

Imagining Futures in Youth Climate Activism

Manuela Velasquez, 2021

My research explores the ways in which young people involved in climate activism imagine and pursue their futures in relation to climate change. In times of recent climate-related crises, youth in particular have grown more vocal in arguing for drastic changes. The moment of this summer in particular presented an unmooring convergence of situations for young people – it is a time of paradigm shifts in relation to the pandemic, visceral resistance in relation to the movement for Black lives, and an ever-intensifying climate situation. My own initial research plan faced a significant redesign in the face of these new facts of our present. My anthropology research methods ultimately came to involve a combination of reviewing existing research, engaging with the culture of this moment through social media, attending virtual meetings through the Sunrise Movement – a prominent youth-led climate action group at the forefront of climate policy advocacy – and conducting one-on-one interviews with college-aged climate activists over Zoom. I primarily spoke with and learned from young people involved in climate activism with ties to the Bowdoin community. Especially during these one-on-one conversations, I was able to explore questions of how young climate activists pursue actions in the present that they understand as being able to influence the future of our world, their own personal futures, and their capacity to imagine each of these futures.

My understandings of how youth take action in relation to the climate are deeply tied to the culture of change that the Sunrise Movement amplifies in its platform of activism, as I concentrated in this research on college-aged youth that are involved with climate activism primarily through the Sunrise Movement. I found that many of the concrete actions that young activists passionately pursue in the present are closely tied to marked checkpoints of the future, particularly those checkpoints marked by election cycles. Though many people that I spoke with were involved in active work related to ongoing, smaller-scale elections this summer, the main future checkpoint on everyone's minds was the upcoming presidential election in November. There is a distinct sense amongst young climate activists that this election and its results will have decisive significance in the long-term trajectory of all of our futures. The weight that many felt due to this impending checkpoint also illuminated a complex relationship between the frameworks under which we operate in the present and those that we hope to create for the future. This summer, the Sunrise Movement and many young people involved with climate activism amplified The Black Lives Matter movement and the push to abolish the system of policing in The United States, engaging with the discourse that systems in our country founded upon violence and inequity can never be modified into something sustainably equitable – entirely new and different systems of operation must be created and implemented. The activists that I spoke to expressed striving to imagine futures under these new frameworks of operation. Climate work is increasingly becoming intertwined with anti-capitalist and racial justice work, as we come to understand climate change as more than just a problem, but as a symptom of our society's unsustainable systems¹. Many of the actions that young climate activists pursue and are able to conceive of in the present still operate within other current systems of our society – the backbone of the Sunrise Movement lies in advocacy for the Green New Deal, a congressional proposal for tackling climate change through modifying our current frameworks of government and economy. A sentiment expressed to me by the activists I spoke to this summer, drawing from Angela Davis, is that one cannot elect a revolution to office, but one can elect someone to office who will be ready and willing to change with the revolution when it arrives.

There is a trend amongst college-aged climate activists to imagine their personal futures as being intertwined with community-based support, that support being part of a greater system of new frameworks. Amid sentiments of uncertainty in the present, especially augmented by the pandemic and other upending events this year, these future imaginaries do not alone carry young climate activists through the present without additional concrete action steps and plans that address the checkpoints of their immediate futures.

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¹ Battle, Colette P. "Climate change will displace millions. Here's how we prepare." TEDWomen 2019. TED video, 12:36.