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'Missing school isn't the end of the world (actually, it might prevent it)': climate activists resisting adult power, repurposing privileges and reframing education

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ABSTRACT

In the current climate crisis, young people are portrayed paradoxically: victims and stakeholders, political protagonists and school truants. Based on ethnographic research with the climate movement, this article explores how youths manage their activism as it interfaces with their socialisation contexts, tracing prevalent adult antagonisms: radicalism, condescension and individualism. Drawing on sociological conceptualisations of climate precariousness and on an educational theorisation of subjectification, I argue that activists construct margins of resistance in their everyday political practices by incorporating processes that interrupt adult structures while reframing educational imagination. This highlights how the individual present is colonised by the risks posed to a collective future, leading adult power to be contested at a collective-public level (through performative reconfigurations of existing orders) and subverted at an individual-private level (by repurposing privileges towards climate struggle). Resistances to adultism uncover competing notions of future and education as integral to politicisation processes within the climate movement.

KEYWORDS

Climate activists; Fridays For Future; adultism; privilege; school; family

Introduction

> This [climate activism] is all very pretty and very noble as long as it is other people's children. […] Very often, our families praise Greta, as long as Greta is not Sofia or Manuel.

This short excerpt from Lara, an activist from the Extinction Rebellion, illustrates the first piece of a puzzling thread which emerged during an ethnographic study, conducted over two years, with climate activists from the School Strike for Climate and the Extinction Rebellion in Portugal. Climate change is one of the most pressing and defining problems of our time and, considering both the residual denialism in Portugal (Horta and Carvalho 2017) and the political mandates for climate education (UNESCO 2015),

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there seems to be little room for doubting the seriousness of the problem. It would be expected, then, that youth mobilisations for climate would be consensually welcomed by educational agents and in youths' socialisation contexts. Yet, as suggested by Lara's excerpt, public praise of global climate icons, discourses of consternation about climate change and eulogies of youth participation may not match the real, close-up level of the everyday lived experience. As the ethnographic fieldwork progressed, I witnessed permanent strategies of managing daily obstacles to activism, based on ideological antagonisms, condescending narratives and tacit pressures to abide by standardised individual pathways from so-called educational agents. This article uncovers such contradictions while showing how resistances to adultism are incorporated in the very practices of participation towards the politicisation of climate crisis and of young people, grounded on a sense of urgency and commitment which contrasts with adults' responses – be they family members, school actors or politicians.

Even though climate change is a worldwide, largely human-induced phenomenon (UN 2019; UNESCO 2015) which has been featuring high on public and scientific agendas, political leaders are falling short in coming to terms with the challenges involved. COP26, in the aftermath of which this article was written, ended with the elaboration of the Glasgow Climate Pact, entailing global political compromises which, as assessed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, 'are welcome steps, but they are not enough'.[1] In parallel, massive protests in hundreds of cities pleaded for political leaders to act as adults. Although the climate movement is internally very diverse, constituted by multiple branches, the uniqueness of the current uprise in climate activism relates to it being led and fore fronted by young people, in many cases underaged (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2020). Yet, their engagement with climate issues develops within diverse contexts wherein they face (and learn to manage) different types of obstacles (both symbolic and material) posed by significant adults[2] who regulate fundamental socialisation spheres, such as family and school contexts. 'Adultism biases' developing into structural barriers have been reported in many studies (e.g. Bonnardel 2015; Biswas and Mattheis 2020; Malafaia, Neves, and Menezes 2021), with young people often internalising adultist-types of narratives of political incompetence, as if politics were an adult-exclusive sphere of argumentation and action. Such potentially disempowered positions intersect with a social condition of climate precarity (Holmberg and Alvinius 2021), as the younger cohorts are disproportionately more heavily impacted by climate change. While there is a political rhetoric placing young people as key actors and fundamental stakeholders in climate change (UN 2019), the sharing of political power remains unavailable, with tokenistic façades not going unnoticed. Exemplary of this are recent reports of exclusionary practices in COP26, publicly voiced by climate campaigners excluded from negotiations. Therefore, the way in which the climate crisis is played out at the political level entails important paradoxes: young people are pointed as victims of climate change and, simultaneously, placed at the centre of climate responsibility, namely as catalysts of political change – for instance, the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (UN 2015) points to both victimisation and responsibility in different parts of the document. Yet, they continue to be largely disqualified as political actors.

In this context, youth hold a double-edged position of precariousness and activism. While research on climate activism is growing (e.g. Trott 2021; Gaborit 2020; Jacobsson 2021; Mattheis 2020; Han and Ahn 2020), little is known about how young people

manage their activism as it interfaces with their socialisation contexts. Based on an ethnographic study in Portugal, this article traces adult antagonisms faced by young activists as it permeates their practices of participation. Drawing on sociological conceptualisations of climate precariousness (Holmberg and Alvinius 2021) and on an educational theorisation of subjectification (Biesta 2020), I argue that climate activists actively construct margins of resistance in their everyday political practices by shaping their socio-political roles in line with climate-rooted notions of their future – repurposing their class privileges towards climate struggle and, thus, contesting normative social expectations about their lives. Simultaneously, by highlighting activists' everyday resistances, I shed light on how young activists bring education into play through the interruption of the existing order and their positions in it, eliciting imagination of what (climate) education can be. As detailed below, they do this mostly in a three-fold fashion: (i) by means of performative protests in which they act as 'educators' of politicians (reversing traditional power relationships between teachers and students, adults and youths), (ii) by reconfiguring a collective, structural approach to climate issues to be communicated to school students (in opposition to common practices of individual and non-political approaches to climate education), and (iii) by transforming the public space into an educational arena (in contrast with school-bounded learning, based on vertical relationships and detached from real-life experiences).

