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The politicisation of secular mindfulness – Extinction Rebellion’s emotive protest practices

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ABSTRACT

The environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (XR) not only uses civil disobedience for its radical protests against climate change, but it also employs narratives and practices of mindfulness. Internal guidelines include numerous standardised and mindfulness-based emotional precepts and techniques that promote the well-being of individuals for the purpose of sustainable coexistence. While sociological critiques of mindfulness have primarily condemned its tendency to depoliticise, privatise, and heighten individual responsibility, XR’s novel politicised reception raises numerous questions. Using a qualitative analysis of public documents and the regulations of the movement, this article examines the extent to which mindfulness, which has been criticised for its individualist disposition, can be deployed in a political context. This analysis sheds light on the often conflicting consequences for XR and mindfulness itself. Building on this, the article then explores how institutionalised emotion programmes can work in a decentralised movement to establish order.

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Introduction

[...] our beautiful planet is suffering, it is exhausted and many species are threatened with extinction [...] And so we want to come together to meditate on a more peaceful world and future, to connect with compassion and love for all living beings and to recharge our batteries for further actions. (Extinction Rebellion Deutschland, 2021)

Meditation against the apocalypse – numerous passages from the protest programme of Extinction Rebellion (XR) seem to take inspiration from this principle. Activists peacefully meditating and practicing yoga have increasingly marked the public image of this movement since its founding in 2018. This is striking because XR is often better known for

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its dramatic protest practices which include roadblocks, mass arrests, and protestors chaining themselves to objects. So it may come as a surprise that this group, often labeled as particularly radical, has made peaceful emotional centering and comfortable togetherness part of its political agenda. However, a closer look at the internal life of the movement reveals a nuanced culture emphasising feelings and caring. This is part of a comprehensive conception of sustainability that focuses explicitly on the well-being of individuals. To have a future worth living for, it is not enough for activists to fight climate change and species extinction. Rather, they strive for a profound cultural transformation aimed at a sustainable lifestyle that is supposed to result from the deliberate thematisation, production, and regulation of individual feelings. In this sense, XR draws on forms and techniques of emotion management which currently enjoy a high level of popularity. Therapeutic narratives alongside a Western secular interpretation of mindfulness – as well as practices such as meditation and yoga – feature in many parts of their programme. XR has thus shifted their focus to the feelings of individuals in order to attain their political goals. But this naturally raises the question, how does this emphasis on the individual fit with their environmental objectives?

Through the use of a nuanced programme dedicated to a deliberate training and management of feelings, XR has taken up a contemporary phenomenon that can be observed in many other areas of society (Röttger-Rössler, 2019). This emotional training encompasses social, political, and economic dimensions. The doctrine and practice of mindfulness is a striking example that has gained popularity not only within the climate movement (Purser, 2019). Frequently used mindfulness programmes such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) are recognised methods for stress reduction, burnout prevention, and the treatment of depression (Kirmayer, 2015). For this reason, measures promoting MBSR have not only become standard in organisations and corporations, but are also frequently the first choice for managing individual crises or for altering everyday patterns perceived as onerous and entrenched (Badham & King, 2020).

Due to the broad and steadily growing reception of this meditation programme, mindfulness has become a particularly relevant issue for sociologists. Within this relatively new branch of research, there have been critiques of the growing depoliticisation of stress and exhaustion as well as the accompanying privatisation of health responsibility and of physical alongside emotional well-being (Forbes, 2019; Purser,

2019). These critical perspectives, which have also been designated as ‘McDonaldizing Spirituality’ (Hyland, 2017) or the by now classic ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser & Loy, 2013), are not new (Hickey, 2010; Stanley, 2012; see also Walsh, 2016). Representatives of this line of argument locate the secular reception of mindfulness, especially in social processes of the second half of the twentieth century that shifted the focus to the self. Among these are, in particular, individualisation, personalisation, psychologisation (Sennett 1977/2017), and therapeutisation (Illouz, 2008; Wright, 2008).

If, however, these current mindfulness techniques and practices are now increasingly being deployed in the context of political protest cultures and protest collectives (Isaac et al. 2020), new questions arise about the sociological investigation of emotion programmes.

XR activists explicitly rely on the use of emotional self-management and self-thematisation as a part of their radical protest. In addition to dealing with anxiety, rage, and grief about what they perceive as the immanent end of the world, these activists also focus on the targeted production of feelings. A programme within XR called *Regenerative Culture* (*Regen* for short) is supposed to contribute to the increased emotional reflexivity of demonstrators and thus to the mental health of individuals. ‘Regen’ expressly includes the values of empathy and mindfulness as well as relevant guidelines for action. By focusing on affective emotional and physical techniques such as mindfulness meditation and the practice of yoga, XR challenges previous notions of protest. These activists take up social discourses in which the focus is shifted increasingly to an individual-centered management of bodies, affects, and emotions when dealing with social problems (Penz & Sauer, 2020). At the same time, contradictions emerge here that is evident in the tense relationship between the fear of an impending global demise and the mindful, individualised focus on the *here and now*. This raises new questions for affect theory and the sociology of emotions. Namely, to what degree can mindfulness – which in its current popular reception is decoupled from its religious origins increasingly appearing in individualised, neoliberal, and depoliticised contexts of self-optimisation – function as a political instrument of protest movements? Where does this centering on the individual come from and what purpose does it serve? How does the contemporary culture of therapeutic self-care, which is the basis for the broad success of mindfulness, fit into political contexts and what role do individuals play in the global fight against climate change?

