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Introduction: resisting the ‘post-politics’ of climate change

‘The lesson of this feeble climate deal? Governments have played God and failed. It is up to the activists now’ (Esteva, 2010)

Climate change is increasingly understood as one of the most significant threats to existing forms of human and non-human life. As such, considerable media and popular attention has been focussed on attempts to secure global policy agreements, notably via the recent United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP), such as the 21st meeting in Paris in 2015. Government responses to climate change through the hierarchical formal processes of the COP are widely regarded as failing to bring about the changes necessary to abate dangerous climate change (see Bond, 2012 for more on these failings). Indeed countries’ binding commitments for action to limit warming in the run up to the COP21 talks in Paris will only limit warming to between 2.7-3.7°C, hence some commentators suggesting these talks echoed the failures of their predecessors (Reyes, 2015).

The very approaches underpinning the UNFCCC, that the dangerousness of climate change might be determined by a globally agreed temperature limit (Shaw, 2013), or that there might be one universal response to climate change (Catney and Doyle, 2011), are problematic in themselves, irrespective of whether or not efforts to achieve them were successful. The governments of the Caribbean region, for example, are calling for a limit to warming of ‘1.5°C to stay alive’, noting that 2°C would result in the region suffering greatly (Bishop and Payne, 2012).

One explanation of why these formal UN processes are failing is that the (often implicit) conceptions of economy and society on which they rely are narrow enough to be ‘post-political’ (Swyngedouw, 2010). In sum, post-politics is a hegemonic project that involves the predominance of managerialism in all areas of social life, and a reduction of political questions to technical and administrative ones to be solved via the application of technical expertise rather than by political debate (Swyngedouw, 2010: 225). Swyngedouw (2010: 227), in fact, suggests that the UNFCCC process might be *the* best example of the ‘performative expression of a

post-political condition'. In response to post-politics, activists have organised protests camps at these COPs for a number of years.

Such approaches have been a key feature of anti-capitalist activist responses to mainstream governance practices for decades, becoming especially prominent since the 1997 WTO protests (Clough, 2012; Day, 2005). According to Frenzel (2014: 908) being in protest camps can facilitate an 'outsider' perspective on the 'system' by providing a symbolic distance from it. This is likely to create spaces in which a critical politics of climate change could be developed and acted-upon by participants.

With regard to discussions of activism and post-politics, there is debate within the literature over the extent to which activism either supports post-political theory, challenges it in its dissent, or even reproduces it in, or as, activism (Pusey and Russell, 2010; North, 2010; Schlembach *et al.*, 2012; Urry, 2011). This is due both to the variety of forms of activist organisation, and the types of critiques on which action is often based. Chatterton *et al.* (2013), for instance, suggest that social movement responses to climate change at the COP15 in Copenhagen did challenge the post-political consensus.

Saunders (2012) suggests that the reformist tendency within the UK Camp for Climate Action (known colloquially as Climate Camp or CfCA) contributed to its demise. Saunders (2012: 830) has also suggested that anti-authoritarian 'leaders' of radical environmental groups tend not to adopt pragmatic politics. Likewise, Schlembach *et al.* (2012: 811), in evaluating the strategies of participants in the Climate Camp, identified a predisposition towards individualised and "scientised", "post-political" forms of politics' which came in to conflict with other more political understandings and forms of action. Pusey and Russell (2010) also warn against undue optimism in spite of what was the largest ever European protest about climate change, at the COP15 in Copenhagen. They identified apolitical tendencies, towards carbon fetishism and technical solutions, within many areas of climate change activism (Pusey and Russell, 2010). In light of this, it is unsurprising that Baer and Reuter (2011: 2) argue that more ethnographic research is needed to better understand differences and commonalities among climate movements.

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There is evidence to suggest that critiques of the post-political condition have been taken up by some activists who have attempted to reframe responses to climate change in overtly political terms. Few studies of post-politics, however, have looked sociologically at how those who take action on climate change understand and engage in reflexive discussions about their practices. Debates have been conducted elsewhere by Day (2012) and Purcell (2012a, 2012b) who have discussed tensions inherent to the prefigurative practices of anarchism, but not specifically in terms of post-politics and climate change.

Echoing arguments about ‘lay expertise’ (see, for example: Jasanoff, 1997; or Mensy, 1998, 2009), it is suggested that the accounts provided by activists are important to explore, however, because they try to provide an articulation of the social world which is explicitly political in terms of viewing climate change as more than just a technocratic policy problem. It is also suggested that in terms of trying to evaluate the potential for political action on climate change it is possible to link these articulations of the social to the specific forms of anarchist and autonomist forms of prefigurative and anti-hierarchical organisation that take place at summit mobilizations (Frenzel, 2014; Saunders, 2012). The concept and practice of prefiguration is discussed more fully below.

