2 Why does it matter?

'THERE'S SOMETHING about the nature of the campaigner that makes them averse to reflection,' an organisational development expert told me. This was a person with two decades of experience in management training and coaching for senior staff in campaigning organisations. 'What I've observed is that the people who run campaigns aren't the people who stop and reflect. It's all go go go, thinking at 100 miles an hour. The general mode for campaigners is adrenaline overdrive. Reflection is really very rare.' And there is a reason for this, many of those campaigners might say. The job we are doing is important, and it is urgent, and we need to get on with it. Does it matter, then, if activists are mirroring the system we are trying to change? Isn't it more important to get on and tackle the urgent problems, including confronting the bastards who are still busy causing them?

Yes, it matters if we are serious about making effective, lasting change. If activists are recreating or reinforcing the thinking behind the problems we are trying to solve, then the real source of the problems remains untouched. We risk applying their efforts to change what we think is 'the system', but which may only be the symptoms of the system, the ice above the surface. We risk, potentially, making the problem worse. Meanwhile, the system still has us firmly in its grip. To take a pressing example, climate change can look like a problem of carbon emissions and is often tackled on that basis. At a deeper level, however, it is about an economic system that requires endless growth and distributes the proceeds and harms of that growth very unfairly. Underlying that growth are perceptions about the world, perceptions that can lead us to see, for example, nature as a resource to be extracted, and the 'environment' as something separate to us. What really needs changing are the *perceptions and behaviours that give rise to* the systems that activists say we want to change.

So activists mirroring what we are trying to change matters for strategic reasons. If the people who are trying to change the system cannot see the perceptions and behaviour that underlie it, there is no chance of us changing the system at its root. But activists share these perceptions and behaviours with everyone else; they are the water in which we all swim. There may be very little clear ground from which an activist can say they have stepped far enough 'outside' a problem, outside how everyone else perceives it, in order to see it clearly and change it. Indeed, the search for such a location may be a symptom of the same binary, us-and-them, subject–object thinking that has caused many people to treat the world and other people as objects. Where does this leave the activist, this person who so keenly wants to make things better? It means that the problem we are trying to tackle can be manifested by us, the activists, as much as it stems from anyone else. And this in turn means that some of the task of change is located within us. If we as activists are doing the things that need to shift, if we are stuck in the perceptions that are at the root of the problem, then the route towards change must include our willingness to do something differently ourselves, as well as seeking to influence others. This is unlikely to happen when we are in action-panic mode, focusing all the attention outwards on the thing or person to be changed, or the people who need saving or helping.

These questions also matter because they are timely. There is more activism going on. It can certainly look like that to those who are joining in or who are noticing activism for the first time. I have been thinking about and writing this book during the years in which the fog of consent around the issues of sexual violence, racism and ecological breakdown has been lifting, thanks to activism: movements like Me Too, Black Lives Matter and the school strikes and Extinction Rebellion. And when that fog of consent clears, we can suddenly see them. There they are: the activists who have always been there, who hadn't waited for the issue to become topical or gain more traction.[20] They had never stopped. Still, political upheavals, democratic deficits, growing awareness of ecological breakdown, and the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–21 *are* creating new activists. The public sphere is being revitalised with the emergence of multiple initiatives, movements and organisations as the failure of politics-as-usual becomes more and more evident. And it is easy for newcomers to activism to step into established understandings of what activism is. Doing it for the first time, it is easy to pick up the established script, the one that identifies the problem as separate to the activist.

These questions are also timely because big shifts are underway within activism. Social media, in practical terms, has widened and sped up movement formation, recruitment, organising and communicating about any issue and what activists are doing about it. In short, it has altered almost everything that happens in the campaigning process. Social media is also where people who are not doing activism are most likely to encounter it, and it makes them more likely to encounter activism than they were before. Many people already sense that posting, liking and re-posting can indicate genuine concern or a desire to perform the right moves and opinions (or, indeed, both), and that these various possibilities operate independently of the liker or re-poster's likelihood of going out and doing any actual real-life activism. And social media's outrage-amplifying and division-widening function is increasingly recognised to be a huge political problem, and evident beyond any questions about how activism is done. But its outrage and polarisation functions are a problem for activism, too. If the social platforms make it easy to look like we're doing activism by saying certain things, they also make it easy to make ourselves feel better by criticising those who don't get it ('it' being whichever issue is in question) as much as

we do. They make it easier to do activism, but they also make it easier to do activism badly.