Drawing on an empirical analysis of public documents and online sources from Extinction Rebellion, this article examines the extent to which XR's emotion programme provides a new reception and interpretation of mindfulness that goes beyond the pure work on the self. Moreover, the standardised emotional rules and regulations of the movement are also a vivid example of how the strictly regulated treatment of emotions and affects can work to establish order.

Social movements, feelings and reflexive emotion programmes

Extinction Rebellion demonstrates how mindfulness can be used to establish an emotion programme within a social movement. This is one example of numerous links between emotions, emotion programmes, and social movements. Social movements are closely intertwined with emotions. Their interrelationship has long been the subject of sociological research: movements arise from emotions and generate them. Emotions and movements stabilise each other. Moreover, collective feelings can motivate and strengthen activism. This nexus can therefore be studied from various perspectives. In the following, I will explore the role of emotions in social movements in terms of particular emotion practices and programmes.

Social movements and emotions

Many discussions of emotions and social movements assumed a dichotomy of emotionality and rationality over a long period of time. While early theories on the subject portrayed social movements as emotional, impulsive masses (classically Le Bon, 1960 [1895]), more recent theories from the twentieth century depicted protesters as utterly unemotional and rational (see Goodwin & Jasper, 2006, p. 615). As Jasper (2018) vividly demonstrates, both approaches cannot be upheld in the more recent, contemporary debate on the subject.

Thus, approaches on emotions and social movements in the twenty-first century address, among other things, the specific emotional practices of protesters. For example, Summer-Effler (2010) explains that emotions are the reason why social movements persist even though they repeatedly fail and do not accomplish many of their goals. Similarly, Gould (2009) discusses how a group's shared collective emotional disposition, which she calls emotional habitus, sustains shared political views among protesters over time.

Aside from the functional side of emotions that impact the collective community of movements, specialised social schools and training also become part of protest. This includes deliberate (emotion) programmes and their curricula. For example, Isaac et al. (2012; 2020) reveal how various movements use programmes and deliberate curricula to prepare, train, and motivate their activists for social engagement. Such programmes can explicitly target emotional training. For example, the authors show that FEMEN activists must attend week-long camps to prepare psychologically and physically for their extreme, high-risk protests. In this case, they include training emotions, facial expressions, and poses while demonstrating naked (see Isaac et al. 2020: p.172).

Programmes in which emotions are reflexively trained are thus increasingly being established within social movements. However, emotion programmes are not to be limited to this area but can rather be considered as a characteristic of the broader contemporary emotion culture.

Reflexive emotion programmes as a contemporary phenomenon

Programmes in which feelings are deliberately thematised, produced and managed are frequently part of strategies to change or optimise the self and to make it more resistant and resilient. The prerequisite for this work on the self is the utilisation and validation of feelings as well as increased emotional reflexivity (Burkitt, 2012). Reflecting on and using one's own emotions involves treating them as a resource and thus reinforces their economisation and commodification (Hochschild, 1983). In these social processes, feelings are shifted to a functional context through their cognitive controllability and changeability. This utilisation of feelings has emerged as part of decades-long processes of psychologisation (Sennett, 1977/2017) and therapeutisation (Illouz, 2007, 2008) that have gone far beyond the treatment of pathologies. Instead, they must be understood as a social imperative in support of what is currently regarded as healthy. Part of this is also an increasingly conscious self-thematisation that is based on the reflective perception of one's own feelings. The Western reception of mindfulness is a particularly prominent example of how emotions and affects are systematically shaped based on reflective observations of the self. This programme has become a key part of popular and therapeutic approaches that focus, for example, on better ways of dealing with (everyday) stress, personal crises, and general dissatisfaction. Given its heterogeneous and broad range of applications, mindfulness is no longer supposed to merely promote better awareness and the non-

judgment of feelings, but also an increase of individual resources and capacities (Forbes, 2019; Purser, 2019). Thus, the functionality of mindfulness has been shifted from a pure technique of the self to a politically and economically effective instrument of emotional optimisation.