Climate activism: resisting precarity, challenging adultism and navigating political socialisation

In August 2018, when a 16-year-old Swedish girl sat outside parliament with a poster stating her school strike, a new global movement began. Greta Thunberg's claim for urgent government climate action ended up turning into the Fridays For Future movement, with an action repertoire replicated by young students around the world. This repertoire involves skipping school on a weekly basis while gathering outside the most significant political institution in the city (parliament, city hall), exhibiting posters and taking pictures to spread the protests on social media. Unprecedent levels of youth mobilisation were reached around the globe in 2019 (e.g. Han and Ahn 2020), building momentum – both spurring other existing climate movements and paving the way for the emergence of new groups and alliances, an example of which was the rise of Extinction Rebellion in October 2018, grounded in non-violent civil disobedience.

The climate crisis is deeply entrenched in social justice issues: the most vulnerable groups and countries are those with inadequate resources and conditions to face the consequences of climate change. The same argument crosses many dimensions (e.g. geography, age, social class, gender, ethnicity) and roots climate justice struggles. As Grauer (2016, 43) put it, 'the iron law of climate change is this: the less you did to cause it, the more you feel its effects'. Climate change, then, is a layer which reinforces existing structural inequalities deeply. When it comes to age, intergenerational justice is at the core of the whole narrative created by young climate activists – e.g. 'Don't burn your kids' future' and 'If you don't act as adults, we will', are some of the most recognisable slogans of the movement. Young people seek to hold older generations accountable for the severity of the current situation, which leaves them with prospects of a barely liveable future (Kenis 2021; Han and Ahn 2020). Climate-related problems of loss have even motivated sociological approaches advocating for new epistemological framings capable

of addressing dimensions related to materiality, politics, knowledge and practices (Elliott 2018). Holmberg and Alvinius (2021) suggest that today's children be conceptualised as a new climate precariat. Drawing on three main dimensions – temporality problems, insecurity, and identity vacuum – the authors seek to make children's vulnerability more visible, arguing that the concept of climate precarity is valuable in explaining youth's resistance to those vulnerabilities and their engagement in collective action. Therefore, understanding the climate precariat as a social field, shared among children, implies acknowledging that they are forced to live the present always in relation to a dystopian future which they feel responsible for, and bearing vulnerabilities – perceived as unfair – which compose a new form of social identity (Holmberg and Alvinius 2021). Still, these elements of vulnerability intersect with others, either more specifically related to climate impacts (geography and socio-economic status) or more transversal to young groups (lack of political power, structural adultism). Thus, it is worth examining how young people manage to transform their condition of climate precariat in the face of an adult world shaped by structural political biases.

The age-based political marginalisation of youth, as well as the recurrent dismissal of their political positions, voices and grievances – in both public and private contexts – is far from breaking news (Malafaia, Neves, and Menezes 2021; Flanagan and Gallay 1995). Interestingly, young climate activists seem to contest the age-based disqualification when claiming their political positions vis-à-vis adult society, exposing the failures of adult leaders and, simultaneously, the contradictions of adultism. Illustrative of this are some slogans and discourses delivered publicly – e.g. '[world leaders are] behaving like children, [so] it falls on us to be the adults in the room' (Greta Thunberg, during Bristol protest, 2021). Based on Foucault's theories on power and resistance, Leung (2020) analyses some of these discourses as modes of subverting the traditional power relations of adultism and leveraging youth as an ideological position to problematise (adults') current political inaction. In parallel, recent research on media representations of the climate movement reveals paternalist manoeuvres which neutralise social critique and delegitimise protests as acts of truancy (Jacobsson 2021). Importantly, the potential of youth climate activism to confront the established social order and the role of core social institutions has led academics to make a case for youth disobedience as a remedy against the exclusion of young people from political participation (Mattheis 2020), or to argue for an understanding of youth climate activism as countercultural (Trott 2021). As stressed by Kenis (2021), 'calling for a school strike is a politicising message in itself: pupils decide to distance themselves from the place which is attributed to them in society' (138), politicising their own social position as agents of change in both macro (the goal of shaping climate politics) and microsystems (families, schools, communities, etc.) in which they are embedded.

Families and schools are unavoidable contexts of political socialisation. Classic studies indicating parental influence on political ideology and participation (e.g. Jennings and Niemi 1974; Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 2005) find echoes in recent sociological research showing that even radical climate activists are influenced by family legacies of left-wing socialisation (Gaborit 2020). Regarding the role of schools, educational capital has long been shown as a correlate of, *inter alia*, political knowledge, democracy support and political engagement (Lister 1973; Bovens and Wille 2008), with multiple aspects of education (in-and-outside curricular and classroom formats) influencing

how young people see the world. Indeed, a lot of what young people experience at school relates to the very foundation of politics: experiences of inclusion and exclusion, rights' claims, power and status, fairness and injustice, dialogue, and estrangement (Menezes et al. 2019). Yet, the schools' role for experiencing democracy does not go without controversy. The long-standing instrumental relationship between schooling and the state, with schools working as apparatuses of governance, is a fine and clear example of the indisputable role of schools in political engagement (Foucault 1991). At the same time, the diversity of formats in which citizenship education is delivered, often anchored in safer (unanimous, uncontested) participatory models which try to make the best out of sometimes vague, changeable political priorities, comes with implications. Brown (2003) argues that 'the "active citizen" of contemporary curricula is, in fact, a deeply neoliberal subject' characterised by an individualistic-minded kind of engagement and 'an unprecedented degree of political passivity and complacency' (43).

