rebellion Venice" 34% of the total respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the affirmation.

The tension regarding the pressure to perform as activists and the related stress that it creates on rebels emerged multiple times while I observed the local group and in interviews. Carla, which was one of the most active people in the local group and that was also one of the strongest members in terms of trust towards the movement, has recently left all his official roles and is now taking some time off Extinction Rebellion, contributing as an integrator for new rebels and making calls to invite people to XR's events when necessary. When I confronted her on the motives behind her setback, she was a completely different person from the one I interviewed just two months earlier. She described her profound sense of discomfort in always forcing herself to perform activities and tasks for the movement, even when she was not feeling like it. She also had open tensions with a few members, who were – as she said – "bringing people into an ever more toxic environment than that of the system" (Carla, Telegram chat, November 28, 2022. Personal communication). This moral obligation towards the movement emerges because "activists experience their work as part of their self-identity, thereby making them particularly vulnerable to exhaustion and burnout within movement cultures" (Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021, p. 36). Commitment and sacrifice are seen as necessary by activists because the fight is urgent and in line with their personal values. Moreover, as part of a restricted niche, climate activists often feel left out and alone,

as they get continuously bombarded by images of catastrophic events on their social media, but no one around seems to perceive their same sense of solastalgia. As analysed by Rahmouni et al., burnout is common in the activist world where most active members are often individuals who have rejected every other form of commitment outside activism, including spending time with friends and relatives, and refusing job or study opportunities. In my experience as a participant observer, I witnessed how members – such as Filippo – obsess over Extinction Rebellion in general, not only the local group in Venice but the Italian and global structure in general. Filippo is considered the founder of the movement in Venice, and he has entirely dedicated his life to this purpose. As of now, he is unoccupied and intends to remain as such to support the creation of other local groups in Italy. This wholeheartedness towards Extinction Rebellion was fundamental at the birth of the Venetian group, because Filippo was able to share his energy and motivate other people to join. During the observation, however, I noted how this enthusiasm can sometimes become oppressive for newbies or people who do not share the same sensation and can even lead members to dissociate from the group or become strong critics of the techniques and tactics of the movement. As one of the activists interviewed by Rahmouni et al. describe (2021, pp. 48–49):

I found there are many people like this...many people...people you have the impression that they're exhausted but they're still here, and they only do this. But they love it, because actually they need this.

This precise dichotomy between being always exhausted and loving the feeling of activism is what I felt in the first months of activism and what I observed in people such as Filippo and Carla, who decided at the end of November that the pressure was draining her and that she needed to rest.

‘[F]ast,’ ‘flexible’, 24/7 global capitalism has consequences not only on those who perform paid work (Kelly et al., 2007), but also for those individuals who work voluntarily in the realm of social movements and associations. The image of the ‘machine-like activist’, who pushes body and mind to the limits, to perform tasks for his/her/their movement can be explained as the pressure to act against the urgency of the climate crisis, but also the desire to conform with the leaders of the movement, who have internalised this pressure and promote the culture of self-sacrifice as a necessary mean to reach the movement’s goals (Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021, p. 46). Naturally, these tendencies are present in XR Venice with more or less intensity. Antonio defines this urgency as a “bulimia” which forces rebels to act against their eco-anxiety (Antonio’s Interview 2022. Translated from Italian). During the observation, for instance, Giulio decided to take a break because he was exhausted and in burn out:

It is a structure very focused on productivity, on being always active, on always growing, on...on doing always more and bigger...you know? [...] It becomes something that people feel pressured to do...'oh fuck if I don't come, they cannot organize the action'. I mean, I understand that we have to emphasise the importance of...being always active and make actions and so on, because otherwise the civil disobedience movement doesn't do anything, it's not civil disobedience, but the aspect of regenerative cultures it's there also to make us understand that things need to be done sustainably, so that people feel safe for what's happening. (Giulio's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian)

The burden that is exerted from outside or self-inflicted by rebels creates a fracture between most and less active members. During the daily practices mentioned in the previous paragraph, members not only bond and regenerate together, but most of the time they also discuss strategies, actions, future projects, and ideas. Antonio and Laura describe this process as a difference of *rank*, which entails all the social, cultural, and biological privileges that a person filling a role in the structure can have. Some activists, for instance, are not working or are still studying, and thus they have more time to discuss, especially if they can meet outside XR Venice in other common spaces of their life. Others have been in the movement for years, and thus have more theoretical knowledge, know other activists in Italy, and are perceived by the group as having more authority. As argued by Diani (1995, p. 63): “friendship linkages within the movement network may facilitate circulation of information and other valuable resources for action”. This aspect was emphasised by Giulio, when he described how Martino used to arrive at meetings of the Action WG with proposals already written, even though they all agreed to discuss them collectively. According to Giulio, he did that because he had more time outside his work, but most importantly more knowledge collected during the years in XR Italy. Even Giorgia, the external coordinator of the Outreach group, told me during an informal conversation that she felt like her role was sometime bypassed by Filippo (the former external coordinator), because often she knew of proposals and ideas only after they had already been discussed and approved (Giorgia's Interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