This article contributes to discussions of post-politics and resistance to post-political strategies by relating forms of organisation at the COP16, in Cancún, Mexico, to debates around post-politics. It does this via a consideration of the motivations for action, forms of organisation, and the effects that activists’ attempts in pursuing political action against climate change have. Specifically, it is argued that exploring activists’ political action in context offers insights beyond both the overly critical and the overly celebratory accounts of post-politics and activist responses to be found in the literature discussed above. Doing this it becomes possible to evaluate the forms of organisation employed by activists. It is possible too to identify the challenges activists face in trying to adopt prefigurative forms of organisation, and the extent to which they successfully manage in their attempts to politicise climate change.

The article is important because there has been little sociological engagement with the Cancún climate talks. The COP16 itself was significant partly because it took place immediately after the failure of the biggest COP, until Paris in December 2016, the COP15 in Copenhagen (Russell *et al.*, 2012). The COP16 also came in the wake of the social movement-supported 'World People's Congress on Climate Change and Mother Earth Rights' in Bolivia (Building Bridges Collective, 2010). These two events, and the organising and networking surrounding them, were pivotal in the emergence of the 'climate justice movement'.

Paralleling many other forms of environmental activism, the climate justice movement attempted to reframe climate change as not only as an environmental issue, but rather as an issue of social justice inseparably bound to social and political relations (see Brand *et al.*, 2009; Bond, 2012; or Chatterton *et al.*, 2013; for a discussion of these views elsewhere in the climate change movement see: Saunders, 2012; or Schlembach *et al.*, 2012). In many ways the CJM seemed, at one point at least, to be the heir to the 'movement of movements' that had emerged out of the alter-globalisation protests (AGM) of the late 1990s and early-mid 2000s (Bond, 2012). It mirrored the AGM in terms of often involving protest camps oriented around formal summit negotiations (Frenzel, 2014); its strong anti-hierarchical organising models; the use of direct action as an important organising tool; and the social and environmental justice focus (Chatterton *et al.*, 2013; Schlembach *et al.*, 2012; and Saunders, 2012). An exploration of dynamics of climate-change activism in Cancún, specifically, is key to our understanding of the challenges facing activists globally, as well as those looking to challenge the dominant depoliticised framings of climate change emerging from within the formal COPs. The following section will expand upon the scholar-activist perspective methodology that is central to this project.

Attempting scholar-activism

In order to explore activism in Cancún, and drawing on the history of scholars being participants in the activist movements they research, I pursued a 'scholar-activist', 'militant ethnography' approach which entailed overtly partisan participation with fellow activists (Anderson, 2002; Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Juris, 2008; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Russell, 2015). It is hoped that 'by providing

critically engaged and theoretically informed analyses generated through collective practice, militant ethnography can provide tools for activist (self-)reflection and decision making while remaining [rigorous (19) and] pertinent for broader academic audiences' (Juris, 2008: 22).

The motivations for adopting, or attempting, this approach were manifold. I had been somewhat disillusioned as a junior scholar at the contradiction between so much radical rhetoric and rather orthodox practice among many scholars. I was also keen to challenge the neoliberal and depoliticised tendencies which persist in academia (Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013; Sealey-Huggins and Pusey, 2013). Additionally, as someone already engaged in the climate justice movement in the UK, having been active within climate justice groups, I sought to try and marry my scholarly and activist motivations.

This was not without its problems, however. I found that trying to operate as both a scholar, whose primary responsibility was to author a PhD thesis, as well as an activist, provided space for reflection on the notion of ambivalence that at times left me feeling separate from both my scholarly *and* activist concerns. On the one hand, the 'distraction' of the need to come away from the COP16 with 'data' felt as if it compromised my full involvement with the groups in Cancún. On the other hand, however, the critical distance afforded by my scholarly role helped me to reflect sociologically on the dynamics of what was taking place. This has been key to developing the argument of this piece, for example. An advantage of the approach, then, in addition to allowing for a subject-position which seemed to better reflect and marry my activist and scholarly concerns, was that it allowed for an 'insider' reflection on the activities of the COP. In this sense, I felt a pragmatic concern to continue with my attempts at scholar-activism in the face of the ambivalences of its practice. Such pragmatism reflects that which was a feature of activists accounts, as is discussed further below.