Adding to the ever-disputed field of citizenship education, climate education is, currently, a major mandate (UNESCO 2015; Agenda 2030). Even though the potential of educational systems in motivating climate activism is stressed (e.g. Tinkler and Bousfield 2019), research has shown a tendency for a depoliticised approach to climate change: one mostly framed as techno-scientific issue, as a domain of science classroom, and detached from action (e.g. Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019). Ethnographic research involving environmental education reveals that adultist assumptions need to be seriously addressed – 'unlearned' – within educational settings (Ceaser 2014), and that counter-hegemonic practices and tools need to be brought into narratives of environmental education, in order to challenge existing structures and relationships of inequality (Tzou and Bell 2012). As Andreotti (2014) pleads concerning a critical global citizenship, educational approaches should discuss structural injustices and power relations, in which problems are collectivised rather than individualised. Biesta (2020) considers that education's functions should not be limited to qualification and socialisation. Following Arendt's value of plurality in the public realm, he argues for subjectification – in addition to the other two functions – highlighting that education should be about making possible the encounter with the materiality and sociality of the world. Thus, public pedagogy is conceptualised as entailing an interruptive quality by '"staging" dissensus […] that can act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness' aimed at 'keep [ing] open the opportunities for becoming public or, in Arendtian terms, to keep open the possibility of a space where freedom can appear' (Biesta 2012, 691–693). To be sure, the question of subject-ness is not about identity (who I am) nor about subjectivity (personal opinions and feelings), but rather about how these dimensions encounter the world (Biesta 2012).

Context and methodology

This article is based on ethnographic data collected within the project 'Imagi(ni)ng Democracy: European youth becoming citizens by visual participation', in which the method of *snap-along ethnography* (Luhtakallio and Meriluoto 2022) was developed to follow activist practices online-offline.[3] The article's title came from a #FridaysForFuture Instagram image of a street poster related to the international call for a global strike in November 2019, widely re-posted by some of the key informants. In Portugal, the

ethnography began in October 2019 and continued until November 2021. It was conducted mostly in one of the largest metropolitan areas of the country, but also encompassed data collection in the country's capital. The ethnography involved regular contact with a core-group of more than 30 young climate activists, aged 18-35, mostly middle-class, and belonging to different groups (e.g. School Strike for Climate, Extinction Rebellion) – in line with the fluid and intersectional character of the movement – even though this article rests mainly on data from the School Strike for Climate, the most nationally representative group. The intertwined nature of the climate movement is mirrored in the joint organisation of protests and the simultaneous participation of young people in more than one group. Also, some young activists, even if above 18, belong (sometimes exclusively) to the School Strike for Climate, once they are graduation or postgraduation students.

The ethnography was developed in alignment with wider political events – such as the COP25 counter-summit in 2019, the 'By 2020 We Rise UP' European campaign – and national climate claims – the closing of thermoelectric power stations, the opposition against building a new airport, and the end of gas and lithium exploration both in Portugal and in former colonies, such as Mozambique. Actually, a framing of current climate catastrophe in terms of colonialism, extractivism and capitalism is often integral to the movement's manifestos, encompassing claims for climate compensations from the Global North to the Global South, as a process of transformative justice and political power transfer towards historically marginalised communities.[4] Official responses to student climate action in Portugal reveal some ambivalence: A recent media analysis (Almeida 2022) accounts for local politicians supporting activists against the central government in what concerns fossil fuel exploration, whereas national school representatives and politicians make declarations that attempt to downplay both the legitimacy and the effects of school strikes.

Every ethnography implies an investment in *rapport* building, based on impression management efforts and the establishment of trust relationships. My position in the field was facilitated by being in the early 30s – a young adult woman who does not have a large age gap relative to the participants – and by being somewhat close to the activism sphere – due to past research experiences with youth political movements. The promotion of trust relationships rested on reciprocity, balancing the effort to not intentionally influence the course of the movement with a progressive responsibility of acting as bridging element between academia and activism – either by assisting activists in organising talks at the university or by engaging in collaborative writing processes with activists for scientific dissemination outlets. Such collaborative efforts eventually built the ethnographer's role not only as a researcher, but also as an 'adult ally' (Biswas and Mattheis 2020) or, as put by Bowman (2019), as a 'supportive scientist' whose methodological and epistemological positionings align with the consideration that 'climate action is more than protest: it is also a world-building project' (298). To be sure, such a participatory, horizontal approach was also instrumental to the ethnography itself: both softening any tension that might arise when an adult ethnographer works with young activists and minimising risks of the ethnographer's irrelevance throughout a two-years long fieldwork.

The ethnographer participated in the groups' meetings and events (online, during the pandemic), while following social media and online communications (Riot, WhatsApp).

Thus, the ethnographic method enabled participant observation of both the most visible face of activism – e.g. weekly strikes, public talks, demonstrations, civil disobedience acts – and its backstage – e.g. collective meetings and preparations for protests, informal moments of debriefing and hanging out. From an ethnographic point of view, such regularity and informality offer particularly interesting moments for capturing the texture of routine talks and relational dynamics. As aforementioned, relationship-building was a central process throughout an ethnography and it was, perhaps, the defining feature of the initial ethnographic phase: approaching the fieldsite. This is a key stage to develop trust and reciprocity relationships, which was done in line with a dynamic approach to consent as embedded in negotiated practices and relationship processes (Nairn et al. 2020), softening the gap between procedural-prescriptive ethics and real-life ethnographic situations (Neves, Holligan, and Deuchar 2018). Thus, gaining access to the field involved countless contacts, attendance to public demonstrations, presentations of the research project and its ethical safeguards to activist groups. Informed consent were signed by all participants, as this research is part of an ERC-funded project whose compliance to the required ethical standards had been pre-approved.