Another fundamental weakness of the local Venice group stems from the lack of experience of most of its members. Extinction Rebellion young movement, formally born in 2018. XR Venice, on the other hand, approved its constitution at the end of 2021, when its structure and roles were formally created. I observed this vulnerability on many occasions, even during interviews and conversation with rebels in Venice. In a small number of intermittent blockades of different roads in Mestre the organisation was faulty, and activists showed signs of frustration because the inadequate planning put in danger those who were performing the action. In addition, most of the personal and structural conflicts and tensions I collected during the research have not yet been managed with proper instruments by the RCs WG. Unluckily, no internal active member in the group has the knowledge to organise restorative circles to

transform conflicts between members, and those who can do so have momentarily taken a break from the movement. This absence of skilled activists in managing the overall health of the group and its individuals is dangerous, as few have already decided to distance themselves permanently or temporarily from the movement.

From an overall perspective, Extinction Rebellion Venice seems to have a general willingness to forge better ways of relating with the self and others, through appropriate spaces and instruments that are always present in its activities or are periodically organised whenever the need arises. On the other hand, a proper focus on rebuilding the relationship between its members and non-human beings is still missing and only present as a more superficial and self-regenerative practice. In my opinion, the most important is to promote a more open-minded approach regarding transversal and intersectional practices on the topic of creating new processes of subjectivation. Moreover, as the movement continues to grow in numbers and in knowledge brought by its members, rebels have to ensure that this know-how is correctly integrated in RCs and its structure, and that it is also shared with the whole group, to forward its transferring and dissemination over time.

5. Conclusion

Pugnetti et al. (2022, 78) claim that we need new “organs of perception” to allow humans to regain the awareness that we are all part of the same “living tissue” as other species. The authors of the volume “Science, politics, and society: the post-normal approach in theory and practice” forward the widening of empathy within and beyond the human species.

With compassion I do not mean a feeling toward suffering, wherever it manifests itself, but rather an awareness that Others, as much as their points of view may be different from mine, are sentient beings, that fight like me, and that have their own story (Ravetz 2022, 49).

The use of emotions and empathy have been particularly central in the thesis, analysing the instruments of regenerative cultures centred on rebuilding connections between humans and between species by exercising one's emotions and learning to understand others'. The focus on emotions, however, was not initially part of the research project I firstly developed. I started my observation on the field with the purpose of investigating the organisational methods and the instruments of political participation (i.e., citizens assemblies) promoted by Extinction Rebellion and the group in Venice. However, when I first approached the theory behind the movement and analysed my experience as an activist through a theoretical lens, I acknowledged the power of Regenerative cultures as a form of re-subjectification, and I thus decided to shift the focus of my research from participatory processes towards regenerative cultures and decentralisation in the movement, which particularly reflect a desire to learn from nature and regain the sense of interconnectedness between species. Thus, many features of the movement such as citizens assemblies, the historical and political strategy behind nonviolent civil disobedience, de-escalation techniques etc... have been left out from the ethnographic analysis.

I decided to concentrate on how to transform the relationship between humans and nature from two levels: the decentralised methods of organisation as a way to promote diversity, empowerment, and equity between species and humans, and the use of regenerative cultures to rebuild our identity in a relational manner, acknowledging others' emotions and perspectives, while also bridging the historical *cultural severance* (Bridgewater and Rotherham 2019) and work towards recognizing the *continuity* that connect us all (Plumwood 1993).

To analyse these research questions, I decided to use both qualitative and quantitative methods, in particular participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and a self-administered online questionnaire, to support or complicate the ethnographic observations. However, the quantitative evaluation was only partially representative of the local group of Venice, as approximately 50% of its

members responded to the questionnaire. This happened particularly because the movement is dynamic and fluid in nature, there is no membership and the participation in activities is usually sporadic for most activists. Consequently, this thesis is merely a temporary photograph of what the movement and the local group of Venice, as well as its rebels, truly are. An interesting point of view I did not expect was the way in which the tools of Extinction Rebellion Venice also became ethnographic instruments that improved my research. Focusing on deep listening and exercising the repetition of the interviewee's words, for instance, forced me to remain silent for most of the conversations, allowing the person to express freely and feel heard whenever I acknowledge their emotions through repetition in my own words.