Mindfulness as a reflexive emotional programme

Mindfulness describes a mental condition or state of consciousness that is derived from a Buddhist meditation practice. It can be understood as the secular utilisation of this practice. One of the most popular forms of the Western reception of mindfulness meditation is currently the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme established by molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn. MBSR was developed in the 1970s largely dissociated from the spiritual Buddhist background of mindfulness and is now considered an important subfield of psychotherapy. However, mindfulness-based programmes have also been adopted in numerous other realms of life, especially in corporate contexts (Badham & King, 2020). Their deployment has become broad and ubiquitous (Islam et al., 2022).

The state of consciousness that contemporary mindfulness programmes such as MBSR strive for is based on the attentive and non-judgmental perception and observation of one's own emotions, sensations and thoughts (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This is supposed to enable a holistic view of the body, mind and feelings. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. lx). The explicit goal of the programme is to reduce stress, that is often explained by its neuropsychological and physiological triggers (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, 287ff.).

The practice of mindfulness is based on standardised meditation techniques. For example, MBSR training includes three formal meditation practices: sitting meditation (which focuses primarily on observing one's own breathing), the body-scan (that is, deliberately and successively directing attention to individual parts of the body), and a gentle form of yoga called hatha yoga. In this way, one's attention is supposed to be directed to the present in order to break through spirals of negative thoughts, recurring anxieties, and ruminations. All these techniques are intended to improve one's own well-being.

Mindfulness as a neoliberal technique of the self and (sociological) critiques of it

Given its potential for improving well-being and focus, mindfulness is frequently used in the West for the prevention of stress and burnout.

These states of exhaustion are typical affective consequences of competition and the pressure to perform (Neckel et al., 2017). Feeling burned out has emerged as a normal condition in late capitalist economies (Ehrenberg, 2010; Han, 2015). Hence, individual strategies to counter this have been adopted in popular culture (Kucinskias, 2019). This is why critics have discussed currently popular uses of mindfulness as the prototype of an individualised technique against social suffering (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Stanley, 2012; Forbes, 2019; Purser, 2019). This critique takes up extremely complex and historically far-reaching controversies in the reception of Buddhist traditions in the West revolving around the ostensible lack of social critique and of aspirations for political change. These traditions have been grouped together under the term ‘engaged Buddhism’ (Queen, 2000) and have themselves stimulated a discourse that includes the effectiveness of Buddhist practices in relation to the self and to society.

However, the focus here will be on the current reception of mindfulness in the European and Anglo-American world decoupled from its Buddhist origins. Since the critique of this individualised practice stands at odds with a political application of the programme, this issue will be given particular attention. The focus of this line of argument is the shifting of responsibility onto the individual (Neckel & Wagner, 2017). Emotions are detached from their social context and depoliticised, thereby concealing and trivialising the social and economic significance of subjective feelings (Ehrenberg, 2010). Since this has long been a fundamental criticism in the sociology of emotions and affect theory (Penz & Sauer, 2020), it is hardly surprising that sociologists have often been skeptical about the growing popularity of mindfulness.

One of the most prominent concepts in the critique of mindfulness is that of *McMindfulness*, a popular-science term developed by Purser and Loy (2013). This concept focuses on the curious application of Buddhist and spiritual practices to the context of work, enhanced performance, and above all the adaptation to neoliberal, individualised, and corporate orders. In mindfulness discourses, the stress arising from the accelerated economies of Western industrial countries – which are oriented around growth and competition – is privatised and biologised (cf. Purser 2019, p. 11). These discourses are frequently underpinned with ‘caveman theory’. In modern societies and in numerous receptions of mindfulness, an individual’s perception of stress is traced back primarily to the biological ‘fight-or-flight’ reaction of cavemen. This naturalisation of stress fuels the growing depoliticisation of the phenomenon (Purser, 2019, p. 53ff). It

becomes the responsibility of individuals to adapt to the stress-producing environment through techniques of the self such as mindfulness practices. The social, cultural, economic and political causes of stress are simply accepted as given (Stanley, 2012).

However, while critiques of mindfulness as a privatised emotion programme of neoliberalism now predominate in sociological debates, manifestations of mindfulness that have gained social and political significance in the recent past have been neglected. For this reason, XR's emotion programme, whose principles are grounded in the narratives and practices of mindfulness will be analyzed below as an example of how mindfulness is used in a political context. Although this fact alone should invalidate the sociological critique that points to the individualisation and privatisation of mindfulness, it will become clear that XR's use of mindfulness also produces political contradictions.

Methods

To analyze the reception, application, and significance of feelings in general as well as within XR's mindfulness programme in particular, public documents of the movement were subjected to a qualitative analysis. From the theoretical and methodological perspective of social constructivism, the empirical focus was on the reconstruction of interpretations and practices for the targeted production of feelings.