After some months following the activists, more active participants were invited to an interview: 22 interviews were conducted, based on a script exploring, e.g. pathways into climate engagement, social media practices and visual tools of activism. Thus, these interviews enabled to explore tensional relationships between the young people and significant adults which had been reported in fieldnotes: the strong, and ideologically oriented, opposition from family members and the difficulties caused by both 'authoritarian school principals' and reluctant teachers. The transversal and recurring nature of those oppositions caught my eye and pushed me to understand it: under what circumstances do young people manage to stay committed to activism while resisting daily opposition from influential adults? And how do these practices of resistance shape young people's own politicisation as climate activists?

The next section presents the main empirical results: first, the key obstacles found throughout the ethnographic fieldwork, related to both family and school contexts, and then the activists' practices of participation despite (and in response to) such obstacles.

Resisting adult antagonisms: radicalism, condescension and individualism

The family

Throughout the ethnography, the opposition of the activists' families to their engagement with the climate movement emerged recurrently. Soft versions include condescending indifference, while harder approaches encompass contempt and insults. Because the School Strike for Climate is formed by students largely dependent on their families, parents' attitudes towards activism can pose significant daily challenges for activists. During participant observation, it became puzzling how young people's political positions were forged and held at odds to their families'. In the online arena, for instance, a sort of 'damage control' approach is often adopted to manage visibility and avoid family pressures. As elaborated elsewhere, the strategic use of social media is part of

the activists' everyday practices (Malafaia and Meriluoto 2022) but dealing with both sides of the online sphere – empowerment and control – is also embedded in family relationships. Luísa, an active member of the climate strike and an animal-rights activist, talked about a situation in which she participated in a campaign relying on online visual tools, which prompted offensive behaviour from her mother, despite the usual editing cautions:

> I once did a 24-hour fast for the 'animals of the world' campaign the second day of every month. The idea is to fast in solidarity with animals which go from 24 to 72 hours without eating or drinking, in trucks. So, you do this and put a photograph [on social media] with a circle with a cross in the middle which represents an empty plate, the cutlery … The first time I did this, I edited everything so that it was not accessible to anyone associated with my parents, but even so my mother managed to find it and called me while I was in class with offensive language … […] My father, who is from the armed forces and a supporter of Chega [far-right party], is always saying that I'm wasting my time and that I will regret it in the future, because climate change doesn't exist. (Interview, February 2020)

The right-wing family background of many young activists is a relevant factor behind the lack of support for activism, which can range from quite radical undertones to condescending tolerance. The latter approach is illustrated in the next fieldwork excerpt – a chat with Gabriel (a 19-year-old student actively engaged in the School Strike for Climate) during one of the weekly Fridays For Future:

> Gabriel commented that sometimes it is not easy to do all this without the support of the family.
>
> – My family is from the centre-right, so you can imagine. My mom is always telling me that if this makes me happy, okay, but none of this will do any good. It's annoying always listening to this … Sometimes, on Fridays, my father asks me how many people have been on strike and laughs about the fact that there are not many, but well … .
>
> – What about your sister? – I asked him, because I recalled that he had a sister very close to his age.
>
> – My sister is monarchist … – his answer surprised me a great deal. (Fieldnote, November 22, 2019)

Conservative family backgrounds are often coupled with a devaluation of non-institutional (presumably less promising) arenas of participation and with an emphasis on standardised youth trajectories, based on individualistic values. Raquel, a 27-year-old master's student, belonging to the School Strike for Climate, explains how her family has radically different expectations concerning her life and how that undermines a collective approach to the climate crisis:

> My grandfather was the mayor of my city for 18 years for CDS [right-wing party]; I had everything to be a very different person. […] They [my family] are constantly telling me that I am no longer a teenager […] Why will I have a career if I am going to live on a planet where life is going to be completely unsustainable? […] What society expects from you is that you put your own interests first, but being a committed activist means putting the interests of the collective – and of the society which criticises you – first. (Interview, January 2020)

The family emerges as a bastion of social norms based on individualistic values prescribing how young people should lead their lives. Activism is seen as entailing individual risks for both their present (academic trajectories) and future (professional careers). As

stated by Lara, some adults may even laud the climate movement, as long as none of their children are part of it:

> This [climate activism] is all very pretty and very noble as long as it is other people's children […] Very often, our families praise Greta, as long as Greta is not Sofia or Manuel. Kids lie to organise themselves politically, they lie to take action […] I remember some kids who are 18 years old, sometimes even 17, minors really, which … well, one of them, for example, I know that her parents moved to another city to keep her away from these things … You also have parents who are supportive and who even get involved in the movement … but it's residual. (Interview, November 2020)

Adult obstacles to climate activism are something which young people also face when trying to mobilise for large protests. The experience of mobilising young students, a significant proportion of which are minors, makes activists realise the resistance of parents to facilitating their children's participation in global climate strikes, even though these bigger strikes only occur two or three times a year. The following excerpt, related to a preparatory meeting for a Global Climate Strike, illustrates these obstacles:

> When I went for a cigarette with Raquel and Marta, Raquel shared that her family is constantly demoralising her about her activism.
>
> – My mother often asks me if I like talking to the walls. She thinks this is useless, that no one listens to us, that nothing will change. They [parents] think that if it is not through the 'perching parties',[5] participation is useless. – Raquel said.
>
> The meeting proceeded, and the major topic was the youths' mobilisation for the next Global Strike.
>
> – The problem is school absences. – Raquel said – the only ones who can justify the absences are the parents.
>
> – But most parents don't want to justify them – Gabriel added.
>
> – In the last global strike, there were people who tried to never appear in the pictures because their parents didn't know they were there. – Raquel said. (Fieldnote, October 16, 2019)