There has been substantial reflection on the tensions of adopting this kind of approach elsewhere (see for instance Mason, 2013; or Russell, 2015), and it is beyond the scope of this article to reflect in any more depth on questions of methodology. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the kinds of insight and reflections,

particularly in terms of the ambivalence and pragmatism considered later in this article, would not have been as readily accessible to outsiders practicing more detached forms of scholarship. This approach also allowed me to explore how tensions between ideological and logistical issues (such as the presence of highly militarised police or geographic divisions between spaces) were negotiated. It is also suggested that scholar-activist engagement was particularly relevant for Cancún to the extent to which it facilitated an 'embodied and affective understanding' (Juris, 2008: 20) of the ways in which activists' value-positions and knowledge claims were articulated and enacted (Anderson, 2002: 303; Juris, 2008: 319; see also Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007). As such, the article is able to contribute greater insight into the underlying sociological complexity running through people's actions in activist communities, as well as the often-ambivalent dimensions of undertaking climate change activism (Schlembach, 2011; Schlembach *et al.*, 2012; Saunders, 2012).

As with any in-depth, qualitative method, the richness of 'data' is somewhat balanced against its 'partiality' in terms of numbers of participants. I interviewed only English-speaking participants as, although I can speak some Spanish, my language skills were not good enough to be able to converse on the topics I sought to cover. Hence, while I did interact with a wide range of participants at the campsites, I would not pretend to be able to represent the full diversity of activities taking place in Cancún, nor the complete range and subtlety of political positions. It is important to be clear, therefore, that I am not claiming that *all* activism at the COP is articulated in the ways described below, but nevertheless, being based on my participation in climate justice activism, as well as interviews with 20 actors encountered (conducted between 30th November and 12th December 2010 in Cancún), my account provides a snapshot of my own engagement and participation in actions there. Having briefly reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods, and how they themselves contributed to the findings, the forms of activist organisation encountered at the COP shall now be outlined.

Organisation at the COP16: rejecting the depoliticised and co₂lonial COP

The formal spaces of the UNFCCC COP, in which global governmental negotiations were taking place, required participants to have applied for official accreditation for

access. In contrast, there were three main ‘open’ civil society, or activist, spaces located in and around Cancún: Klimaforum10 (KF10), organised by local Mexican environmental justice activists; the ‘Global Forum For Life, Environmental and Social Justice’, (often referred to by the name of its main organisers, the global peasants’ union) La Via Campesina (LVC); and finally, the Espacio Mexicano (EsMex) was a space where many of the ‘big green’ international NGOs and their Mexican colleagues were based (see Russell *et al.*, 2012 for more detail). These spaces provided opportunities for representatives of various environmental NGOs, indigenous rights activists, and other protesters to come together for workshops, networking meetings and protest planning activities. As will be noted later, however, the geographical dispersion of these different spaces was a factor seen as limiting the effectiveness of social movement organising in general. In sum, workshops, talks, and protests were a significant feature of the activity organised at the aforementioned informal spaces. Often the expressed aim of these activities was to challenge the depoliticised assertion that ‘there-is-no-alternative’ to market-based, capitalist responses to climate change, as well as to involve marginalised publics.

As will be explored further below, many activists in Cancún considered the formal negotiations of the UNFCCC COP to be proceeding in such a way as to be described as post-political, although this term was never used by people I encountered. The dominant policy solutions being negotiated within the COP all pre-supposed forms of market capitalism as the primary way of dealing with climate change. Additionally, the proceedings of the COP also often involved reliance on technocratic forms of science-based governance, to the perceived detriment of indigenous and local community groups. This was best exemplified by the pushing forward of market mechanisms which require technocratic knowledge and accounting processes, such as Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Degradation (REDD). The agreement emerging from Cancún was signed up to by every country apart from Bolivia, which was a lone dissenting voice. The efforts of most governments to establish consensus, as well as the marginalisation of Bolivia’s dissent within the COP itself, are also evocative of the populism which is identified as being a key feature of the post-political (Bond, 2012). These (depoliticised) characteristics of the COP were described by actors as being an important part of their justification for action in civil society spaces.

Travelling between these different spaces as an activist-participant, I also occupied the role of PhD researcher, interviewing fellow participants. Interviewees regarded the formal policy response emerging from within the COP as being unjust to the extent to which they treated climate change as a business opportunity, or a problem to be solved by the application of technocratic science and policy.

Some actors in Cancún, meanwhile, explicitly drew attention to the processes of colonialism in relation to climate change politics. The slogan 'co₂lonialism', for instance, was used by the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) in their critique of fossil fuel extraction in indigenous territories as a neo-colonial practice. LVC's (2010: 1) 'Global Forum Position Papers', meanwhile, lamented governments' incapability to tackle the root causes of 'current climate chaos' at the COP15 and cited this as a reason to protest at the COP16. In contrast to the depoliticised representations of the official COP, many of the participants spoken to in Cancún were keen to represent climate change as being an issue of environmental or social justice (a framing which has a number of precedents elsewhere Schlembach, 2011; Schlembach *et al.*, 2012; and Springer, 2011). This represented a broad understanding and reframing of climate change 'beyond' depoliticised technocratic terms, an understanding with implications for how activists understood and mounted a critique against it. There are suggestions in the literature that where activists claim that the formal political processes of government favour elite interests their critique echoes aspects of the theory of post-politics (Chatterton *et al.*, 2013). By articulating such critique, however, activists are to some extent undermining any 'consensus' (for a fuller discussion of the paradoxes of post-politics see Kenis and Lievens, 2014).