The analysis is based on the methodological and empirical ideas and techniques of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and, more specifically, Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). The numerous international and decentralised online representations of XR served as the data basis for the present analysis. This includes websites, social media channels like Youtube or Facebook, as well as XR's publications and documentation of events. Due to language limitations, I focused on data in English and German. Following the technique of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006), I utilised feelings and mindfulness as sensitising concepts. These 'guiding empirical interests' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 16) served to frame the research questions and to narrow the scope of the data. Due to the size and reach of the international movement and its public documents, I reduced my data corpus to content that explicitly addressed mindfulness and emotions. In doing so, I came across XR's 'Regen'-programme. So, I started analyzing public documents, particularly on 'Regen'. These documents contain explicit manuals or sets of rules aimed at emotional training and well-being for

activists. For my analysis, I used three major XR publications, two of which were explicit guidelines for emotion management in climate protest: The 'Extinction Rebellion Action Wellbeing Handbook' and the 'Don't Panic Guide'. The third more comprehensive reference is the manifesto of a German local group of XR: 'Hope dies – action begins'. Following the logic of theoretical sampling, I expanded my sampling in the iterative research process to include content from XR's websites as well as videos from their Youtube channels. Most local XR groups have their own websites. Besides a substantial amount of information on activists' activities, they contain self-descriptions. Subpages such as 'What is XR?' therefore served as an important data source.

I analyzed the different data types in three different coding steps. During the initial coding process I searched for key words or text passages that explicitly mentioned emotion words or where emotions, feelings, and mindfulness narratives and techniques became manifest. This data base was then the foundation for deeper analysis by applying techniques of focused and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). By using these coding types I developed more specific categories that relate to very distinct emotional and mindfulness practices. Focused Coding, for instance, revealed XR's various use of techniques of the self, and in particular their own emotion programme and concepts. In a next step, theoretical coding helped me to link and conceptualise these categories. This resulted in theoretical codes such as 'collective benefits of individual techniques' and 'therapeutic approaches for optimised well-being'. As part of this process, I explored the question of how the codes can be integrated into a theory (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). In so doing, I also included knowledge from existing sociological literature.

Extinction rebellion's emotional programme: Strategies of political and affective subjectification

Using drastic and vivid methods, the environmental movement XR fights for a fundamental social, economic, and ecological transformation 'in an attempt to halt mass extinction and minimise the risk of social collapse' (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2021). The movement relies on non-violent civil disobedience in the form of visually stunning protests. XR is explicitly organised around decentralisation and internationalisation. Anyone who is interested can participate and act in XR's name as long as they share their fundamental values. All of this is rooted in the idea of a peaceful, non-hierarchical social transformation aimed at reforming the so-

called ‘toxic system’ that promotes climate change. To achieve this goal, the self-proclaimed rebels seek to create a culture based on the principles of sustainability, in which humans and the environment can coexist in harmony (Extinction Rebellion, 2020a).

XR differs from other environmental movements in that it intensively engages with social and cultural issues and addresses new and sustainable forms of social and private togetherness. To this end, XR has developed its own notion of culture that activists call ‘Regenerative Culture’ or ‘Regen’ for short (Extinction Rebellion, 2020a). ‘Regen’ stands for a lifestyle based on sustainability and includes numerous normative rules and regulations with explicit standards for actions and feelings. As such, it represents a culture of mindfulness that is intended to be healthy, resilient, and adaptable (cf. Extinction Rebellion, 2020a). The programme aims at individual well-being for all its members. The guiding principle of this culture shifts the center of focus to individuals and their feelings.

The reflexive management of feelings and centering on the individual

XR seeks to promote a social transformation and the culture of regeneration first and foremost through a conscious and optimised management of feelings. For this reason, the attentive thematisation, reflection, and regulation of emotions and affects are regarded as the desired foundation for the protest movement:

Our Rebellion has grown out of feelings of grief, anger and a whole mixture of other emotions that spring up once we learn about the climate emergency and the 6th great extinction. (Extinction Rebellion, 2019b, p. 14).

Feelings are closely related to the fundamental demands that XR has made on governments and political actors. The movement’s highest appeal – ‘Tell the truth!’ – is a demand that implicitly involves a strong sense of anger and frustration. It is also based on the premise that the recognition of ‘truth’ as well as its ecological and global consequences will lead to profound emotional challenges. This affective plight can certainly result in emotional burnout (Extinction Rebellion, 2019b, p. 16). However, feelings of sorrow, rage, despair, hopelessness, but also shame and guilt (cf. Extinction Rebellion, 2019b) are important resources for the movement.

We need a new sensitivity. What is required is that we feel the catastrophe. Only those who feel the catastrophe will be able to recognize it. (Extinction Rebellion Hannover, 2019 [translated from German])

Feelings thus become the fuel of radical protest. The issue, however, is not merely dealing with emotional pain in the face of a feared apocalypse. The production of feelings in individuals is also supposed to serve as the resource-igniting motor of the activists' protest. This powerful focus on the emotional state of individuals shifts the subject to the center of the protest. Every individual activist is attributed a special significance:

In whichever role you choose to support our rebels, you are so important! [...] Your presence at an action makes all the difference. Thank you! (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a, p. 3)

The individual constitutes the rebellion's foundation and, in contrast to other political protests and social movements, this is less an issue of managing collective emotions than of recognising and validating the emotional states of individual activists.