Literature in the field of youth political participation classically attributes an undisputable role to the family as a central socialisation context (Jennings and Niemi 1974), crucial to understand processes of intergenerational transmission of political orientations and practices (Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 2005). Also, recent research reveals that radical climate activism is influenced by families' cultural capital and left-wing political socialisation (Gaborit 2020). Therefore, the ethnographic data presented came as a surprise. As referred by an activist, parental support for political activism exists 'but is residual'. Rooted on ideologically and morally-charged positions, the adults close to young people not only dismiss climate activism as an urgent (or even legitimate) struggle, but strive to convey individualistic norms and values: young people should care about their own individual future. Activism emerges as a distraction and pressures are made for them to focus on schooling pathways, professional prospects and, at best, institutional spaces of politics that may bring individual gains.

The school

The uneasy access to schools – involving negotiations with school boards – illustrates the lack of permeability to non-normative climate education, and the predominant

perception that political affairs divert attention from school. This emerges as a structural barrier which is difficult to alleviate, even with youth-adult partnerships within the movement. The following fieldnote displays one of the many Fridays For Future taking place at the sidewalk stairs of the city hall, when the young activists decided that, instead of just being still, holding posters, they would carry out a *discobedience*[6] protest. While they were dancing to the Bee Gees' song 'Stayin' alive', the police arrived and asked the young protesters to stop. The mother of two teenage boys participating in the strike came by and intervened in favour of the activists. During this event, I came to realise the interplay of obstacles at stake regarding the school arena:

> The mother of the two teenage brothers participating in the Strike was trying to talk with the police officers. After the police left, forcing the activists to stop the performance, everyone just sat down with the posters. The boys' mother, who belongs to the parents' association of the school of one of the boys, was talking to Gabriel about the possibility of the School Climate Strike giving a talk there. She is available to help, warning, however, that the vast majority of parents are against that.
>
> – Seriously? – I reacted, while listening to her.
>
> – Yes. Parents want their children to be in the classroom, to get the best grades possible to access university. Anything which distracts the kids from that is not welcome – she told me. (Fieldnote, February 14, 2020)

Furthermore, when it comes to the role of the school in promoting climate action, the young activists point out some problems: the climate crisis ends up being conveyed in an emotionally detached way, in which alternatives are downgraded to individual-blaming narratives, hampering connections with principles of justice and collective implications.

> Luísa – What is happening to the planet is a lot for people to deal with. But there is also the problem of climate education in schools […] People begin to think that it is their fault because instead of going to buy pasta in bulk, they buy pasta in a plastic package. […] I think that civic education in the Portuguese school is a failed project … . (Interview, February 2020)

The emphasis on a cognitive dimension of learning and the absence of conditions for expressive and emotional connections with climate futures are at the core of young people's critiques of the school's role. Lara, a 30-year-old activist, assesses these issues and talks about a 'generational betrayal' referring to the neglect in the uneven intergenerational implications of climate crisis and the condescending and individualistic approaches to climate education and action.

> [In school] it is a very rational approach, with [climate issues being] delivered in a completely detached way, in the midst of other contents. […] At school, these questions have to go through the emotional dimension in order to create an effective response which leads us to action. […] This younger generation – Greta generation, as I call it – has this notion that they […] will be hurt by the consequences [of climate change] even more [than adults]. I would let young people lead the process and let young people educate each other … […] We have the teachers saying "Kids, recycle!", "Kids, do this and that!" […] If adults do not [engage with climate action] what happens is what I call generational betrayal – people who are not connected at all, nor are politically active, telling you what you should do. So, in the future you will be […] the person who turns to young people and says "Kids, this is how you should live". (Interview, November 2020)

This risk of 'generational betrayal' – the reproduction of adultist norms and structures – jeopardises climate political action, as data show young activists experiencing disregard for their political knowledge and practices by educational actors. The distancing of school education from political activism and youths' experiences may well reinforce conceptual, individualistic and technical-oriented types of environmental education (Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019), narrowing the room for climate-justice education. Scholarly arguments claiming for climate education to be grounded on mutual teaching (Biswas and Mattheis 2020), counter-hegemonic narratives (Tzou and Bell 2012), and the recognition of youths' political passions (Mayes and Hartup 2021) find echo in the empirical data presented.

Interruption and imagination: agency and urgency in climate action

Repurposing privileges

Missing school in protest, namely in Global-North countries, is an act of symbolically boycotting a relatively secure right – the right to study – to put pressure on governments to shift their profit-oriented priorities towards a climate-just world (Biswas and Mattheis 2020). The ways in which young protesters address privilege (questioning and challenging it) lead to a repurposing of those privileges in favour (and as part) of practices of activism. To be sure, the School Strike for Climate demands a significant degree of commitment, considering the protests' weekly nature (occurring every Friday) – let alone other regular events and activities. The following fieldnote excerpt concerns one of the Fridays For Future: while I was sharing the stairs of city hall with young activists, I was struck by the priority assigned to the climate struggle.

