

# WHITE OR BLACK POWER?

## THE CHOICE BEFORE EXTINCTION REBELLION

By Rob Callender, April 2022

Dear Roger, Just stop using white power narratives and white power tactics with a white power vision of how to tackle a crisis that was made by white power. It will fail. Again. We can't afford to keep failing. It is likely to make things worse for many many people if not for you and that is horrifying to have on your hands. Yes, your hands. We need to do the hard work. You're distracting and dividing people. Hang up your ego and get involved. Love, Rob

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## WHITE POWER FORGETS

Many within environmental movements like Extinction Rebellion are unconscious of how white power has characterised these movements' tactics and strategies. It is why we are failing and why we will continue to fail unless we learn and evolve.

If oil is stopped, then what? The climate crisis will not have gone away. We are struggling against a monstrous hydra with many many vicious heads all destroying ecosystems and the liveable climate. We need to strike at the root, the heart of the monster, not at one single element. Greenpeace has had many campaigns, some daring and with success. But Greenpeace is now 50 years old. We don't have 50 more years. After oil, then what?

After every action, movement and rebellion, some fill the pause with strategising. Every time a single conversation that dominates others has gone something like this: *"we haven't got the narrative right, it's not appealing to 'the people', because we're using leftist jargon and talking about 'justice'. We need to have a vision of what the future will look like for ordinary people - a nation they can buy into and want to build - it needs a sense of let's all come together now to fix the climate for our children and grandchildren"*. Sound good?

**This is white power.** People shaped by white power live in a loop in which they believe that *their* vision, *this* time, must succeed, *if only everyone got behind it*. Their conviction comes from the privileged lived experience of whiteness which brings them closer to the establishment and a reformist mindset (despite what they say and the vehemence of the tactics they employ) and farther from communities outside of the establishment. The powerful conviction coming from the individual person creates obliviousness, forgetfulness - amnesia.

Roger Hallam recently demonstrated this with yet another [simplistic and visionless narrative of white power](#) summarised as: *"anyone not doing what I say is guilty of supporting organised genocide"*. Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil have a daring zeal in common with early Greenpeace actions. The

difference is, unlike the Greenpeace campaigns, JSO and IB haven't had their demands met. We don't have 50 years.

Each failed rebellion, action or movement should humble everyone involved; instead, white amnesia makes a parade of new and old individuals double down and actively hostile to other visions. They use their influence, position and platforms to silence others, exploiting existing inequalities and structures, instead of taking action to increase equity and enfranchisement - in short, they use their white power to reinforce white power. Finally, they sell their view with impatience, "*just try it, you'll see*", forgetting that this has been the strategy all along. And it is failing. The line on the graph hasn't changed direction downwards at all.

What happened? In 2019, Extinction Rebellion brought the frontline action into cities, made NVDA more accessible, created the 'climate emergency' narrative and created a worldwide network of activist groups. In 2022, the Just Stop Oil coalition moved the frontline back to "the bad guys" - oil infrastructure. Frontline activists are brave, daring to lead by example, putting their bodies in harm's way. But frontlines are only as good as the vision behind them because **good does not necessarily fill the vacuum left when one evil is removed.**

There are blueprints for success on the scale the climate crisis calls for in the radical, nation-building movements of Lumumba, Sankara, Castro, and other, which all focussed on empowering local communities and anti-globalist, anti-corruption, anti-colonial, and often anti-capitalist narratives. These were successful, transformative movements until stopped by murder or sanctions carried out by white power. We need to be thinking about uprisings and revolutions like these; not reforms and appealing to conservative attitudes, campaign by campaign. Only revolutionary feeling will give us the depth of vision and energy to transcend the extractive and exploitative system driving species to extinction. That vision cannot be designed from a comfortable white power ivory tower.