Another change in activism is that the form of campaigning I had long done – professional funded charities and non-governmental organisations – is in crisis. Many of the big and well-known single-issue campaign groups grew into their current form during the 1990s and 2000s, when Clinton and then Blair were in power. These non-governmental organisations, or NGOs, were the children of the 'new social movements' of the 1960s, which themselves had turned campaigning away from the parliamentary arena and explicit class struggle, towards human rights, the environment and peace.[4] The NGOs were being well funded in a broader context of privatisation of aid and the use of charities for social provision previously undertaken by the state.[5] Under broadly centrist governments it seemed possible for these professional campaigning organisations to bring some change through incremental technocratic policy interventions. It seemed possible that such policy interventions could be achieved through close alliances with bureaucrats 'inside' the system who wanted the same changes that we did, and who needed us to make a noise 'outside' to help them make the case to their masters. We would choose our target carefully, provide the facts and make the uncomfortable noise outside the walls, and under the rational-actor model, those in power might weigh things up and respond in our favour. We were Fukuyama's children, to borrow my colleague Jonathan Rowson's phrase. This was a form of activism for a particular form of politics – liberal, centrist – and it bought into the political economist Francis Fukuyama's ever so nineties idea of the 'end of history'. Capitalism had won the Cold War and now we were just improving things without attempting deep changes. New Labour in the UK helped lift people out of poverty at one end of the inequality spectrum without tackling the real motor for inequality at the other: the growth of extreme wealth by an uncontrolled financialised economic system. And the NGOs that treated with New Labour were doing their own version of the same thing: taking its money to help out in particular places and get selected rules changed, but without challenging the foundations of the system.

In this pre-2008 crash model, NGOs saw themselves as bridging the gap between power and people: those whose situation needed improving. But

the bridges creaked, stretched and broke when power moved to the right from 2010, and those at the grassroots – and some in the Labour Party – responded by becoming more radical.[24] The big NGOs mostly stayed closer to power and carried on working on technocratic and incremental policy change, on the other side of a widening gulf from the ferment of grassroots activism that is now bubbling amid the increasing anti-government radicalisation revealed by the Brexit vote and fuelled by a decade of austerity.[25] The NGOs have been slow to respond: the apocryphal frog in the slowly heating water that doesn't see what is happening in time to jump. Now that the extent of their strategic difficulties is clear, they face a path-dependency problem. They are set up and funded to achieve single-issue incremental policy change, in a world where it is now more evident, to more people, that much more is needed.

People who work for NGOs may acknowledge, privately, that the model is not working so well, though publicly they are still committed and they are still putting their energy into it. I have heard about people still working for NGOs because that is their source of income, while campaigning with grassroots groups in their remaining free time because, they feel, that is more effective. More fundamentally, however, the rise of authoritarian regimes, the normalisation of far-right views on immigration and extreme neoliberal views on the role of the state, as well as the ongoing failure of current political systems to respond to the evident need to cut carbon emissions, are undermining the impact of single-issue, elite-access campaigning NGOs. It's not only because, as Audre Lorde put it, 'there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't lead single-issue lives',[26] but also because it is becoming clearer that we need an altered political system that can produce a different kind of government, not merely a more successful way of asking or pressuring whoever happens to be in government to do what we want.

With NGO purpose in crisis, then, and with new forms of activism emerging as the world experiences more political, social and ecological crises, there are many activists thinking and talking about *how* we do activism. And there are many initiatives within activist movements and organisations that are focusing on how activism is done, as well as on *what* actual changes are needed. Scholars call such efforts 'prefiguration', because they are trying to

prefigure – to create, within their own efforts, the reality they are trying to achieve as a result of those efforts. Some of these efforts have been around in activism for decades, such as non-hierarchical organising and consensus decision-making.[27] Others, such as training on power and privilege, have flowered within the last decade, partly as a result of anti-racist and intersectional activism within activism. There are funders, such as the Guerrilla Foundation and the Chorus Foundation, and networks such as the EDGE Funders Alliance, that have come into existence to support new forms of activism, explicitly acknowledging that the goal is, as the Guerrilla Foundation puts it, 'dismantling the industrial-charitable complex along with the rest of the old paradigm – to create a world where there is no need for Foundations to exist in the first place'.[28] Such 'progressive' funders have been influenced, says Romy Kraemer of the Guerrilla Foundation, by 'realising that the traditional NGO campaigns are winning campaigns but losing the planet'.