> I arrived downtown at 3 pm and sat on the stairs by the posters. Gabriel asked me how my research work was going, and we talked a bit about school.
>
> – How is university? – I asked.
>
> – […] I am learning to reconcile the strike and the university, but the priority is this, not the university. I'm more useful here than in the university. And besides, this is more urgent than university. – I listened to him, surprised, even if it is hardly arguable. Raquel nodded, agreeing with Gabriel's perspective.
>
> – But it's also important that you don't hurt your studies … – I said to Gabriel, nonetheless.
>
> – But if I'm not here, I'm doing myself more harm, in the long term – He answered me. […]
>
> – This is a lot of work, isn't it? – I commented, as he really seemed tired.
>
> – It's supposed to be super tiring because we are fighting a system which is very well structured. – Gabriel replied. (Fieldnote, November 1, 2019)

Even though these young people experience disempowering positions in relation to some of their socialisation contexts, their activism also relies in taking ownership of their privileges (of formal education, of digital savviness, of social capital, etc.) for confronting power structures. The next excerpt relates to a period prior to one of the global climate strikes, when young activists were dealing with the usual hindrances to students' participation, namely from school boards:

> During the meeting, someone said that some schools used to schedule exams for the days of the global climate strikes. […] Raquel insisted that the students' mobilisation inside each

> school is key.
>
> – School principals are increasingly authoritarian … how do you deal with authoritarian principals? The only way is for the school students to collectively organise around petitions … – Raquel said, looking at the two high-school young brothers. In addition, Raquel suggested that whenever a school gets on board, that support should be advertised on social media, encouraging students from other schools to put pressure on their schools as well. (Fieldnote, February 9, 2020)

The next excerpt concerns the 'Fossil Banks No Thanks' campaign which was being planned nationwide. It depicts the repurposing of privilege – in this case, insider information – in favour of the climate movement's goals, even if at the expense of an instrumentalisation of family relationships:

> At the strategic meeting, Raquel revealed that she had the information about the day of the Annual Meeting of the [Bank name omitted for confidentiality reasons]. The goal was to organise a protest. Some hours before, Raquel had already told the regional group that she was thinking of presenting this proposal. Everyone embraced the idea. Then, at the strategic meeting, which sought that national climate groups coordinate their action agendas for the next wave of mobilisation, Raquel pointed out the confidentiality of the information she was sharing. Raquel got that information from her uncle, who works at the [Bank name]. Although her uncle did not reveal this information directly to her, she came to acquire it by talking to other family members. She knew the protest would cause family problems. In fact, the protest in front of one of the Bank's headquarters some weeks before brought some discomfort with her uncle, once it took place at the agency where he works. 'You do your part and I do mine', Raquel told her uncle, according to what she later told us. (Fieldnote, February 21, 2020)

Using privileged positions for purposes of collective action implies questioning such privileges in the first place. By having young activists talk about their trajectories, the questioning of educational privileges emerged. Upper-class school environments or the family's economic status are some of the aspects problematised towards a socio-political positioning of individual responsibility within a climate justice frame.

> I am a privileged person […] My parents' money allowed me to study at [a private college] … yet, I realised that if I am privileged, I am against all of this … […] Why can't I be a class traitor and fight all this? […] Why should I, in order to live in my Western comfort, have to jeopardise the well-being of a person living in Kenya or Laos or Cambodia, or Tuvalu … who will eventually be submerged? Globalisation also requires collective responsibility […] the climate struggle is that which most confronts the system in which we live … and if I must degrow, I cannot live in a state of permanent production. (Paulo, May 2020)

The findings show how axes of privilege and disempowerment interact to shape everyday experiences of activism. This can be of assistance in a more nuanced understanding of how identity elements linked to the climate crisis affect the ways in which privilege is lived (and repurposed). Privilege needs to be approached as socially dynamic experiential practice and, also, as an intersectional phenomenon (Johnson 2006). In this case, having an upper socioeconomic status and living in a Global-North country, seem to be transformed by the experience of identification as an out-group characterised by disillusionment with the inaction of older generations (parents, political leaders, economic elites) in the face of climate crisis (Holmberg and Alvinius 2021). Therefore, paradoxically enough, identity elements of climate precariat

interconnect with privilege, which rather than being reproduced, dismissed or ignored, is repurposed towards how individual activists negotiate their everyday lives as activists striving for sustainable futures.

Practising education through role reversal

In July 2020, the climate strikers decided to use the streets in front of national and local government buildings as classroom stages. The performance was the same in several cities: one of the activists performed the role of a teacher, while the others played the role of students using masks of well-known politicians and corporate executives. The contestation revolved around the national economic recovery plan which was being elaborated to face the Covid-triggered economic recession. The performance consisted in having the 'politicians' raising economically oriented questions and arguments, while the 'teacher' was pointing to the financial interests underlying the investment in fossil fuel industries rather than energy transition plans. By performing as educators, the young activists actively challenge condescending views of them and expose what they consider to be greenwashing manoeuvres by the Portuguese government. Similarly, in school talks, the young activists present themselves as politically knowledgeable actors and, simultaneously, as young activists with whom students can relate. These school-related practices, entailing a role-reversal strategy, emerge as forms of paving counter-narratives to paternalist approaches to youth engagement, through experimenting an interruption to the state of affairs and imagining another education altogether.

