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Adapt or perish

If they want to achieve real progress, climate activists should be fundamentally rethinking the tactics of disruption

For Germany's *Letzte Generation* ('Last Generation') activists, things have been far from easy of late. The population mostly bears them ill will. The fines and prison sentences keep on coming, and they face compensation claims amounting to many hundreds of thousands of euros. And then there are the growing number of public prosecutors who seem to be of the opinion that perhaps we are dealing with a criminal organisation after all. The group's biggest concern, however, should be that they increasingly seem to have exhausted the possibilities of their protest model.

In this age of TikTok and Instagram, constant content generation is required to cut through in the ongoing battle for public attention; after a while, the same old images of people gluing themselves to roads and defacing things with paint are just not enough. Besides, after weeks of blockades and repeatedly daubing the *Brandenburger Gate*'s sandstone columns, it's hard to see how the group can hope to top all that with its existing repertoire of direct action.

What's more, such tactics have not proven effective thus far, and that seems unlikely to change. Germany's under-fire three-party coalition will hardly want to spend its remaining political capital on ticking off the climate activists' wish lists. Nor has there been any serious trend of civil society showing solidarity with the activists, despite expectations that it would side with the protesters in the face of increasing repression and thus bring about a 'social tipping point'. The protesters are thus treading water and attempting to conceal their own helplessness with strange proclamations of success — claiming, for instance, that the initially agreed but swiftly reversed decision to raise aviation fuel duty was not a product of the general budgetary crisis but a result of the movement's efforts ('This is your achievement!'). This may sound like bizarre self-congratulation from the outside, but internally, it primarily serves as a classic morale booster.

A new role model?

When you've reached such a dead end, it's tempting to seek inspiration further afield. *Letzte Generation* thus seem to be looking to US climate action alliance Climate Defiance, which has attracted much attention in recent months with its person-centred protest style. Their concept is not to stop car drivers in order to force the decision-makers to act, but to stop the decision-makers themselves by disrupting their events, interrupting their speeches and, if necessary, even chasing them halfway across the city. Among the most prominent victims of this new protest form is US Deputy Secretary of the Interior Tommy Beaudreau, who has been targeted by climate activists over his decision to sign off on an oil drilling project in Alaska. When he stepped down weeks later, Climate Defiance interpreted his resignation as confirmation of their own impact and issued the bellicose warning 'Respect us or expect us', a friend-or-foe attitude that's more reminiscent of Carl Schmitt than of the oft-cited civil rights movement.

Even established cabinet ministers such as the Democrats' one-time rising star Pete Buttigieg, now transport secretary, have gained first-hand experience of the protesters' ire. Just weeks after activists played cat and mouse with Beaudreau, a horde of Climate Defiancesupporters stormed the stage at an event in Baltimore, shouting 'Stop Petro Pete!' and positively haranguing their target. Their grievance with Buttigieg was that his department had approved a petrochemical project in Texas which could result in 80 coal plants' worth of greenhouse gas emissions. They also complained that the project's harmful impacts on local indigenous communities were being swept under the rug, stating: 'This is about environmental racism and it's about the climate impacts this project will have.' Ultimately, the minister (who only briefly attempted to respond) was led off stage by security staff, while the activists were left to make merry in what was by then an almost empty hall.

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It's hardly surprising that such scenes might lead members of *Letzte Generation* to ponder whether a similar tactic could be used in Germany. From a strategic point of view, there's little reason not to give it a try — the opportunity costs are low, and taking their protest to political decision-makers would allow them to at least spike the guns of those who say their protests have primarily affected 'ordinary people', people in a hurry to get to the doctor's or to work, rather than the political and business leaders who control the levers of

power. Besides, from a self-efficacy perspective, there's something very tempting about the idea of directly disrupting a senior government official (or perhaps even German Finance Minister Christian Lindner himself). It allows your adversaries, those tenacious, change-resistant forces of social inertia, to be given a face, to be made more tangible and real. While a general reluctance to change is by nature hard to pin down, those who embody it by virtue of their office are not.

So much for the pluses. As for the negatives, it's generally wise to view protest forms imported from abroad with a degree of scepticism: local circumstances are too divergent, especially in terms of public opinion and political influence, to assume everything can always be simply transposed from one country to another. Climate Defiance's direct action, for instance, clearly takes its cue from the discursive traditions of a country that champions radical freedom of speech, primarily judges politicians on their entertainment value and in which barely half a dozen campaign appearances go by without a newsworthy heckler incident of some kind. In such a context, public confrontations are a logical form of expression. The picture may be rather different in Germany, where the prevailing political culture has long placed more emphasis on by dialogue than drama — and favoured composure over commotion and righteous wrath.

You only have to go back to the conversation the cofounders of *Letzte Generation*, Henning Jeschke and Lea Bonasera, forced upon Olaf Scholz in October 2021. The pair had a whole hour and a half to grill the then chancellor elect in public — but Scholz repeatedly parried their attacks and dominated the exchanges with his circumspect manner, whereas Jeschke constantly interrupted and came across as distinctly overemotional. The activists worry that further confrontations of this kind would lead to a similarly one-sided judgement, when self-gluing climate protesters with angry, repetitive, mantra-like slogans clash with politicians who can act as a voice of reason and win the sympathies of the public by standing up to the disruptors.

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When *Letzte Generation* interrupted a speech by Friedrich Merz last February, the leader of the Christian Democrats countered somewhat smugly that it was nice to see some of his critics had stayed in the country given that others had gone to Bali (a reference to a newspaper story about climate protesters travelling to the

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island). The laughter heard from all sides revealed that, here too, it was the individual being attacked who scored the win.

More importantly, borrowing from the personal confrontation playbook would not solve the protesters' twin problems of waning impact and the need to escalate. At best, it would just kick the can down the road; here too, the more these methods are used, the more their media news value shrinks. Once you've disrupted a public appearances of the chancellor, raised a banner in the chamber of the *Bundestag* (though this has been done already), chased down a leading CEO, then what?

Ultimately, it's a bit like buying a brand-new pair of pliers to replace the worn-out ones in your toolbox when what you actually needed was a hammer. Here, however, the requisite hammer is (whether *Letzte Generation* like it or not) the gaining of majority support, without which any climate protest movement will sooner or later lose momentum and collapse. Rather than simply targeting politicians instead of commuters, activists should, if they want to achieve real progress, fundamentally rethink the tactics of disruption. Otherwise, they will simply be prolonging the circus of protest and thereby souring an important debate.



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