From an overall perspective, I have briefly introduced the history of environmental movements, focusing on the Italian contexts and all the possible roots that have led to the creation of Extinction Rebellion and its adaptation in the Italian context. I have also shown how practices at the micro social level can work on multiple levels of experimentation and individual transformation at the organisational and individual level. Through an open dialogue between anthropologists, sociologists, activists in Extinction Rebellion Venice, and my research, I have tried to present how we can move forward to organise better our communities, but also how to work in the present towards building hospitable futures and concrete utopias for ourselves and the generations to come. In addition, I have demonstrated how the group in Venice, even though its lack of experience, is actively changing the perspectives of its members and producing a sense of community that breaches the spaces of activism, contaminating the everyday life of rebels and working towards a new ecological identity in continuity with others, through the repetition of regenerative practices. This change, indeed, happens particularly through the decentralisation of the movement and the whole of practices that are organised, shared, and taught by the regenerative cultures working group. In Chapter 3, furthermore, the thesis provided an example of how we can acknowledge the continuity between humans and non-humans (Plumwood 1993), combining the scientific and humanistic literature on the topic, and comparing it with the ethnographic observation on Extinction Rebellion Venice.

This research has profoundly enriched me in the understanding of the complex dynamics that enter into play when experimenting with new forms of being together. As the climate and ecological crisis continues to threaten our and other species' lives, I deemed it essential to find better and more inclusive ways to decide how we are going to live together and more sustainably on this planet, accounting for everyone's ideas and using a systemic, transdisciplinary perspective. However, as this thesis has shown, participatory democracy and its different modalities require an underlying culture founded on the principles of empathy, cooperation, and solidarity between humans and towards non-humans. Nonetheless, climate movements and Extinction Rebellion Venice represent a huge source of hope for thousands of young, middle-age, and elderly individuals, who are still looking forward to exiting the capitalistic system, without isolating

themselves in intentional communities or putting an end to their life. Despite its fragilities, Extinction Rebellion Venice portrays an attempt to “step outside of the condensing and displacing powers of capitalocentrism and give the full diversity of economic relations and practices the space to exist in all their specificity and independence.” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 59). The group represents a *cooperativist experimentation* (2006, 612) in which community, inclusivity, and kindness are pivotal values under which relationships are organised.

Throughout the thesis I have explained the weaknesses of the movement in Venice and how it sometimes lacks efficacy, particularly regarding its impact on political and social institutions on the Venetian territory. Establishing the efficacy of a movement is almost impossible, as its objectives involve multiple levels within society (e.g., change of the economic system, of cultural approach, of organisational methods, of democratic institutions, of energy production etc...) and different time frames. Nonetheless, this study has demonstrated two important elements in the study of social movements: firstly, that looking for better futures and working towards concrete utopias are practices that can be promoted even in groups such as Extinction Rebellion Venice, where the individuals do not live in the same context (as happens for instance in eco-villages) and where most of them still participate and live in the capitalist system. Secondly, Extinction Rebellion Venice proves the efficacy of horizontal and decentralized practices for organizing and making decisions in communities, creating a common ground between efficacy and inclusivity.

An important application of my thesis, as I have started to work in a research institute, is to bring these methods and tools in the context of research, to find place-based solutions and cooperation in the context of mitigation and adaptation projects regarding climate change. The participation of citizens, together with politicians, researchers, and stakeholders is fundamental in every stage of a project, to avoid the discontinuity in the monitoring of data, to improve the capitalization of a project findings, and to ensure that the project continues, even when public or private fundings cease. Naturally, the exportation of these governance methods also requires a profound work on the culture of the group taken in consideration. Thus, tools such as facilitation, restorative circles, and active listening need to be studied in depth to understand how to bring them outside the context of Extinction Rebellion and other examples, such as those based on Macy's work (i.e., intentional communities and ecovillages). Without these instruments, the discussion in movements, local politics, or science can easily become hierarchical, exclusionary, and based on competition where those who are more informed can impose their interests over others. The crucial role of a regenerative and spiritual culture is supported by various scholars (Macy and Johnstone 2012; Wahl 2016) as well as by historians such as Joachim Radkau, who claims that the ecological movement is deeply rooted in spirituality and contains the “ancient Nature goodness” (Radkau 2020, 345), loosing this spirituality will lessen the efficacy of every climate fight.