As seen in the previous section, the school continues to be perceived as a guardian of the 'status quo', having a more normative and disciplinary role than an empowering and horizontal one. Paying attention to the practices of climate activism uncovers interesting potentialities of activism-based climate education. The next fieldnote concerns a meeting in which school talks were being prepared, with activists using both science- and protest-based images, grounded in a prospective intention, aiming at politicising societal notions of future(s):

> The next topic on the agenda was the joint preparation of the powerpoint presentation for schools. […] It was decided that it would be made primarily from images (of the climate crisis and protests). It includes a climate-science briefing on what is happening and may happen (future scenarios presented by the IPCC, according to different thresholds of global warming increase); the relationship between individual and collective action, through an illustration of how much greenhouse gases would be avoided if a person would turn into a 'climate franciscan' (a 'perfect' life-style environmentalist) and would influence 1000 other people (about 400 thousand tonnes of emissions would be saved) and, finally, how much carbon a power station in Portugal produces in one year (6 million tonnes of GHG per year). (Fieldnote, October 10, 2019)

In the Global Climate Strike in November 2019, under the motto 'This Christmas we don't want a present, we want a future', the young activists shouted claims, painted banners, echoed chants and ended the demonstration with a street assembly. Building on the sense of commonality which was shaped during the protest with young students who were, for the first time, striking school, the assembly started with an open microphone with which every youngster, regardless of their age, could speak up and set grounds for collectiveness. This was a moment to connect the movement with the

schools' daily lives, with students talking about the scope of influence they feel they have in decisions affecting them, and about environmental initiatives they were organising or aspiring to in their schools. Students from different schools shared, for instance, their experiences of pressuring school boards to adopt ecological energy systems and to implement a weekly vegan day in the school canteen. These seemingly small battles were carefully listened to. At the end, older activists from climate groups participating in the demonstration voiced messages to these young students 'to keep fighting, to make alliances, to do petitions, to insist on striking the system' – as summarised by an Extinction Rebellion activist, who asked for the mic at the very end of the assembly.

The adult antagonisms experienced by young activists reported above – e.g. condescending attitudes towards youths' political agency, individualistic-minded notions of future, anachronic versions of climate education – are challenged by acting in reverse. By performing as if in power – playing the role of educators in the streets and inside the schools –, young activists prefigure other political and educational orders. They act, collectively and in public, based on what Biesta (2020) would term as a 'reality check' – encounters with the world and the expressive and identity results of those encounters. By reversing power roles, they perform as interrupters of the institutionalised flow and open up space for imaginations on new ways of being and doing.

Concluding discussion

This article departs from the paradoxical roles attributed to young people when it comes to the climate crisis: both victims and stakeholders, political protagonists and school truants. Despite these conflicting narratives, the youth character of climate activism tends to be generally applauded and will surely be part of the history of climate mobilisations (Han and Ahn 2020). Yet, this article reveals not only how youths resist their political downgrading but also the obstacles – both explicit and tacit – which adults create when collective climate action takes concrete shape close to home (and school). Condescending attitudes, radical oppositions and pressures to prioritise individual interests compose everyday obstructions which young people deal with while they are driven by the urgency to mobilise towards pressuring governments and corporations to take responsibility before the world changes beyond recognition. The very fact that such barriers to participation are lived by so many young people is, *per se*, quite revealing of deeper attitudes towards climate change, coupled with social norms and expectations for youth trajectories. By paying attention to the interplay between the adult obstacles to climate activism and the private and public ways in which resistances to adultism unfold within political participation, we begin to uncover contested notions of future and education as part of how politicising processes develop. The ethnographic findings depict how adult power is contested, at a collective and public level, and simultaneously subverted at an individual and private level.

As elaborated in the theoretical section, the conceptualisation of the climate precariat as a social field enables grasping important elements of vulnerabilities which young people experience (Holmberg and Alvinius 2021). The temporal element is characterised by a reversal of the present-future relationship which, in the case of the climate precariat, is interwoven and non-linear: contrary to the original 'precariat', the temporality has collective dimensions and forces young people to live in relation to their future; in that

sense, it is 'the *present* [which] is stolen from the climate precariat' (Holmberg and Alvinius 2021, 7). Such conceptualisation helps in making sense of the degree of implication expressed by young activists, which is illustrated by, for instance, the prompt reaction of Gabriel to my concern of his striking school on a regular basis: 'If I'm not here, I'm doing myself more harm, in the long term'. At the time, my comment to Gabriel was motivated by the risks and hindrances which I was already aware of regarding his family's attitudes towards climate activism. In fact, the ethnographic fieldwork revealed that the vulnerabilities entailed in the concept of climate precariat intersect, on-the-ground, with other power dynamics which young people face in relation to school and family contexts which, contrary to what literature suggests, may be radically adverse (cf. Gaborit 2020; Tinkler and Bousfield 2019). I argue that what is at stake is a clash between different notions of future and, ultimately, of precarity: on the one hand, the adults' pressure on young people to follow standardised, normative individual pathways (ultimately, towards an economically secure future); on the other hand, the young activists' inability to focus on individual-related concerns which can, ultimately, lead them to economic precarity – the individual present is, then, colonised by the risks posed to a collective future. The findings show that competing visions about the future are played out daily in the young activists' lives in-and-out of the family context. These visions are rooted in a tension between individualism and collectivism which is coupled with other dichotomies: institutional/non-institutional participation and materialistic/non-materialistic concerns. In other words, oppositions seem to be grounded on the assumption that climate change either does not qualify as a problem or is not really an urgent problem, and climate activism either does not fit the institutionally more acceptable forms of participation or undermines the prospects of a stable and socially accepted life course.

Resorting to the concept of climate precariat, the lack of recognition of the severity of climate crisis by the young people's significant adults contributes to insecurity-related vulnerabilities and becomes a part of their identity construction (Holmberg and Alvinius 2021). Implied in the identity of 'climate precariat' is, then, the perception of asymmetrical power relations between the young (activists) and the adult (political leaders) and the need to expose polarised attitudes towards climate change. This relates with analyses of public discourses of climate activists which highlight the juxtaposition of young activists' and adult leaders' positionality (action/inaction) as a counter-power (Leung 2020). Interestingly, such counter-power also unfolds in action – for instance, in public displays of protest performances in which young activists act as the teachers of politicians. The participants' positions as young pupils are, then, reconfigured into empowered positions of activists who, while protesting and pointing to political greenwashing and governmental inaction, also question who is entitled to teach and educate and, ultimately, what being a responsible and knowledgeable adult means in the context of climate crisis. Likewise, individualistic approaches to citizenship education (Brown 2003) and the depoliticised framing of climate change in schools (Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019) are tackled when the opportunity to deliver school talks is given to young activists, who take in their hands the responsibility of discussing structural and collective dimensions of climate crisis, approaching them with images grounded on reason-emotion dialectics.