To this end, the functioning of orthodox economic systems, for instance, was widely criticised not just for being ineffective, but also for being unfair. So, as well as claiming that market capitalism was *technically* incapable of adequately responding to climate change, people also justified their actions in terms of an *ethical* opposition. One person, for instance, remarked that:

I don't think the current system function can continue, no. And inequality, absolutely racism, all the big '-isms' are tied in with achieving environmental justice. (Interview 8)

Critique of the COP based on these ethical considerations was in-turn linked to an ethical commitment in practice, particularly in terms of how activities were organised. The COP was seen to be taking place in the interests of a narrow elite. One interviewee who worked as a translator at the LVC campsite, said that she saw the processes of the COP as being:

constructed in a way to disempower the campesino's [peasant land-worker] voice. (Interview 8)

Such a critique manifest itself in the way in which civil society spaces were set up within the protest camps in Cancún. One of the reasons explicitly articulated by activists for organising in this way, therefore, was to try and model more progressive and egalitarian ways of coordinating discussion and action around climate change. For example, as the organiser of Klimaforum09 in Copenhagen remarked, the public spaces were about:

hav[ing] an open space that was free for everybody ... in contrast to ... the COP where everything is closed. It is possible to get accreditation but you need to be part of some organisation, or company, or what have you. It's not open to the public. (Interview 16)

Sentiments such as this reflect what is often referred to as a 'prefigurative', or 'direct action' ethic (Franks, 2003), and it is the connection between this, and the politics of climate change activism to which the discussion shall now turn.

(De)politicisation and prefigurative organising

In an attempt to better comprehend the alternative forms of social and economic organisation imagined in activists' responses to climate change, in interviews people were asked to reflect on their understandings of how the social world *is*, or *should be*, organised in order to respond to climate change. Through this line of discussion, I was attempting to better understand people's models of the social, or their 'implicit sociologies' (cf. Mensy, 1998, 2009).

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3 People drew on a range of understandings of human action in their accounts. These
4 were often based on interpretations of publics as more than just the consumers or
5 voters of depoliticised accounts (Swyngedouw, 2010). Rather there was considerable
6 emphasis on, or an expressed belief in, the agency of 'lay' actors to influence
7 widespread social change in the world. This emphasis was also tempered, however,
8 by acknowledgment of some of the limitations of, and barriers to, collective action,
9 which included ideological disagreements and facing oppression from the state.
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16 As identified above, many of the activists encountered in Cancún were influenced by
17 the 'prefigurative ethic' that is a part of anarchist organising. The belief that people
18 can undertake direct action in order to challenge dominant practices indicates a form
19 of prefigurative politics strongly linked to anarchist movements (Day, 2005; Franks,
20 2003; Springer, 2011; Williams and Shantz, 2011). Frenzel (2014) suggests that
21 prefigurative politics is a *process* orientated approach to questions of political action
22 and organisation. Central to this organisational approach is a commitment that '[t]he
23 means of progressive politics need to be aligned with its ends' (Frenzel, 2014: 905).
24 Prefigurative politics draws on the ideas of 'direct action' and the building of non-
25 hierarchical affinity, rejecting forms of domination and hegemony (Clough, 2012:
26 1672), including those present in authoritarian socialism. It thus forms part of an
27 ethical position that means should be consistent with ends (Franks, 2003).
28 Prefigurative politics, and a faith in people's capacities to provide alternative forms of
29 social arrangement, ostensibly reflects a different model of agency to those
30 embedded within the depoliticised forms of engagement presented at the COP.
31 Attempts at undertaking the practice of prefiguration often entail a degree of tension
32 for the actors involved, however, a point discussed below. Next, however, the article
33 examines the accounts of actors at the COP16 in light of the preceding discussion of
34 prefiguration.
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49 At the COP16, prefigurative direct action was seen as a key part of a set of anti-
50 authoritarian and participatory alternative responses to climate change. These were
51 necessary in order to steer responses to climate change in more politically
52 progressive directions. As one participant put it:
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56 we know our governments aren't gonna do it. (Interview 3)
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Another interviewee claimed that governments would not take necessary action because they are too invested in the current system. Hence,
it's clear that it's time now for some civil disobedience... It's up to us to propose the changes. (Interview 7)

Likewise, another respondent commented that:

really it's in our examples we can try and model what we want the earth to be. I've tried to do that, but... we have our moments... because it begins with inside each of us. (Interview 8)

Here we have both an acknowledgement of the prefigurative ethos, and at the same time, with the comment that 'we have our moments', an acknowledgement of the tensions or ambivalence involved inherent to trying to achieve these aims in practice. While many activists perceived that formal governmental action was constrained, it is worth noting that there were differences in the range of approaches to organisation in Cancún.