*A strategy is not made powerful by people getting behind it but by the people the strategy puts power behind.* White power is not your friend. You may know that. White power created the systems and structures that got us into these crises. White power won't get us out. White power is not about your skin colour but your actions and beliefs. It's time for justice. **It's time for a black power strategy for climate.**

## WHITE POWER LIES

### **Lie 1: The Environmental Movement has tried "justice" for years and failed.**

Let us be clear, environmental movements have been internationalist, in the sense of stressing solidarity with actions in distant communities. Environmental movements have been "justice focused" if you think that means talking about these 'far off' people and places and tagging on to messaging that ecological catastrophe will continue to disproportionately affect BIPOC, the global South and other species that did not create the crisis and that that's not fair. But that isn't climate justice. That's movements passing the mic to make themselves feel good about their efforts - often confusing this with a vindication of their vision and tactics - without really listening or taking on what justice and that climate debt would mean for them strategically.

Environmental movements have not radicalised. they're just getting more desperate. **White power thinks justice is global fairness, law, order, charitable intent. Black power thinks justice is life or death.**

While you stare up at the inbound comet - by which I mean your dream of the coming, escalating horrors of the climate crisis - you are tripping on those suffering at your feet right now. You may care about them too, but you only have finite time in a day. Your choice is to look up and point up. But the root of the crisis is on the floor. And the solution will only come from tackling the root with the fervour of one who has looked up but seen all the way down.

- *There are more food banks in the UK than McDonalds. 47% requiring food aid in the UK are in debt to the welfare state that is meant to support them.*
- *More than 55 countries are now in debt distress. Brazil's debt is nearly 90% of GDP. Global regimes are established, influenced disproportionately by the interests of the wealthy. The Amazon is burned for money.*
- *The richest 1% became much richer during the pandemic. UK and global average household debt increased. The African continent became poorer.*

When Emanuel Macron raised fuel levies in 2018 without any thought for how this would squeeze the working and poor, the Gilets Jaunes burst onto the streets saying, *the elites talk about the end of the world; we talk about the end of the month.*

Plans to raise fuel prices stalled. Just a few weeks later a new slogan appeared:  
*end of the world, end of the month, same fight!*

These weren't empty words. Individuals of the Gilets Jaunes movement developed a radical understanding (radical literally means *getting to the root*): *inequality is what is killing us.*

### **Climate change is the symptom, not the disease.**

The disease is inequality. Inequality has congealed in wealth, land, capital and structures consciously developed for the benefit of those who already have a greater share of wealth. These structures extract, exploit, enslave, oppress, pollute and make you forget by selling you the dream. Justice doesn't mean tackling far off things, it means tackling the root of the crisis as it manifests right now and not backing down. It means moving from being the elite, obsessed with the end of the world and oblivious to the end of the month, to being those people who take action on the extinction crisis of monthly rising gas bills, fuel prices, food prices, taxes, useless welfare and unfair, high-interest debt in a tactical, effective, consciousness-changing way because the end of the world and the end of the month *are* the same fight. And that means tackling racism, sexism and ableism too because all of these inequalities come with pay gaps, wealth gaps, ownership gaps and debt.

*All this is too slow, isn't it? The latest IPCC report said we have three years!*

Sidelining justice explicitly assumes that the powerful, the wealthy, and the structures that have been formed around power will bow to "*if only enough people did what I say*" narratives like "*just stop oil!*" or "*insulate Britain!*". They won't. And, even if they did, there is no clear path from these single reforms to measures radical enough to really address the climate emergency. The work would begin again with another name. We don't have 50 more years to fail!

The tactic these movements use has been adapted with glancing reference to the most Hollywood moments of the civil rights, suffrage and freedom from British colonial rule campaigns, forgetting the most obvious fact that these were all absolutely causes of **equality** and justice, and were diverse movements that appealed to people's present interests with many voices and a plurality of tactics.