XR's strategic utilisation of feelings includes creating fear alongside emphasising sorrow and despair by making a universal promise of salvation. However, reducing the movement's emotion programme to a strategy of emotionalised scare tactics – as has frequently occurred in public debates (*The Guardian*, 2019; *The New York Times*, 2019) – does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. To understand XR's programme and techniques for the management of feelings, we need to analyze them, initially as a part of their social demands and especially the sustainability-based demands made on individual lifestyles.

The individual and climate protection

The fundamental emotionalisation of contemporary society undoubtedly also affects climate change (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021) and reveals several tensions regarding XR. Since the generally accepted understanding of a sustainable lifestyle is based on the principle of extensive self-restraint and frugality (Boucher, 2017), the ideal of an environmentally friendly and resource-conserving life requires first and foremost the subordination of the individual. Concessions and renunciation are the commandments that should guide individuals in their decisions, especially in terms of consumption and mobility. Everyday practices based on growth and accumulation are denounced and even called 'imperial' (Brand & Wissen, 2018): Every individual bears co-responsibility for climate change on the basis of a lifestyle grounded in exploitation (Lessenich, 2019).

However, the public bogeyman of an ostensibly aggressive and dogged 'eco-dictatorship' is difficult, if not impossible to find in XR's programme,

which does not focus on specific guidelines for sustainable consumption, transportation, and lifestyle. It relies instead on mindfulness and spiritual salvation whilst explicitly abstaining from making recriminations against individuals. One of XR's principles, for example, is: 'We avoid blaming and shaming' (Extinction Rebellion, 2020a); and more precisely: 'We live in a toxic system, but no individual is to blame' (Extinction Rebellion, 2020a). However, the movement also argues that the individual stands alone at the center of an ecological and cultural transformation. Here XR's radical and explicit emotional politics becomes evident. The narrative of this politics shifts individuals and their feelings to the center of focus by attributing political significance to subjective sensibilities.

This is in line with Folkers and Paech's (2020) approach on the so-called sufficiency-principle. The authors suggest that linking economic perspectives with Buddhist perspectives could help to achieve this aim, that is, striving for greater frugality. This view stresses the idea that individualised programmes could promote global climate protection. The Buddhist-inspired mindfulness programme is thought to increase discipline and minimise rivalry, envy, and competitive behavior, thereby inducing individuals to limit excessive consumer behavior and act in a resource-conserving manner. However, this theoretical idea does not always prove to be coherent in practice. The narratives and practices of XR's own Regenerative Culture vividly demonstrate this.

Up to this point, I have shown that XR uses emotions and their management as part of its protest and emphasises the importance of the individual subject. In doing so, the individual is assigned a new role in the global and collective struggle against climate change that goes beyond issues of consumption and sustainable lifestyles. Next, I will demonstrate how XR uses not only emotions, but also specific, individualised emotion programmes, and techniques – in particular mindfulness – to achieve its political goal.

Mindfulness as a component of XR's regenerative culture

As has been argued, XR's nuanced emotional programme – which is strikingly manifested in 'Regen' – promotes a mindful and empathetic relationship to oneself, other individuals, and the environment through explicit strategic regulations, guidelines and techniques of the self. These include the management of individual as well as collective feelings.

Reflexive emotions

'Regen' is based on the use of self-reflection and self-observation in dealing with emotions. One element of this are therapeutic techniques oriented around healing and the care of the self.

Self care is also about taking care of the animal parts of the self that respond instinctively to stressful situations with fight or flight or faint. (Extinction Rebellion, 2020a)

The aforementioned biologisation and depoliticisation of stress discourses have been adopted here, but they have also been embedded in a new political and progressive context. Only those people who engage in self-care can, according to XR, contribute to a socially and ecologically sustainable coexistence. These different forms of emotional and affective relationship maintenance will be illustrated in examples below.

The reflexive self: Emotional self-observation

One essential part of 'Regen' is the continual observation of feelings. This conscious monitoring is supposed to prevent burnout amongst activists as well as promoting sustainable coexistence for all:

Part of taking care of ourselves is reflecting on our capacity and pre-existing physical, emotional, mental, economic and social situation as we enter the rebellion. To do this we need to take Personal Responsibility and continuously 'track'/monitor ourselves. (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a, p. 3)

The text refers explicitly to techniques of emotional self-care that should be used during arrests. Activists are supposed to concentrate on their breathing, to consciously feel the connection between their feet and the ground as well as paying attention to the things around them (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a). All of these are classic mindfulness practices and constitutive components of the MBSR programme. 'Exercise, time-out, nature, meditation, yoga, spending time with loved ones can all support. Self-care is not selfish.' (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a) Mindfulness practices that include meditation and in particular breathing exercises alongside consciously focusing on certain aspects or sensory perceptions in one's surroundings are supposed to help activists to heal from the 'toxic system'. This is also designated as 'inner work' and identified as genuinely human: 'We are not machines' (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a, p. 7).