Reflecting these contrasting approaches, some people were much more optimistic than others about the potential for popular pressure to force governmental reform. Some interviewees saw civil society as having some power to influence governments, in contrast to others who were highly unconvinced of the capacity of governments to come to a 'rational' response at all:

...the consequences seem to be so severe that the existing political system as it exists must be done away with and recreated, remade. ... in light of the massive failures here of governments... it's up to the citizenry, the subordinated populations to intervene politically toward the hope of enacting, of creating, a different world ... I can't say I really see that happening. (Interview 9)

Interesting in this quote is both the perceived necessity of collective action at the same time as a pessimism about it actually happening in practice. Sentiments such as this reflected a wider sense of reflexivity about the inherent contradictions of trying to undertake political action in response to climate change.

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An example of an attempt to operate with an explicitly antagonistic politics in relation to the COP was the 'ANTI-C@P ANTI-COP' (anti-capitalist, anti-COP or 'antic@p' for short). As one interviewee suggested, any mobilisation would need to be:

anti-capitalist and if we're speaking of making actual gains in the world I think it's going to have to be antagonistic. (Interview 9)

Being so focussed on anti-capitalism, rather than just climate change, the antic@p frequently drew attention to issues beyond climate change, broadening their focus beyond the action taking place in Cancún. From this explicitly political position, in terms of straying from any kind of consensus framing of climate change, stemmed a corresponding form of organisation that was based on prefigurative direct action tactics. The focus within the antic@p on an antagonist praxis led to tensions which impacted upon the possibilities of direct action, however, as is considered below.

By insisting on referring to the broader social and political contexts and processes of climate change, these actors were inherently trying to politicise climate change, and in doing so were appealing to a different, more participatory model of society than those of post-politics. In sum, many of the people spoken to stated that the reason they thought grassroots actions were necessary was because of the inadequacy of official responses. Official responses in turn were seen as inadequate to the extent that they overestimated the capacity of market-based mechanisms within a framework of capitalist social relations to provide solutions to the causes of climate change, for instance.

Nevertheless, there were limits to these attempts at trying to politicise climate change. Conversations with fellow actors afforded a space for the development of reflexive critique of the processes with which we engaged. As indicated above, this kind of reflexive critique has not been very well explored in terms of the prospects for political action. Actors' considerations of the tensions experienced and encountered as part of their practice provided insights into explaining how and why people tried to make the most of situations they participated in. It is to these instances that the article shall now turn.

Challenges to action: tensions and divisions

People also highlighted some of the substantial challenges in their attempts to pursue a prefigurative political praxis along non-hierarchical lines. These challenges to collective social action included state security services limiting the right to protest, or a contradiction between the participatory rhetoric of the COP and its authoritarian practice. The Mexican authorities had widely deployed both local police, and heavily armed state 'Federales' in Cancún. These highly militarized police were often clad in riot gear, rode on trucks with mounted machine guns and literally surrounded the site of the COP with checkpoints and reinforced steel fences. It is unsurprising, then, that the fear of a 'heavy police hand' (Interview 4), as one participant put it, was a concern for activists present in Cancún, while others made reference to the pressure of having to commit their bodies in protest (Interview 9).

Infiltration of the counter-summits by undercover police fed into a suspicion of newcomers among the antic@p, which in turn led some participants as seeing the antic@p as being hard to engage with. In some instances, the police knew of antic@p protests before they happened, and therefore managed to prevent protests from taking place. It has been documented elsewhere how heavy-handed policing is used to undermine activists' organising practices (Clough, 2012: 1671) and so people's wariness can be well understood. It has also been documented that the 'security cultures' pursued to counter infiltration have limited the organisational capacity of anarchist-inspired activists (Clough, 2012).