As an activists myself, I truly believe that the experimentation on social and organisational practices promoted by Extinction Rebellion Venice can help the academic research on subjectification processes and promote local and community based ecological transitions, especially on a cultural level:

In this moment we probably won't achieve anything. The positive thing about acting as such, that we don't think of a single project but we think of the bigger picture...it's that we are like ploughing a field, you know? Until it doesn't rain...and you plant...until it doesn't rain nothing grows. But one day or another it will rain, and then you will have planted something...positive...that...continuing with the metaphor...if you have planted something that can give you profit, like a crop, then you can collect it; if on the other hand you have abandoned the soil, you will collect weeds, do you understand? So now, it's not raining, but we still must plough and plant the field, we have to prepare the consciousnesses, and propose now solutions that no one wants to accept. [...] And even though we know that now no one will accept them, at some point, when the situation will be extreme, you'll see that someone will say 'we should do something' and people will already be prepared. (Thomas' interview 2022. Translated from Italian).

This excerpt from Thomas' interview depicts the core of this thesis: Extinction Rebellion and the group in Venice do not have yet the capacity to influence and change the local, as well as national and global system of exploitation that has been driving the climate crisis for more than a century. On the other hand, activists of XR and other climate movements are raising the bar of what is considered possible and are experimenting with forms of socialisation and community life in the cracks left open outside capitalism.

Hopefully, change is already happening within Extinction Rebellion worldwide and in the whole climate movement. Ultima Generazione of the A22 network¹⁰ is pushing other movements in Italy to perform more radical and public actions to influence the policies and subsidies of fossil fuel industries and the Italian government. Together with their partners such as Letzte Generation and Dernière Rénovation they are giving a new meaning to eco-activism and creating a polarisation in the discussion on methods and efficacy of climate activism and climate policies. As a response, at the beginning of January 2023, Extinction Rebellion UK declared that the national group has decided to abandon its prioritisation of arrests to trigger political change and is focusing on mobilising as many people as possible on the Rebellion that will start on the 21st of April (Image 5.1). A week later, the Instagram profile of Extinction Rebellion global responded indirectly to the British part of the movement, reinforcing its focus on disruption, arrest tactics and civil disobedience for 2023. This is particularly evident in the response to a comment that the profile published, saying that XR groups in the Global South do not have the same

¹⁰ <https://a22network.org/it/>

privilege to follow such a decision (Image 5.2).



Image 5.1 – Extinction Rebellion UK [[@xrebellionuk](https://www.instagram.com/xrebellionuk)]. (2022, January 1). Instagram Post. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm2pXBAt8wO/?hl=en>



Image 5.2 – Extinction Rebellion Global [@extinctionrebellion]. (2022, January 8). Instagram Post. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnJV1H4OaNd/?hl=en>

An important local fight with global consequences is also being fought in Lützerath, a small village between Dusseldorf and Aachen in Germany. For almost two and a half years, activists from different climate movements have occupied a part of the territory under the name “Lützerath Lebt”¹¹, where the fossil company RWE wants to expand a lignite coal mine, which would cause new GHG emissions, as well as the destruction of an entire village and its local forest. This fight has important consequences for climate movements because it is showing how activists in the Global North are finally taking a step against the expropriation of fossil fuel companies who have been destroying the Global South for decades. Moreover, from a strategic viewpoint, the fight in Lützerath is creating a convergence between thousands of different movements, such as Fridays for Future, Rise up 4 Climate Justice, Extinction Rebellion, the A22 network and many other anarchist and feminist movements who have joined the occupation of the forest and the remaining houses.

¹¹ <https://luetzerathlebt.info/en/what-is-luetzerath-lebt/>

As I am finishing this thesis, indeed, Italian activists from various movements who have come back from Lützerath have started to cooperate on bringing the spirit of convergence in the Italian context. Extinction Rebellion Italy has already contributed to reaching important results (e.g. the approval of citizens assemblies in Bologna) but it needs to step up its work in cooperation with other groups. Extinction Rebellion Venice, for instance, has recently started to work on creating a network of climate movements in different ways: opening its trainings and participating to others' workshop, organizing actions together, supporting each other's campaigns of actions etc... Moreover, the politics working group has held a meeting with local politicians and representatives of other associations and committees to discuss about how XR demands can be forwarded in the Venetian political context, in cooperation with other entities, supporting their tactics and demands.