The current discourses on stress that underlie the MBSR programme have been transferred to the protest context and in this way political motivation is placed in a new light from a sociological perspective. The

focus is no longer simply the centering of the individual subject, but also on the centering of the political subject. This subject is supposed to submit to the imperative of emotional self-care, not only for improved well-being, but also to increase and optimise the political effectiveness of their protest.

Reflexive relationships: Check-ins and emotional debriefs

A central dimension of XR's emotion culture is not only the care of the self, but also the care of others. Any interaction should be supported with processes of emotional reflexivity that have been institutionalised by XR and are regulated by very concrete instructions. Important components of protests are, for example, emotional check-ins and emotional debriefs.

Check-ins are mindful inquiries about the condition of other people and are supposed to promote individual well-being and thereby strengthen community and support networks. Standardised communication about how activists are doing, what moves them and how they feel are also supposed to contribute to greater resilience (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a, p. 16). To ensure success, this technique is introduced with and accompanied by mindfulness practices:

Our dominant culture has cultivated many unhealthy and often oppressive forms of communication that lead to us blocking or skimming around the surface of our emotions. So before plunging into the conversation take a few minutes together to breathe deeply and share with each other the particular qualities you wish to bring to your communication. (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a, p. 14)

The suggestions here are surprisingly explicit and precise. The 'Action Wellbeing Handbook', which is published by XR itself, contains very concrete instructions for the optimised communication of one's own feelings: 'When I hear ... , I feel ... , because I need/value ... , would you be willing to ... ?' (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a, p. 6). Speaking of and explicitly asking about emotions becomes a medium of self-investigation and self-control and can in this way function to stabilise order.

Emotional aftercare following protests is organised similarly. An explicit emotional technique called 'emotional debrief' is used to counter what is described as 'post-rebellion blues' – the emotional exhaustion and despondency that arises after a phase of activism (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2019). Here as well, activists come together and talk about their feelings:

It can be beneficial to take a moment to ground yourselves, come together as a group and create a safe and caring atmosphere (despite the external environment) and enquire: How am I right now? What do I need? How are we as a group? How can I support the health of this group? (Extinction Rebellion New York City, 2021)

This focus on well-being, however, goes beyond the ideal of positive feeling and thinking that Ehrenreich (2010) and others have criticised. In line with the current imperative of self-care and the practice of mindfulness, XR calls on activists to recognise and reflect on *all* of their emotions. This is the foundation of a therapeutic relationship with the self that must always be seen within the context of systematic interaction (with the ‘toxic system’) and is thereby distanced from the principle of self-responsibility. This is interesting because in other organisational and institutionalised contexts this technique has also served as the starting point for a functionalised economisation and commodification of emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Yet XR – in line with the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness – shifts the continual reflection about feelings to a context of care and solidarity. Now the focus is no longer solely on the well-being of individuals, but also on how the best-possible emotional state of a group can be attained through the establishment of normed and standardised emotion programmes.

Collective responsibility for individual feelings

XR places the individual subject at the center of the protest, but this protest movement strives at the same time to mobilise the masses. Feelings are conceived as an important task (Neckel, 2008), but not only one’s own feelings. The well-being of every single activist is the responsibility of the group. Although constant reference is made to the individuality and subjectivity of feelings, the corresponding techniques for managing feelings have been unified and standardised. Emotional support for individual activists at mass arrests, for example, is specified precisely:

Walk with the arrestee to the van, remind them they are doing something great, Wooo! Love to the conscientious protectors! It’s really important that they have a smiling friendly face as the last thing of the action they see before sitting by themselves for 12 h. (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a)

Caring for the feelings of others becomes an instrument of activism. However, this is not merely an act of charity, but rather a functionalist, self-preserving, and order-maintaining moment for the movement and ultimately of the political issue behind it.

The movement's own 'Regen' programme is also supposed to strengthen the physical and emotional resources required for sustained and intensive protests. This is illustrated by a recurring narrative: the ongoing and strenuous battle against climate change involves the great danger of burnout. It must be avoided through deliberate and strategic stress reduction (Extinction Rebellion, 2019c). In this respect, XR can be associated with those social phenomena that are characteristic of times of crises. Individualistic strategies are used to counteract exhaustion resulting from the increasing demands of a meritocracy focused on growth and personal success (Neckel et al., 2017). Numerous links to existing critiques of the privatisation and neoliberalisation of mindfulness can be identified here. XR also relies on stress reduction as part of a neoliberal logic of marketing and functionality, since the movement itself benefits from the best-possible performance and optimisation of its activists.