It is hard, though, to find ways of doing activism that take into account all of the ways in which we are entangled in and affected by the problems we are trying to solve. Different groups and movements attempt to extricate themselves from particular entanglements, while remaining in the grip of others. The Occupy movement in 2011 was strong on consensus processes and participatory democracy, but researchers have documented multiple accounts of gendered and racist power relations being reproduced in the camps, with white, male voices heard most loudly, dismissals of feminist viewpoints, racist harassment and, at Occupy Glasgow, a rape.[29] Extinction Rebellion, which has emerged while I have been writing this book and on which I have had a participant's view, has been explicit about some aspects of what it calls 'regenerative culture', which is its way of describing prefiguration, or that *how* they are doing what they do matters as much as *what* they are doing. It has set a clear intention – not always followed through in practice – about the need for rest in order to avoid burnout, and the need to avoid blame that can be a cover for our own projections. And by encouraging grief and the use of emotion, it has successfully recruited many people who could no longer · or who had never been able to take part in activism about our ecological crisis on the basis of appeals to facts alone. But it has failed to take account of the embeddedness of its majority white founders and participants in a culture that systematically marginalises

people of colour. While it has been trying hard to reconstitute itself to include wider perspectives, a tone was set early, and a clear perception is in place, for many people, that this is a movement caught up in privilege. This isn't only about who gets to participate, but about Extinction Rebellion's chances of success while remaining unembedded in the communities where it is causing disruption, such as the east London station where angry commuters dragged a protester from the roof of a train in October 2019.[30]

Activism can be a crucible for learning how we all hold, within ourselves, the sickness of the structural systems we are trying to change. When these unhealthy patterns get in the way of our activism, it shines a light on the real nature of the problems that we're trying to heal. Activism can offer opportunities to perceive the extent of the connection between our inner worlds and the social, political and economic world that we share; for realising that shifts in our inner worlds would make a difference to the state of the outer world. This understanding is needed, of course, beyond activism. It is needed in politics, in business, in academia, in healthcare, in education, in technology. It is needed everywhere. In some ways, activists are in a better position than others to realise this necessity. Because we are deliberately trying to improve things, we are likely, sooner or later, to run into the limitations of trying to change the system on its own terms. When we hit this wall, we may come to realise – if we didn't know it already – that the task runs deeper; that it engages our inner worlds, our deep psychology and, as some see it, our spiritual commitments.

Yet progressive activists also want to identify with being 'good'. Our goals are equality, justice and peace, and so, focused on these worthy values, we have an added incentive to push the 'shadow' in ourselves out of sight. We have an incentive to disavow the parts of ourselves that are the opposite: dominant, unjust and violent. We may be defended against acknowledging that the potential for violence, verbal as well as physical, is in all of us, and is much more dangerous if we don't acknowledge it. So we are in a position to see that inner work is necessary for a more peaceful world, yet, identified with the 'good', we may be more invested in not seeing the full implications: that we need to do this work too. We might even want to turn away from it. This contradiction can run at a high temperature in activists. It helps to create the stridency, the righteousness, the lack of

22 e.g. Trans, elisabeth Read, Brown

nuance … especially when added to our genuine passion for the issue, and the high pressure of the other emotional material that we may be using as additional fuel for our work.