Other participants, such as a local Mexican activist, wondered what role the Mexican government might have had in constraining protest. As she remarked:

the government, by doing this event here in Cancún, make it pretty difficult for the Mexicans to come... it's not the same as if it was close to Mexico City ... how you can reach this place? ... Most of the people will like to take a bus, [but] they cannot leave their children. And it's not because they are comfortable with this situation on the contrary, it's the economical situation which makes this impossible to them. (Interview 12)

Likewise, as another participant commented

...not everyone can afford a ticket to Cancún. (Interview 9)

This analysis is one shared by scholars such as Frenzel (2014: 906) who notes that differential resources for travel, for instance, can lead to hidden hierarchies and power imbalances within movements. All of this has implications in terms of what levels of participation activists in social movements expect of potential participants. There is tension, therefore, between the prefigurative ethic, that presumes egalitarian participation, and organisational practice that faces challenges limiting participation. This tension was reflected by the sense of disconnect within and between activists and our spaces in Cancún, something considered now in more depth.

It was mentioned above that there were a range of civil society or popular spaces and activities in Cancún. On the one hand this pluralism could be seen to represent a diverse movement. On the other hand, however, such divisions were seen by many participants as contributing to a lack of coherence within the movement. Many others have identified antagonisms as being an inevitable part of social movement organising (Frenzel, 2014: 516; Saunders, 2012; Schlembach *et al.*, 2012). Yet there is disagreement over the extent to which it is possible, or even desirable, for movements to come together under more unified coalitions (Day, 2005, 2012; Purcell, 2012a, 2012b; Pusey and Russell, 2010; Saunders, 2012; Schlembach *et al.*, 2012).

At the COP16 evidence of tension between activists was demonstrated via the antagonism felt between so-called 'hippies', and 'anarcho-punks', the latter constituting members of the aforementioned antic@p. One interviewee commented on these divisions:

something that I've been noticing subtly, it's not a specific political ideology, well maybe it is, beyond the logistical problems of getting together, there's been this punk/hippy division thing going on [...] there's this subtle undercurrent, and I was worried, the day when people came from KF10 on the 'hippy bus', which is now what the bus is called among like the hard-core punk people. [...] [Some of them] were not impressed with the grass skirts, face paint, neo-primitive cultural appropriation hippy-thing... thinking that they're

just a little flaky, that they don't have really good politics, that we have better politics than they do and so on. (Interview 10)

Members of the antic@p were apparently dismissive of the 'hippies' because of what they saw as both an inadequate political, and perhaps implicitly sociological, analysis and lack of radicalism. As illuminated in the quote above, for instance, the 'hippies' dressed up in faux-indigenous attire, which was seen as evidence of their lack of political and cultural sensitivity, and their sociological naivety. Tensions between activists, then, were partly due to differences in approaches to the role of theory and practice, and the potential contradictions of these.

Meanwhile, reflecting the anti-authoritarian approach of some anarchist theorists (Williams, 2014), actors from the antic@p also adopted an uncompromisingly 'radical' position in orientation to LVC, who they saw as collaborating with the Mexican state (Russell *et al.*, 2012). LVC coordinated with the Mexican authorities to secure the physical space for their camp site; agreed protest routes with the Mexican police; as well as hosting a speech by Bolivian President Evo Morales.

All of this further highlights the tensions faced when trying to organise political action, something that is brought into especially sharp relief in the case of actors who pursue a prefigurative model of ethics. Decisions must be constantly reviewed in terms of the extent to which they are perceived to reproduce the problematic forms of social relations against which action is oriented. On the other hand, however, there is a risk of activists employing what Purcell (2012b: 531; and Day, 2012) identifies as a 'marginalisation narrative' which may serve to reduce the sphere of action to only those who have the 'correct' analysis. Rather, Purcell (2012b: 531) advocates an acknowledgment of the fact that each and 'every protagonist in the most vibrant social movements, [is] a complicated assemblage of multiple wills'. Such recognition seems more attune to the ambivalence and ambiguity involved in social movement activism.

Interestingly, whilst prefiguration was the stated aim of action for some in Cancún, pursuing 'lifestyle' changes, similarly based on the notion that actions in the present should be oriented towards the desired sociology of the future, was critiqued

elsewhere. One respondent for example criticised 'life-stylist hippies' from KF10 based upon the claim that the urgency of the climate crisis necessitates revolution rather than lifestyle changes. For this participant:

a hippie, life-stylist approach to the problem ... [is not] very useful given the severity of the issue at the moment and it's likely acceleration in the near future. (Interview 9)

Expressing a similar sentiment, but with a degree of ambivalence another interviewee reflected that:

... lifestylism is counter-productive. In one sense I can see it as necessary cos we do need to change the way we live, but I see it counter-productive [for] the environmental movement, whatever that is, to try and basically bully people ... into how they should and shouldn't live. I don't know if that's a productive method. (Interview 14)

Meanwhile, he suggested that 'lifestylists':

focus on doing things personally [and] just ignore the political aspect... And similarly perhaps the other way round as well. You'll get people who focus on the politics without thinking about lifestyle at all. (Interview 14)

Overcoming divisions between different actors and groups was aspired to by many activists but the fundamental tensions between groups were still perceived to be significant. The tensions that existed were often based on different understandings of the 'issues', their corresponding implicit models of society, and, relatedly, their ideas about how to organise.