Standardisation and regulation of emotional practices

To focus on the feelings of individuals, XR provides numerous resources to work on and with emotions in an organised and institutionalised manner. In addition to specific emotional guidelines therapeutic narratives are also applied. XR protestors who struggle with powerful or negative emotions, for example, can contact the *Trained Emotions Support Network (TESN)*, which provides contacts for professional therapeutic help (Extinction Rebellion, 2020b).

Here we encounter the contemporary phenomenon of therapeuticisation, which has already been critically examined by sociologists (Illouz, 2008). The critiques, however, have mainly focused on the individual and are therefore insufficient for analyzing XR's emotional programme. The popular culture of healing and self-care, which is closely tied to cultures of thematising and centering the self as well as to practices and narratives of mindfulness, has been shifted increasingly to a political context. This preempts any critique that begins with an ostensibly narcissistic egocentrism. The yoga group 'XR Yogi*nis', for example, insists in its self-description:

XR Yogi*nis reject yoga when it is used exclusively to make the toxic system that causes climate change more bearable or comfortable for individuals. Yoga can be a means to change lifestyles and thus also the system. (Extinction Rebellion Deutschland, 2021 [translated from German])

This has consequences for the emotion programme itself as well as for the political objective that the programme is supposed to fulfill. Such a

perspective is certainly compatible with Folkers and Paech's proposal (2020) of implementing degrowth's sufficiency principle through the doctrine and practice of mindfulness. Nevertheless, XR's assumption that mindfulness changes people and thus the world is over simplistic. The practice of Buddhist-inspired programmes does not automatically lead to a lifestyle of renunciation. Indeed, the growing market for expensive yoga and mindfulness classes along with the associated equipment and clothing suggests otherwise (Irizarry, 2015).

Parallels to this can also be found in narratives from corporate and economic realms. Google employee Tan (2014) formulated similarly ambitious goals in his modern mindfulness and self-optimisation classic *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)*. This best-selling book is based on the view that meditation practices can lead to more harmony, initially at the workplace and ultimately throughout the entire world. Like Tan, XR is so convinced of the social value of its emotion programme that failing to teach the advantages of mindfulness would almost seem irresponsible. This gives rise to a phenomenon that Wilson (2014) has called 'moralising mindfulness'. According to Wilson, the secular form of mindfulness that has increasingly gained popularity in non-religious realms also exhibits a stabilising and orienting function. In this process, a banalising and binarising classification has arisen that allows for the division between mindful insiders and mindless outsiders.

These paternalistic tendencies in the emotion programmes of an affective community, however, are evident not only in the reception of narratives and the application of certain techniques of the self. For mindfulness to become a part of the political aspirations oriented around global well-being, this programme must transform the entire activist subject.

Subjectification of mindfulness and transformation of protest cultures

XR's centering on the individual subject leads to an affective process of subjectification that requires the transformation of the entire feeling and protesting person. For this reason, practices of mindfulness also must be subjectified in order to optimally deploy and implement not only the physical, but also the mental and emotional resources of activists.

The extent to which these subjectification processes are part of 'Regen' can be seen, for example, in a video interview with two Buddhist nuns from the well-known Plum Village Meditation Center in southern

France. The video explores the question of how mindfulness can provide activists with the energy that they require for sustained protest. The nun in the interview explains possible ways of expanding protests that could take place, for example, on walkways to the subway station – as long as this is done consciously and mindfully:

I will walk in freedom from this lamp post to the entrance of the tube station. I will do that and at every step I resist. So every step can be part of the rebellion. I will not run, I will not be a victim of my fears, my despair, my urgency, my struggle in this moment. I am a free person. (Extinction Rebellion, 2019d)

Mindfulness is supposed to help not only in dealing with the feelings that arise from the (frequently invoked) extinction of living beings or from the exhaustion caused by activism. It is also supposed to contribute to a transformation of the protest and the protestors themselves. However, if mindfulness practices are now equated with protest practices to the extent that every action is considered a protest, if it is done mindfully, then protest becomes unbounded and thus politically useless. This is also true for the shifting of interpretive authority. If every protestor can designate all their everyday practices as protests, then political context is inevitably lost.

Two apparently contradictory developments can be observed here. On the one hand, mindfulness – which has been criticised for its privatising and apolitical tendencies – becomes a political phenomenon by shifting it to an activist context. On the other hand, the political potential of this phenomenon is nullified by approaches that equate mindfulness practices with protest practices.

Mindfulness as an element of protest: An ambivalent political issue

XR's emotive protest practices strikingly illustrate how social transformation occurs in affective cultures and how these practices are used as an instrument for individuals to negotiate global social crises and changes. This approach – centered on individuals and feelings – for dealing with political problems reveals several tensions, which raise questions about existing sociological critiques and enable new diagnoses by sociologists of emotions.