Being invested in avoiding our own shadow is not the only thing that prevents activists appreciating the necessity of inner work to our work in the 'outer' world. Like everyone else, activists are subject to our culture's polarising distinction between inner and outer. We resist seeing the external world and the contents of our internal experience as facets of the same reality, as many Eastern traditions and indigenous cosmologies have long understood, and as a systems theory view of life can describe in Western terminology (by seeing mind and matter not as two separate categories but as 'two complementary aspects of the phenomenon of life – process and structure'[31]) because we are usually taught, implicitly as well as explicitly, that they are not. That said, there are activists who are conscious of the need to pay more attention to their inner worlds. There are guides to 'the inner', whether they are therapists, religious leaders or teachers of practices like yoga or meditation, who can help to develop a spiritual sensibility or mindfulness, and who are conscious of the link between their work and the world of politics and social change. One activist I spoke to while writing this book put it as follows: 'we need to get more people off their yoga mats and into lock-ons, and more people out of lock-ons and onto yoga mats.' (A lock-on is a technique or technology used by protesters to make it harder for the police to move them, ranging from a firm hand grip with the next person, to specially designed hardware.) Retreat to the 'inner' can be a way of avoiding the politics of the 'outer' world as well as a way of reproducing them, too, as the critics of whiteness in yoga culture point out.[32] Too often, attempts to bridge the divide can end up with one side being framed as the antidote to the other. Nor does it augment the appeal of 'inner' work to activists that the idea of a more conscious, inner-focused approach to life is rapidly being co-opted and turned into superficial imagery by commercial brands in their marketing and advertising.

Activist movements that do not emerge in the Eurocentric imaginary can get less stuck in this split: Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher, insisted on the need for both reflection and action, for attention to both subjective experience and the objective world.[33] But our

mental structures make it hard to see 'inner work' not simply as a tool to improve our own interpersonal health but to do so as an inextricable part of the health of the system we are trying to change. The theory and practice of non-violent communication, for example, was developed by Marshall Rosenberg as an interpersonal social technology that could be a route to social change, but, co-opted by an individualist culture, it has become more usually seen as a tool for personal development.[34] The Transition movement's 'inner transition' component holds the potential to transform the entire task of developing community resilience to climate change, but it is often relegated – if it is practised at all – to a way of supporting exhausted and fractious activists. Transformative possibilities become downgraded to the tool of personal transformation only, because we put them in a category of 'personal' or 'inner' that separates them from the possibility of change in the outside world. Because of the way we have been taught to separate inner and outer, we don't see that methods of 'inner' attention for activism are not only a tool to protect activists from burnout and to transform conflicts within activism, but could be a tool for the transformation of wider problems. Burnout and conflicts within activism are a feedback mechanism for the system as a whole.[35]

Another reason that activists are reluctant to consider the shadows of our own activism is that it sounds like adopting the classic conservative criticism of progressive campaigning. They call us righteous, hypocritical, angry, bullying, totalitarian, because they want to distract attention from how *they* benefit from the status quo. When our opponents are implicitly questioning the ways in which we might be speaking from our own inner stories, and they are doing so to discredit and downplay our structural critiques of the system, it can feel like a political failure to look at the same material. Aren't we colluding in their attempts to draw our activist attention away from their workings of power? And aren't we giving them ammunition to use against us? It is true that we cannot reduce to personal psychology everything that is going on as activists speak and as those who hear us react. But maintaining a purely political, or purely material account of what is going on strengthens the status quo too. To be resistant to looking at our inner lives because we must urgently focus on the workings of power is to reinforce *once again* the dominant culture's insistence on separating them. We can explore ways to consider our inner lives *together with* thinking about power. This book

proceeds on the basis of recognising that the abuse of power we fight against has also impacted our inner lives, and that transformations in our inner lives therefore hold the potential to transform the workings of power. It is a means of resisting oppressive power, not a subjugation to power, to look at how it runs within us, how it makes us its agent.

Also, just because this criticism of activism is being voiced by our opponents – just because, to misquote Mandy Rice-Davies, 'they would say that, wouldn't they' – does it mean that their observation has no truth in it? That activists are never righteous, hypocritical or controlling? The accusation that 'inside every progressive is a totalitarian trying to get out' is an animating one for some conservatives. As an accusation that progressives lust for coercive power, it speaks to conservatives' avowed valuing of freedom and desire to guard against potential state oppression. According to the terms of the psychologist Jonathan Haidt's 'moral foundations' theory, the left makes its moral judgements primarily on the narrow foundations of 'care/avoiding harm' and 'fairness/avoiding cheating', while the right is more likely to base its moral judgements on a wider range of foundations that include freedom/oppression, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation and loyalty/betrayal, as well as care and fairness. Haidt's argument, based on his observations of US politics, is that conservatives are more effective at the polls because they are appealing to a wider range of moral 'taste receptors' in the electorate.[30] His theory is helpful, too, in casting light on the things that progressives do not always want to think about. That we are animated by care and fairness does not mean we don't have other instincts. The desire to help and protect others is genuine, but it does not rule out the will to power.