The belief Hallam has that any one demand might serve as 'a Trojan Horse' to sneak in a cascade of reforms that will address the "genocide" of impending climate catastrophe is supported by a particular global North history of charismatic leaders within the establishment - Washington, Roosevelt, Thatcher, Churchill - who were able to shape the world through sweeping national and global reforms. But the world they formed and reformed has led us here. It has helped entrench a globalised culture of white power. **White power will not reform to undo itself, it can only create more white power.** The Greeks inside and outside the horse left Troy a ruin. Meanwhile, Trojans who escaped went on to establish Rome. White power. These histories are being perverted and appropriated to suit a wish. White power lies.

*Anything that does not centre justice is too slow because it cannot succeed at all. In fact, it is likely to make the problem worse by legitimising the current system, by increasing inequalities and certainly by wasting precious time. In other words, climate justice is the fastest way because it is the only way.*

## **Lie 2: We need a nation-building vision that resonates with 'ordinary people'.**

The strategy of watching and appealing to the mainstream media has held Extinction Rebellion, Greenpeace, IB and others back. Instead of pictures and reports of actions adding pressure to government, they become an ineffectual background noise for the UK public to have opinions about. This is **the aesthetic of co-option.**

Extinction Rebellion now appears to many to be a part of the establishment - something that some people do over there, part of the culture, uncontroversial. This aesthetic has been created by a tactical lust for instant gratification from click-traffic and headlines, believing that this translates directly into influence. Influence is not so symmetrical. If the appeal is to the establishment, and the conversation is with the establishment, then you are becoming the establishment. Only the initial novelty of the movement with its push to declare a climate emergency stands out.

The establishment scares people. The people I talk to don't like Johnson or Starmer because "they're all the same." The idea of a Roosevelt and a new New Deal "Build Back Better" scenario - a Big State solution - terrifies people. I'm often told these ideas are either fascist or communist - the thing in common is that they are *extreme*. It is far away from people. People don't want a climate lockdown while the wealthy have "work parties". They know the world is burning. They want to do right. They want to be empowered to do it. Empowerment doesn't come from outside. A movement has to be explicitly with and for the people where they are because the people are "the nation" and its voice.

Speaking to people "in their language" happens when you are on the street doing things with people *for* people, not *at* them. A nation building narrative emerges from within the people's struggle not by adding nationalist noises from the outside.

Pandering to national sentiments won't do it, we need to roll up sleeves and get into communities for communities with an eye on the bigger picture: it is not and can never be charity, it must always be to build towards system change.

Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream" vision of an equitable nation came out of his radical and practical community work not despite it. It used constitutional language because that was the campaign he was involved in at that time. That doesn't mean his strategy was what the black majority envisioned. Stokely Carmichael describes how one day Martin Luther King Jr. was away from the usual gathering and the people there were just so fed up of being told to sit down and turn the other cheek when every day they were being beaten, killed and imprisoned, so Carmichael jumped on the

mic and started talking about Black Power. By the time King was back, the idea was everywhere and things were starting to change. But whether King, Carmichael, Newton, Malcolm X, Gandhi or Pankhurst or the countless others, these figures all began their work and strategies building power behind local communities. Too many skip to the Hollywood moments. *White power wants. White power forgets.*

If the environmental movement, with 3 years to act meaningfully to mitigate the worst effects of climate change, took the path to centre justice and be the change, rather than appealing to white power and white media, then we'd have a chance to create a revolutionary mindset that can transform decision-making structures and, therefore, global power structures. This would challenge white power in similar ways to those that brought crushing authoritarianism down on the civil rights movement and others because we would be building black power, not white culture.

Why aren't there empowered communities leading the world already? White power.

A network like Extinction Rebellion could do this work and it could grow incredibly fast, with local groups reinforced by the communities they actively work to empower, and guiding the whole towards structural change with local roots globally. But only if we make some big changes.

### **Lie 3: All we need is 3.5% to be actively engaged / people to get arrested.**

According to Chenoweth's research, the engagement of 3.5% of a population with a campaign *correlates* with policy change. The percentage does not tell you *how* to activate 3.5% of the population. For that, Extinction Rebellion uses the same tactic it always has done with a little more energy recently: the *Heading For Extinction Talk*.