In spite, or perhaps because of, the aforementioned challenges, many people were ambivalent about the scope of their action, revealing highly reflexive accounts of the limitations of these. A coping strategy identified was an attempt to remain pragmatic in trying to make the most of their involvement, a point that is neglected in the existing literature, but which the article shall now address.

Reflexivity, ambivalence and pragmatism

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3 In practice, while some were very critical of each other's' practices, others adopted
4 conciliatory approaches and were keen to challenge the divides that existed between
5 groups. One interviewee for example, commented that she was:

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8 ... always around all kinds of people. I really don't care if you're hippies I go
9 and I'm not hippy. (Interview 10)
10

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13 Meanwhile, other participants expressed feelings of frustration and pessimism:

14 ...this good protester/bad protester thing doesn't make sense. (Interview 14)
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18 Cancún is a really great example of just how fragmented [we are] in all of our
19 efforts. (Interview 7)
20

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23 we're isolated geographically... And there are people in each of these places
24 that were unsatisfied. Even here there's been a lot of problems between the
25 anti-capitalists and LVC... there's been difficulties, there's been language
26 barriers, there's cultural barriers, there's major organisational ... problems.
27
28
29 (Interview 10)
30
31

32
33 Unsurprisingly, a sense of frustration was a fairly common feature of people's
34 accounts. People felt that they were in a relatively subordinate position to the
35 tendencies of capitalism in general, and hence expressed doubt about the potential
36 for influencing necessary changes. Such doubts formed part of their reflexive self-
37 critique of the fact that, for some of the reasons already mentioned, forms of action
38 were not being seen to prefigure the kinds of progressive social relationships that
39 many participants had aspired towards. At the same time people were still keen to
40 undertake action to try and challenge these tendencies in one way or another,
41 something that suggests pragmatism in the face of the tensions they confronted.
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50 Additionally, there was criticism of the KF10 and its 'eco-village' campsite for being
51 located on the grounds of an elite and exclusive polo club that had been hired out for
52 the duration of the events. There was also dissatisfaction about the hierarchical and
53 entrepreneurial organisation of both KF10 and the LVC camp. Some actors
54 complained that activities were inaccessible, or that the setup of activist camps did
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not reflect the kinds of alternative social relations aspired to in general. As one respondent remarked:

I'd understood it was 'living the example'. I thought we would be using solar-power, you know using biodigesters. And when I arrived it wasn't the case. We were using gas generators to power all kinds of lights, to pump our water. We're buying all our supplies from Wal-Mart, and I really didn't agree with that. (Interview 13)

Meanwhile, another interviewee commented that:

one of the major questions coming from this [mobilization]... not that I have really an answer to it... [is] that there's a gap here between theory and practice. (Interview 9)

Elsewhere, other interviewees were critical of LVC for not being as inclusive and democratic as she might have hoped for given that it was meant to be a civil society space. For example:

a lot of decisions have been kind of top-down, rather than made democratically... the format could have been a lot better ... There absolutely could have been more participation, more engagement, more exchange. (Interview 8)

These organisational shortcomings were seen to be so problematic precisely because activists aspired toward egalitarian social relations in their organising practices. An overriding theme to emerge from these accounts, then, was one of self-critique and reflexivity about the limitations of action. The same kinds of critical analysis that people were applying to the wider processes of the COP, and, indeed global capitalism, were applied to people's own actions, and to the actions of fellow activists.

It was noted above that for many participants it was up to activists to create alternatives, or force the hands of governments, because it was naïve to expect a palatable deal to emerge from the formal COP. Running alongside scepticism of the COP, then, was an apparently optimistic belief in activists' capacities to affect change. Such optimism would appear to contradict people's stated recognitions of

the limits to agency that exist in the power of multi-national corporations in comparison to 'ordinary citizens'. Tension was further evidenced by the fact that people at once articulated a sociologically sensitive critique of the depoliticised governance of climate change, whilst simultaneously having to come to terms with the reality of this depoliticisation in terms of trying to politicise climate change in the face of the aforementioned obstacles.

There were, however, many instances of people overcoming physical and political divisions, where they travelled between different camps and meetings or protests. '[P]eople ... started to mix more' (Interview 10) after the big LVC protest. Considering these factors can contribute to an understanding of how it is, in pragmatic terms, that activists come to terms with the apparent persistence of the post-political condition to which they are apparently so opposed. Pragmatism was therefore part of a strategy adopted in the face of the limitations to action which undermined people matching their theoretical aims with practice.