The analysis of public documents was able to demonstrate how reflexive emotion programmes like mindfulness become part of political protests. Most notably, this was shown in the analysis of the movement's

own culture named 'Regen' and its manuals and guidelines. Here, specific practices came to light that teach activists how to deal with emotions and, more specifically, how to apply mindfulness techniques to activism. By mentioning and teaching these emotion and mindfulness practices XR primarily relates to what sociologists of emotions call reflexive emotions. For example, this could be shown in the fact that activists are encouraged to observe their own emotions as well as those of others. In addition to these guidelines alongside the documentation and publication of manuals containing emotion and mindfulness practices, XR provides training courses in various forms to learn these techniques. Eventually, the study illustrated that mindfulness practices also help to understand how the emotions of each individual activist becomes a collective task. Mindful activists are beneficial to the movement and its political aims by preventing the threat of exhaustion, stress, and burn-out that activism often causes. However, according to XR's publications, cultural programmes such as mindfulness or self-care are not meant to be simply applied. For the long-term success of the protest, as the analysis has shown, activists need to subjectify these programmes. The extensive instructions about the management of feelings illustrate that the transformation of the whole activist subject is being pursued.

This emphasis and broad utilisation of mindfulness has other consequences as well. For instance, the boundless labeling of emotions and practices as 'political' causes the political to lose its meaning. When everything that is considered to be mindful can be part of a political protest, nothing is political anymore.

XR's linking of mindfulness and the political, however, is particularly noteworthy considering the (sociological) criticisms of mindfulness that have been made thus far. As I have demonstrated, this criticism focused mainly on the neo-liberal individualisation and privatisation of responsibility alongside the optimisation of physical and health resources (Forbes, 2019; Kucinkas, 2019; Purser, 2019). To some extent, this is certainly true of XR's use of its emotional programme. For XR as well, the individual well-being that mindfulness practices are supposed to promote is not a pure end-in-itself, but rather becomes functional and ultimately productive.

The movement's functional reception of mindfulness as a performance-enhancing tool is thus not new. What is new, however, is that this attempt to deliberately oppose acceleration is now also being promoted by people who are fighting *against* precisely those consequences of a neo-liberal logic of growth. In seeking the emotional self-optimisation of

individual activists, XR has adopted an economic logic that is paradoxically part of the cause of the ecological problems the movement is in fact striving to remedy.

Nevertheless, XR's focus on individual well-being should not be misunderstood as a purely neoliberal form of unpolitical egocentrism. After all, with its mindfulness-based 'Regen' culture XR promotes nothing less than a fundamental global transformation of any emotional and interaction culture. 'Creating a world that is fit for generations to come' (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2021) is the first of XR's ten principles. Its battle for sustainability permeates all domains of life and includes the shaping of all individuals. Thus, it cannot be denied that the focus here is especially the optimisation of individual emotions and the health of individuals, but for the benefit of a moral and collective mission. For this reason, the classic critique by sociologists of emotions, which rejects the commodification and economisation of feelings in emotional capitalism (Hochschild, 1983; Illouz, 2007), does not apply here. A change in the meaning of secular mindfulness has occurred, from individual performance enhancement to a political mindfulness oriented around solidarity and the common good.

However, in practice certain problems that arise with the mindfulness for individual optimisation recur in altered form with the mindfulness for a collective mission. In order to understand this, we need to look more closely at XR's focus on the individual within the framework of climate protest. Here the centering on the self once again goes beyond the forms of psychologising and therapeutising the individual that have marked late modernity for decades (Illouz, 2008). While these social tendencies can be traced back to a dissolution of institutions and an increased autonomy of the individual subject, a powerful instrumentalisation and regimentation of emotional guidelines is, conversely, also evident in XR. This can be understood as a reaction to the consequences of the comprehensive social upheavals that began in the 1960s (Ehrenberg, 2010). Standardised and unmistakably explicit emotional guidelines have a stabilising function for individuals who have been thrown back on themselves and must survive in a context of endless possibilities and expectations. With XR, the individual is given support through the institutionalised affirmation of all the feelings that arise within the group. The therapeuticisation of emotions is detached here from its pathologising context. Consequently, emotions and affects are no longer regarded as something that needs to be altered, but rather accepted. The explicit emotion programme expressed in 'Regen' functions for XR not only as

an affective frame to guide or manage the feelings of the group. The continual thematisation, explication, and reflection on feelings promotes institutionalised processes that have a stabilising and order-creating effect. Dealing with feelings can therefore be regarded as a constant in XR's otherwise very radical programme to fundamentally transform the planet. XR's use of mindfulness, thus, sheds a new light on the programme itself. The ideal of mindfulness as a neutral technique that can be introduced into all possible realms of life can no longer be maintained here. Instead, mindfulness must be understood in terms of its potential for establishing order.

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