Correlation does not mean causation. What will actually cause 3.5% of the UK (or any) population to get onto the streets and stay there until the changes happen? Is fear of climate chaos enough? Without a vision of how the system driving climate change will really be transformed, how can it be? Who trusts the self-interested establishment to do it? Will "self-correcting" market capitalism do it? "We have the solutions!" I hear you say. For what? To continue consumption at the same rate? For the biggest land grab and wealth transfer from the poorest to the owner class in history? "Well, at least the graph will be going down. We must survive!" But it won't be and we'll be pushing responsibility around for another 26 CoPs. If we had everything lined up already, we would be on the way. We don't. There's something in the way: White Power.

The solutions necessary to mitigate climate change on the scale needed and fairly, as the work of Naomi Klein, Jason Hickel and countless others shows, is **localism and increasing equality** and enfranchisement. First, that means dismantling the systems and structures that profit a powerful few from injustice and global inequalities. Those structures cannot reform themselves in this anti-monopolistic, anti-globalist, anti-extractivist, anti-corrupt direction. When slavery was made illegal, the slave-owners were compensated, not the slaves. That's what white power does.

Movements can drive visions of radical, emancipatory change. Indeed, I know of no movement which was successful that did not change people's understanding of freedom. A radical vision with a progression of practical steps from emancipation to democratic local power, coupled with moral authority akin to the often forgotten spiritual dimensions of Gandhi, suffragettes, Malcolm X, King and Tutu, might get you 3.5%. But 3.5% is not all you need. It doesn't describe what you need at all.

### **Lie 4: Black power means white hate.**

Black power is a living thing. It was born out of real feelings in a real moment in a real place by a real person. I don't think I'm suggesting people go around using it as messaging just yet, what I'm asking is for people to understand it and not pick the bit of history they *want* to be true. Some people don't have that luxury. Black people.

Of course, people everywhere and of all ethnicities can be kind or brutal. **White and black power should not be understood as an inescapable binary linked to your skin colour.** They are radically different systems and approaches borne out of real histories, analyses and singular events.

Understanding what white power meant at the time when the doctrine of black power was born can give us a radical, historical understanding of how the climate crisis has come about and why it remains a growing catastrophe despite powerful and ordinary people knowing about it for more than 50 years.

The Black Power frame sees *the system and mentality of white power and how it manifests*. Seen through its lens, many of the things you find precious are probably synonymous with black power not white power, unless you are very powerful and exploitative. And, even if you are, since you do not live in a constant state of being the smart, sexy, male, CEO-type, you'll find precious black power moments in your life. Black power is not a socially destructive philosophy but a lens through which we can strategise or a lens that we ignore because we prefer other stories.

## WHITE POWER FAILS

What needs to be said here? Recent rebellion strategies have been white power strategies. Don't get me wrong. The intent is to stop the climate crisis. The great majority of people in Extinction Rebellion I have met have good, loving intentions. But our world has been shaped by white power educations, white power media, and white power structures - right down to the justice system. We can ignore it or we can look it in the face. We've been ignoring it and we're failing. Let's look it in the face.

Artisanal miners in the Congo are being forced from their lands because Glencore, the mining giant which supplies Tesla with cobalt for its batteries, has access to finance which mining cooperatives do not. It has found ways and paved new dirt tracks of corruption to buy the land these miners were born on. The artisanal miners have nowhere to go. Without work, whole families go hungry in a country that should be one of the wealthiest on Earth but, instead, through a system pioneered by individuals in the City of London and New York, it has been kept dependent on a trickle of foreign investment that masks the flood of stolen wealth escaping these people whose hands receive miniscule wages in return for carrying the rarest metals. This is Green Capitalism. *With no vision beyond frontlines and reform, all our action is doing is making more finance available for Glencore and others like it.*

## BLACK POWER LIBERATES

Imagine local meetings across the UK overflowing with members because there are uprisings everywhere with the explicit aim of taking power into local hands, standing up for people in the community: their jobs, their homes, their businesses, their air, their green spaces, their right to land, their right to education, housing, food, water, employment and healthcare without becoming a slave to debts.