Progressive activists often have a messy relationship with power and are as likely to disavow it as try to seize it. The very idea of power can look dirty when the only form of it you have ever known is the dominator form of power normalised and practised by an oppressive and violent culture. With so few good models, it can be hard to remember that there is also power-with, and power-to: power that looks like agency and empowering and supporting others. The not-uncommon disavowal of all forms of power, because of a fear of the unhealthy form that has framed our understanding of the world, poses a practical problem for progressive activists. We don't

always push as hard as the other side to get *into* power; for the opportunities to bring our visions to fruition. But the disavowal poses an additional and different set of risks if our own will to coercive power – 'the fascism in us all'[37] – is kept in shadow, from where it can erupt, unbidden. It is healthier to own it, to acknowledge the different possible sides of power and that the coercive version can run in all of us, especially when we are fearful and stressed by urgency and our nervous systems are aroused. That way, when we are under pressure – or have even managed to get ourselves into power – we can be more certain that we will be exercising the kind of power we want to exercise.

This enquiry is timely, then, but do we have time to do it? To keep the rise in global temperatures below 1.5 degrees, carbon dioxide emissions must be reduced by 45 per cent by 2030, and should have been dropping by 2020, the IPCC conservatively estimated in 2018.[38] But the massive necessary global and national action to transform transport, food systems and infrastructure is not yet happening, which is why so many of us have been taking to the streets. What, then, is the point of looking at *how* we do activism, when carbon deadlines are so pressing, when ecological collapse is already occurring, when politics is already convulsed? When democracy everywhere is under threat from authoritarianism and the negative impacts of the online revolution? The urgency is undeniable and almost unbearable to quantify, but it's what we do with it that matters. The activist's instinctive response, faced with an urgent problem, is to move into action-panic mode and campaign more furiously than ever. But whatever the urgency of the situation, the heightened place of nervous system arousal that comes with urgency and panic is not an effective place to begin. It doesn't encourage clear thinking. It is not sustainable, leading to quick burnout. It creates a stridency that makes us hard to listen to and closes doors for dialogue. And it perpetuates the collective trauma that may already be running through us, conditioning us towards reactivity rather than response. If activism in calmer times already risked recreating aspects of the existing system, then urgent activism at a time of more pervasive fear, anger and awareness of breakdown, risks spreading the fearful states that are linked with attraction to authoritarianism.[39] There are good strategic reasons, therefore, to reconsider how we respond to an urgent situation. But it goes beyond strategy.

We are making assumptions when we ask questions about whether there is 'enough time' to look at anything beyond the urgent tasks in front of us. We are assuming that *we* have enough information to know what the most urgent task actually is. We are assuming, too, that there will ever be a clear point where we can say that we have done what we can to prevent runaway climate change and societal collapse, done what we can to create resilient and sane economies, and so *now* we can turn our attention to these other matters of human development. These assumptions do not stand. The tasks we face are never going to be 'done' per se. There are people living with war, drought, flood and fire who are already experiencing collapse. However much more of the already-underway ecological collapse it is possible to prevent, the task of mitigation, adaptation and survival will remain. We will still have to create liveable communities. Migrants and refugees will still need support, and there will be many more, as well as more contentious border politics. The task of sharing available resources more fairly will still be there and will be ever more fraught when food supplies are threatened by the weather in countries where they have previously been stable. The task of finding healthy ways to relate to each other amid increasingly polarising, fearful and violent political cultures will remain. The need for activism is not going to go away. Activism is the task, in each moment, of making things better than they are. If we can acknowledge that we are never going to reach a point where we are 'free' to attend to questions of how we do activism, then we can see that we are already free to have a go at doing it differently now.