For this change to be effective, we need the support of everyone, especially of the whole of professors, researchers, and students, who are continuously studying new ways of living outside capitalism, researching on new methods of sustainable living, and approaches to repair the severance between humans and non-humans. The academic world needs to continue its theoretical and practical evaluation of climate movements and solutions against the climate and ecological crisis, to forward the most effective practices and improve the strategies to reach more people and greater objectives. Nonetheless, research is not sufficient, we must step up and act in the face of the climate and ecological crisis. This is a fight for life as we know it. This is a call to action.

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*Mio padre mi ha ripetuto spesso questa frase quando ero piccola: “al mondo esistono due tipi di persone, i prendinc**i e i mettinc**i, scegli tu dove stare”. Dopo una lunga riflessione e guardando a quello che i miei genitori mi hanno sempre insegnato e mostrato, ho deciso di stare dalla parte della lotta contro un sistema di espropriazione e ingiustizia sistematiche, anche se so che questo porterà loro molte preoccupazioni e incazzature. Loro due sono le uniche persone che sento di dover davvero ringraziare, perché mi hanno sostenuto, finanziato e sopportato fin da quando, a tre anni, mi arrampicavo sugli alberi contro il loro volere.*

Tesi di Ricerca - Il Gruppo Locale di Extinction Rebellion Venezia

I dati raccolti in questo questionario saranno utilizzati esclusivamente ai fini della tesi di laurea per il corso magistrale in Environmental Humanities presso l'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia. Il questionario è in forma anonima, nel rispetto del Codice in materia di protezione dei dati personali (D.Lgs. 196/2003), aggiornato con il nuovo decreto legislativo (D.Lgs. 101/2018) di adeguamento della disciplina italiana al regolamento europeo sulla privacy (Reg. UE n. 679/2016, GDPR). Ricorda che il questionario fa esclusivamente riferimento alla tua personale esperienza, prevalentemente all'interno del gruppo locale di Extinction Rebellion Venezia.

***Campo obbligatorio**

1. In che genere ti identifichi?

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- Uomo
- Donna
- Non all'interno dello spettro binario
- Preferisco non rispondere

2. Quanti anni hai? *

3. Che lavoro fai?

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- Studente
- Lavoratore dipendente
- Lavoratore in proprio
- Ricercatore
- Disoccupato

4. Da quanto tempo partecipi alle attività di Extinction Rebellion Venezia? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

meno di 6 mesi

meno di 1 anno

meno di 2 anni

più di 2 anni

5. Fai parte di qualche gruppo di affinità o di lavoro? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

Sì *Passa alla domanda 6.*

No *Passa alla domanda 7.*

Non so cosa siano *Passa alla domanda 7.*

Gruppi di Lavoro e Gruppi di Affinità

6. Di quali **gruppi di lavoro o affinità** fai parte all'interno di Extinction Rebellion Venezia?

Scala di
valutazione

Rispondi quanto sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti informazioni.
Rispondi in base alla tua esperienza personale!
Per abbreviare, verrà utilizzato XRVE per definire il gruppo locale di Venezia

7. *

Contrassegna solo un ovale per riga.

	molto in disaccordo	in disaccordo	né in disaccordo né in accordo	in accordo	molto in accordo
XRVE è un movimento decentralizzato	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Le tensioni e i conflitti vengono affrontate negli appositi spazi	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sento che le mie proposte, idee e opinioni sono ascoltate all'interno di XRVE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Le persone che hanno un ruolo formale dentro XRVE hanno troppo potere decisionale	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I momenti insieme sono troppo rari per consentire l'inclusione di tuttà nel prendere le decisioni	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Le culture rigenerative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**sono una
pratica
fondamentale
in XRVE**

**Le culture
rigenerative
hanno
influenzato il
mio modo di
agire e pensare
anche al di
fuori di XRVE**

**Le attività di
culture
rigenerative
sono
importanti per
prendersi cura
di sé e della
altrə**

**Fare parte di
XRVE mi ha
fatto
avvicinare alla
natura**

**Penso che per
cambiare le
persone sia
necessario
cambiare
prima il
sistema**

**Penso che per
cambiare il
sistema sia
necessario
prima
cambiare le
persone**

**All'interno di
XRVE mi
sento
sottopressione
per fare quello
di cui il
gruppo ha
bisogno**

**A volte ignoro
i miei bisogni
per svolgere
attività dentro
XRVE**

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