Imagine groups across the country supporting the actions and efforts of single communities, creating flash points of dissent erupting from the needs of the people. Boycotts. Strikes. Occupations.

Imagine these vital, active local communities, based on thriving mutual aid, coming together with nation-scale unions to disrupt the international-scale systems and powerful global elite whose hunger for profits, conservative reluctance to wind down destructive industries and interest in globalised financial extraction through leveraging debt, interest rates, cheap labour, tax havens and corruption is driving the home of all known life into climate chaos and the sixth mass extinction.

Imagine this growing movement bound together by a radical analysis of the transformations immediately needed to avert climate catastrophe and create a better society; guided by a dream of democratic local sovereignty with global coordination and fairness because without global equality, there will still be exploitation.

Imagine Extinction Rebellion strategy explicitly encouraging groups to begin creating such a movement alongside other movements. What would that take?

## **BLACK POWER HEALS**

### **BLACK POWER BEGINS IN COMMUNITIES**

Communities are the real grassroots. For decentralisation to be more than a nice word, local group activity should be at the top of any strategy, not at the end. Right now local groups are often led by people in the privileged position of being able to devote more time to them. Well-designed, regular community-resilience actions with simple roles and trainings as an essential strategy would change that.

Some groups have already done this in spite of the silence from the published strategy. It's time local groups were empowered *because of* the strategy and took power in the movement. The democraticness of a movement makes it more attractive to new members. Right now, Extinction Rebellion UK is not attractive.

### **BLACK POWER MEANS NEW NARRATIVES**

New narratives will be developed by communities but a movement must provoke the dialogue with a suggestion. That was what the three demands did in 2019. Act Now. Tell The Truth. Citizens' Assemblies. These are old and done.

It's time to tell a different story. It's time to have a vision that signals our radical intent. The demands should tell the story of our intention:

- 1. Cancel Debts**
- 2. Free the People**
- 3. Local Power**

**First**, take the knee off the neck. Without debt cancellation, we are not serious about system change, equality, transformation or planetary repair. People can't breathe.

**Second**, free the people means establishing equity - you can't be free and unequal - that means global justice, that means reparations, that means loss and damage, that means *tell the whole truth*; that means ending the hegemony of globalised finance.

**Third**, a vision not of centralising Big State or Big Finance solutions but of communities taking back power - dismantling monopolies, empowering cooperatives - diverse, resilient ecosystems on the people's terms - decentralisation by design.

There is no mention of the climate crisis in the original demands either, they were made specific by our actions and by the name - Extinction Rebellion. These are even clearer. Just like before, we'll have to put some energy into getting the story heard.

### **BLACK POWER MEANS REVOLUTION, NOT REFORM**

This is a provocation. My skin is white. Unlike Hallam, I'm not comparing anyone to Nazis except Nazis. This document lacks explicit reference to many things that must be included in a detailed strategy. That is not the aim of this document, which is to say that it is the responsibility of everyone in the environmental movement to stand up for a vision and not ignore the lens of black power / white power.

I believe now is the time to get into the specifics of a strategy and to invite many stakeholders to shape it, amplifying the voices of the marginalised for the sake of equity and not with the same old charismatic amnesia reproducing the white power of the outside world. Now is the time for a black power strategy.

What do you think?

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*“When you see an individual white boy, you are not afraid of that individual white boy. What you are afraid of is the power that he represents. Because behind him is the local police force, the state militia, the army, the navy, the air force. When you see an African, there is no power behind him, there is no one speaking for his interests, there is no one to protect him.”*

- Stokely Carmichael