This article shows that climate activism develops vis-à-vis resistances to adults' power – across meso and micro-levels – and takes on subtle strategic forms in family

relationships and overtly disruptive shapes in public action. Issues of power and privilege are at stake when considering the young activists' backgrounds and access to schooling and, on the flipside, their political marginalisation and dependence on their families. Indeed, the School Strike for Climate comes as a paradigmatic example against the visions of young people as politically 'in formation' (cf. Flanagan and Gallay 1995), with young activists challenging dominant values and norms by going against what they are expected to do: attend school every day. Interestingly, taking ownership of personal and family privileges involves their reconfiguration as tools of political action – the findings reveal that young activists lead their lives guided by the need to take advantage of privileged positions in favour of a more pressing issue: climate change. Instrumentalisation of family relationships is as an example of radical repurposing of privilege(d) (information and contacts) to fuel climate struggle, while alignment with a 'degrowth' economic paradigm, and awareness of a collective responsibility towards what is happening in the Global-South, implies redirecting social and economic privileges towards what Andreotti (2014) calls critical global citizenship. The empirical findings discussed in this article show that, while challenging the overall political system, the young activists are pushed to challenge their own socio-political role in the structure.

I argue that practices of politicising climate crisis incorporate processes of interrupting adult structures and enacting an educational reimagination. In Biesta's (2020) view, the educational agent – the teacher – is perceived as an 'interrupter' who should lay the grounds for students' opportunities for political existence – to become the subjects of their own lives in the world. Paradoxically, activism prefigures those encounters with the world (and with others in the world) which instigate processes of subjectification, and the engagement with limits to action and collectivism. This article's data show that practices of politicisation around climate crisis end up being oriented by resistance to adult norms, through diverse strategies, namely by repurposing privileges and acting as educators in public, as modes of protest (performative acts) and as modes of being (and learning) together in public. I draw on Biesta's notion of 'pedagogy of interruption' to foreground the possibility of climate activists as interrupters, contributing for reimagining the political and educational roles of youth. According to the conceptualisation of subjectification as a neglected function of education, at stake 'is not merely an interruption of the existing order, but an interruption which results in a reconfiguration of this order into one in which new ways of being and acting exist and new identities come into play' (Biesta 2011, 5). The pressing question is whether there is room for embracing and learning from them.

School teachers scheduling exams for the days of climate strikes, school principals and parents' associations opposing school talks about climate, family members hampering youth's activism – let alone the unresponsiveness of adult political leaders – are all manifestations of asymmetric power relations both in school and society. For bridges to be built, structures and assumptions need to change. Other countries' reports show government leaders reacting with disdain to climate strikes (Biswas and Mattheis 2020) and school systems infantilising young people's (political) emotions and approaching climate action as in need of being contained (Mayes and Hartup 2021). We, then, witness to 'adultism processes of […] power and domination' (Biswas and Mattheis 2020, 149) coupled with 'the contemporary obsession with the domain of qualification' (Biesta 2020, 102), which widens the gap between education and politics. Drawing on Biesta's (2020) theorising of subjectification, this article makes the case that young

activists are actually taking the interruptive quality of education into their own hands, thereby challenging 'the philosophical assumption that it is adults who must always, and necessarily, teach children to prepare them for a better future' (Biswas and Mattheis 2020, 145). While virtually every social movement entails collective political processes with pedagogic potential, the implications of social movements' research to education are seldom given due consideration, and collective political contexts are rarely addressed from an educational point of view. This article shows that young people's envisioning of climate politics is intertwined with a reconfiguration of their sociopolitical and educational positions, which are prefigured in moments of activism, and may contribute to galvanise new ways of imagining education.

Notes

1. https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/260645.
2. This article focuses on young people over 18, most of them are still students, living with their families. For clarity sake, the use of the term 'adult' is not bonded on its legal definition, but is rather closer to its understanding as social category – in line with the contingencies of contemporary modernity, to which standard models of adulthood do not largely adhere to individuals' practices (for this discussion, see e.g., Blatterer 2007). Additionally, the social and political implications of philosophical assumptions about adults, as well as the dominance of adultist norms in young people's practices (e.g., Biswas and Mattheis 2020) can be more clearly grasped by highlighting the relationship between the young activists and the 'adult' actors (political leaders, school authorities, older family members). This serve the purpose of shedding light on the relational power differential at stake.
3. The 'snap-along method' is characterised by concomitant online and offline observations. While this article was triggered by an Instagram image shared among activists, online data ended up not being central in its final versions for the sake of sharpening the argument. For detailed explanations of the snap-along method, including illustrations of the method application in the Portuguese ethnography, see Luhtakallio and Meriluoto 2022; and Malafaia and Meriluoto 2022.
4. Public manifestos of the School Strike for Climate in Portugal available at https://greveclimaticaestudantil.pt/category/greves–acoes/.
5. 'Perching parties' is an expression referring to the political parties usually represented in the parliament.
6. 'Discobedience' (combining 'disco' and 'disobedience'), is a type of protest action consisting of a dance troupe performing to the sound of 80s songs, aiming at raising awareness of climate emergency.

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