

# Changing environments

*Peter Kraftl*

## Taking environmental action

You would think the media and every one of our leaders would be talking about nothing else. But they never even mention [climate change]. Nor does anyone ever mention the greenhouse gases already locked in the system. Nor that air pollution is hiding some warming; so that, when we stop burning fossil fuels, we already have an extra level of warming – perhaps as high as 0.5 to 1.1° Celsius. Furthermore, does hardly anyone speak about the fact that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction: With up to 200 species going extinct every single day. That the extinction rate is today between 1000 and 10,000 times higher than what is seen as normal. Nor does hardly anyone ever speak about the aspect of equity or climate justice. ...

In the year 2078, I will celebrate my seventy-fifth birthday. If I have children or grandchildren, maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you, the people who were around back in 2018. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there still was time to act. ... So, when school started in August of this year, I decided that this was enough. I set myself down on the ground outside the Swedish parliament. I school-striking for the climate.

(Greta Thunberg, 2018)



**Figure 2**

During the year in which this chapter was written (2019), climate strikes were taking place every Friday around the world. In these strikes, children and young people left school to demonstrate about climate change and its effects. In the words of Greta Thunberg (above), who was a key protagonist in the strikes, these acts of protest were not simply designed to call attention to environmental change. Rather, they were intended as a call to listen and a call to action by big businesses and especially national governments who – as both the protestors and most climate scientists agree – had hitherto been taking rather piecemeal steps in dealing with climate change.

One of the key founding principles of social-scientific studies of childhood is that of ‘agency’ (Esser *et al.*, 2016). That is, a sense in which – because they are so often viewed as ‘becoming adults’ rather than as ‘beings’ in their own right – there is a need to uncover children’s voices and their efficacy in the world, as human subjects. More recently, these ideas have been critiqued for overemphasising *children’s* (independent) agency within wider, relational generational orderings (Punch, 2019; Abebe, 2019) and for ignoring the situatedness of children’s agency within the workings

of a whole world of non-human materials and processes (Kraftl, 2013; see below). If the previous and subsequent sections of this chapter offer a critique or ‘decentring’ (Spyrou, 2017) of rather more straightforward celebrations of children’s agency, this section nonetheless serves as a reminder that children can and do take *action*. As the previous section – and Nageshwar’s use of privately sourced water – highlighted, the question is not so much one of reporting *on* different forms of agency but engaging in critical analyses of *how* and *why* children take action, and what the effects might be.

The climate strikes offer a notable example of youth action for several reasons. First, they are – in contrast to much writing on children’s agency – noteworthy because of their global scale. Extending to thousands of cities around the world, literally millions of children took part. Second, they are remarkable because of their use of social media – like Twitter – in mobilising collective protest and then visualising those protests, via hashtags like #climatestrike. Indeed, the use of media – whether ‘social media’ or otherwise – has been a key element of youthful protest for many decades. From the mobilisation of young people across northern Africa and the Middle East during the 2011 Arab Spring (Jeffrey, 2012), to children’s hidden-in-plain-sight popular cultures (Horton, 2010), the use of (social) media has enabled forms of subversion, protest and resistance by children and young people in ways that both transcend scales and occur below the radar of ‘adult’ surveillance.

Third, the climate strikes bring with them particular emotional and political overtones. Significantly, these cut across common constructions of childhood as either somehow vulnerable or innocent. Instead, the word that perhaps best characterises these strikes is *anger*. In a detailed analysis of millions of Tweets using the #climatestrike hashtag, I sought to provide a flavour of this sentiment (Kraftl, 2020). For instance, of 205,097 Tweets posted during a week in February 2019 (noting that many will have been posted by adults), a total of 20,114 (9.8%) reference the terms ‘extinction’, with other key terms being ‘devastation’ (3216), ‘damage’ (654), ‘threat’ (2458), ‘crisis’ (3299) or ‘emergency’ (6267). These terms, the anger that underpins them, and the anger in the words of Greta Thunberg and other protestors, contrasts keenly with the ways in which children are usually viewed as passive vessels for the future hopes of societies (Kraftl, 2008). Indeed, as Greta Thunberg put it:

‘And yes, we do need hope. Of course, we do. But the one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere. So instead of looking for hope, look for action. Then and only then, hope will come today.

(Thunberg, 2018)

Fourth, a key point of contention around the climate strikes has been around their effectiveness, particularly in terms of the responses of powerful adults. Some responses have been engaged and positive. For instance, many cities and local authorities around the world have declared ‘climate emergencies’, in part as a direct result of these strikes. Others have been engaged positively but critically, pointing out that in many contexts – as is the case with other wider environmental movements – the strikes look rather white and middle class. Other adults have felt threatened: indeed, the prospect of children out of school, in public spaces, ostensibly doing nothing (or in this case demonstrating), has been perceived as a risk in many contexts (see, for instance, Langevang’s (2008) analysis of young men hanging out in Accra, Ghana). In other words, ‘doing nothing’ can in itself be a powerful, if unexpected, form of youth social action. Others have reacted more negatively still, suggesting that children would learn more by being in school, and strongly implying that children should be ‘put in their place’ and do not have voices worth listening to.

Thus, actions like the climate strikes – and responses to them – should provide further fodder for critical consideration in future research on childhoods–natures. They highlight, in a different way from scholarship on the water–energy–food nexus, how children and environmental change are entangled in ways that extend beyond the local scale. They raise questions about whether and how (social) media are key tools in the doing of youthful environmental action – questions that require considerable further research (although, for starting points, see Smith and Dunkley, 2018; Land *et al.*, 2019; Kraftl, 2020). Finally, they draw attention to highly emotive and politicised discourses that surround children and their action on the environment.

## References

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