

Schack, Lotte. *Children of the Crisis: Political subjectivity, responsibility and justice in the Swedish climate movement*. University of Gothenburg, 2025

Lotte Schack's substantial work on the Swedish climate movement includes four studies using ethnographic methods which were submitted for Schack's PhD thesis including a thesis frame which I had the pleasure of reading as her opponent. In this review, focused predominantly on the four papers, I examine the author's contributions, common threads, and the questions the body of work helps to frame for future investigation.

"Pandemic Possibilities: The Corona Crisis as Perceived Opportunity and Threat for Climate Activists", a book chapter published in *The Routledge Handbook of Grassroots Climate Activism* co-authored by Mattias Wahlström, contains original data (including panel survey data) analyzing how individual climate activists in Sweden and Finland felt about and responded to the Coronavirus pandemic in relation to their activism. Schack and Wahlström find that the pandemic provided opportunities that included the demonstration that states have capacity and resources to make substantial changes and the experimentation with personal change as people were forced into different types of behaviors. The activists saw that both individuals and institutions could be reshaped in response to crises. At the same time, changes to individual behavior were seen by the activists as slow, temporary, and of limited impact while the state response continued to prioritize economic growth. Furthermore, the pandemic undermined the political salience of climate change.

Beyond this, the authors found that the pandemic affected activists' internal processes. The restrictions placed on physical protests meant a significant number of activists shifted to online forms of engagement, while some stopped participating altogether. The authors note that affective infrastructure (Dean 2016), which reproduces the practical optimism often needed to sustain movement activity, was diminished in online activist practices, particularly for younger activists in Fridays for Future.

In "Climate Subjectivity: Youth, Innocence and Willfulness in the Swedish Climate Movement", published in *Mobilization*, Schack seeks to understand the subjectivity of the Swedish climate justice movement by drawing on feminist, Marxist, and Marxist Feminist concepts. Using ethnographic methods, Schack finds that young people were interpellated (Althusser 1971) into the subjectivity of the child as innocent, apolitical victims but that this was only partially adopted by young activists who accepted the political subjectivity attached to being of a younger age category but who demand generational justice through acts of disruptive protest. This subversion produced the political subject of the willful child, or as Schack (2024a: 236) writes, [young people] "causing trouble by refusing to listen to the grown-ups". This active process not only reshaped the conception of the child but also climate justice itself, which was often associated with a form of global justice in which the Global South was subject to the greater harms of climate change produced predominantly by the Global North.

“Roots or Branches: The Climate Crisis and Other Injustices”, published in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, connects nicely to the question of political subjectivity as it deals with how activists within a local Fridays for Future chapter conceptualize the idea of climate justice. Here, Schack draws on Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) concept of cognitive praxis, especially exploring the movement’s cosmology. The paper centers a metaphor of a tree and finds two distinct representations: 1) climate change is the primary problem (the root) that intensifies other environmental and social issues (branches); 2) colonialism and capitalism are the root problem, creating climate change alongside other environmental and social problems. An eco-Marxist feminist perspective is used to understand nature itself as exploited and expropriated as a force of reproduction of the system of capitalism.

The fourth study in the thesis looks at the way notions of justice operate within the justice system in the Swedish context in the unpublished, aptly titled paper “Taking Climate Justice to Court”. The work looks at two cases: 1) the Aurora case, where a group of young climate activists sued the state for failing to take climate responsibility under the UN Convention on the Child; 2) the defense of Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists charged for disobeying police orders during a civil disobedience action in which the activists claimed self-defense or defense of their children.

Schack observed that courts look at elements of the law less connected to responsibility and thus generally undermine what the movement would consider to be justice. In the case of the XR activists, their protest was against corporations, but the trial did not highlight the culpability of those actors, which Schack identified as obfuscation by redirection. Regarding Aurora, the Supreme Court decided not to look at the case because it did not meet their criteria for consideration as individuals rather than representatives of a class of victims. We can think about that as obfuscation through responsabilization in which the activists must end up accepting the rules of the game and their normative frameworks if they decide to take the judicial strategy to social change. This can, in effect, neutralize the activists’ criticism. However, Schack’s interviewees indicate that following through on such formal channels clarified to them that “some kind of revolt against the system we have today” (Schack 2025) is the only viable response.

The four pieces, though distinct, have more than just the subject of the Swedish climate movement holding them together. There are several themes and threads that make their way to form an analytical quilt that speaks not only to the Swedish case, but across much of the climate justice movement and social movements in general.

One thread that can be identified is the embodied nature of activism. The pandemic period provides a look at the ways in which young activists could no longer engage in the forms of physical assembly that often mark the contestation found in the very definition of a social movement. The movement is not held in the views of individuals in society but in collective struggle. While the findings differed for older activists engaged in forms of knowledge production and diffusion, the study re-raises the question of whether non-physical forms of engagement can qualify as contention or if they form a different type of (related) social process (also see Saunders and Roth

2023). Although perhaps not as developed as it could be, this thread is also present in “Roots or Branches” through the concept of cognitive praxis and, arguably, in the conclusion of “Taking Climate Justice to Court”.

Another thread is the ever-present sociological tension between structure and agency, seen particularly in “Climate Subjectivity” where young people are interpellated as innocent youth. Considering the role agency plays in Schack’s analysis, as compared to the passive form of ideological control in (at least a “vulgar” reading of) Althusser (Montenegro 2023: 114), we could further the analysis through the exploration of the work of Stuart Hall. Hall also found himself wrestling with these ideas (Montenegro 2023) and developed the concept of decoding (Hall 1980 [1973]) to give power to actors confronted by discourses to change their reading of the ideologies those discourses contain. We may find similar tendencies further back in the work of Gramsci (1971), or even in Marx (see e.g., Hall 1983).

What we really find across all four pieces is internal diversity within the movement that is of course not particularly unique but nevertheless worthy of further exploration on its own. We see the tensions regarding the political subjectivity of youth; the diversity of tactics that lead to a diversity of effects during the COVID pandemic; the experimentation with strategies in the court cases - and how they differ from the approaches present in other papers; and of course differences in how the problem itself is understood and what climate justice means to these actors. Although rarely explicitly discussed in the work, these threads also suggest the importance of seeing the activists as *strategic* actors (Jasper 2004).

This final point raises some questions left unanswered. This is not at all surprising as articles should be more focused and journals often have strict word limits. However, these questions may be worth considering for future investigation: Does the subject of the ‘willful child’ raise potential concerns for the reproduction of the movement, and experience-building which may have a future role in strategic leadership (see e.g., Ganz 2009)? (In some ways the political subject of youth requires a reproduction of the affective infrastructure across youth cohorts which would then enable a reproduction of “practical optimism” within the cohort.) Is trial and error (pun intended) a necessary strategic step to advance movements’ strategic views or can these be bypassed without spending precious time, energy and resources? Can strategies align when cosmologies differ? How can activists create their own opportunities or amplify their efforts when opportunities present themselves? Finally, how can Marxist thought further contribute to answering these questions?

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