Perhaps partly because of their making the most of the situations in which they found themselves, and irrespective of the outcomes of the official COP, or of the acknowledged limitations of their activist involvement, many participants still reflected positively on the value in attending the COP counter-summits and protests. This was particularly in terms of the space that camps afforded for the coming together or networking of like-minded groups. For example one interviewee said:

I am glad I came... I've met some really cool people... [...] And it's always a good morale booster to meet others that are doing similar things and that will also go back to wherever they're from and continue their struggles. (Interview 8)

These perceived rewards constituted part of the justification for peoples' continued involvement in these mobilisations in spite of the aforementioned failures to adequately marry theory and practice. They continued:

maybe the biggest outcome of the whole thing would be the message that campesinos have a voice and that should be heard... I think this space has been good for bringing together a lot of different people, sharing of stories [...]. (Interview 8)

Similar points were made by others:

...it's about networking; it's about meeting people that we hadn't met before ... making those friendships. This isn't just gonna be something that we're here for and then we leave and it's done. (Interview 1 and 2)

Recalling Saunders' (2012: 830) point mentioned above, in spite of the tensions encountered there were still benefits to their constrained involvement. While Saunders (2012: 830) has suggested that anti-authoritarian 'leaders' of radical environmental groups tend not to adopt pragmatic politics of reform, it is suggested here that pragmatism was a strategy adopted by radicals who felt confounded by structural constraints. It was only possible for me to understand the activities of activists in this way via the direct participation facilitated by my attempts to pursue an 'activist-scholarship' methodology.

Conclusions: managing the messiness of activism

This article has demonstrated how activists sought to politicise climate change via a series of protests and counter-summits at the COP16 talks in Cancún. Rather than having faith in elites who favour technocratic solutions to climate change, a range of approaches was encountered among activists in response. Some demanded action of governments, while others attempted to bring the kinds of alternatives they aspired towards into being via forms of anarchist-inspired prefiguration. The demonstrations, 'people's forums', and camps, were often aimed at trying to bring about alternatives not only to the UNFCCC mode of governance of climate change, but also to society in general, via forms of direct action.

A distinctive contribution of this paper, then, is to better explain how activists are organising to oppose the tendency towards depoliticised responses to climate change. Many activists do perceive the COP as being post-political, even if they do not explicitly label it as such. Claims that activism exists as a space where resistance or complication of the post-political takes place, were somewhat borne out by my findings (Chatterton *et al.*, 2013; Pusey and Russell, 2010; Saunders, 2012; Urry, 2011).

In spite of people's attempts to prefigure progressive responses to climate change, significant tensions inherent to people's actions were encountered. Tensions existed, for instance, over the 'best' political analysis, or the 'correct' forms of organising. This finding reflects other analyses of climate activism which suggested that tensions and contradiction were an inherent feature of such action (Pusey and Russell 2010; Russell *et al.*, 2012; Saunders, 2012; Schlembach, 2011; Schlembach *et al.*, 2012). An important finding of this article, therefore, is that tensions within groups are partly inevitable in the forms of political action that are precluded by the hierarchical, depoliticised organisation of the COP. A question that remains, is how far these tensions strengthen, or hinder, attempts to undertake political action.

Frenzel (2014: 901) is relatively optimistic about the scope for protest camps to provide a space for 'powerful challenges to the status quo while maintaining a prefigurative politics of social change'. It is also important, however, to be sensitive to the ambivalences that can arise in practice. In spite, or perhaps because of such challenges, many people were not naïve about the scope of their action. This was evidenced via the ambivalence expressed about the contradictions between prefigurative aims in principle, and the much messier and compromised experiences of activism in practice. In this project it was possible, through an embedded scholar-activist approach, to encounter and experience the reflexivity, self-awareness and self-criticism that was a feature of participants' accounts.

Crucially, the article has also highlighted some of the strategies that people adopted in order to try and combat, or deal with challenges and limitations. A pragmatic approach that emphasised the benefits of networking helped people to continue to invest in activism in the face of the substantial challenges perceived to their attempts to organise their prefigurative political practices along non-hierarchical lines. An awareness of these strategies helps us to better understand, sociologically, the potential to politicise climate change.

In sum, this article suggests that via an in-depth engagement with activists' accounts of their action it becomes possible to better grasp how and why efforts to politicise climate change run into problems. This helps us to understand how activists come-to-

terms with the apparent persistence of the post-political condition to which they are so opposed. This is crucial for thinking through how we organise and develop future strategies of resistance. If we want to know how to best to move beyond 'depoliticised' responses to climate change, we must first understand the constraints and limitations placed on activists, as well as how they respond to and manage them.

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