Generational revolt: Youth climate action and risk

Introduction:

Last summer, over 700 activists were arrested in New York City (NYC) for blockading Citibank's headquarters in Tribeca, demanding an end its financing to the fossil fuel industry. Among them were many young people, some as young as 16, who faced police violence, legal repercussions, and potential long-term consequences for their actions. Their participation begs an important question: *What drives young people in New York City to engage in high-risk civil disobedience for climate justice?* The grassroots climate justice movement, which often tends to prefer disruptive tactics, is distinct in its intersectional approach, linking environmental degradation to racial capitalism, colonial extraction, and intergenerational inequity (Garcia et al., 2025). Unlike mainstream environmentalism, which often prioritizes technocratic solutions, Frontline-led and youth-led groups like have often emphasized civil resistance, using body blockades, structure blockades (such as tripods or lockboxes), event disruptions, and graffiti or property destruction – tactics that can carry long-term physical and legal consequences for those who choose them. While social movement theorists like Erica Chenoweth and Andreas Malm have extensively analyzed the strategic efficacy of civil disobedience, there is a gap in understanding the personal and collective motivations young people's choice participate in such actions (Ansah et al., 2025). This literature review synthesizes existing research on the psychological, emotional, and structural forces that motivate young activists who care about their future towards disruptive, high-risk tactics, with a focus on New York City's unique socio-political context. I integrate theoretical frameworks from social movement studies, affect theory, and critical youth studies to this review challenges dominant narratives that dismiss young

activists as "idealistic" or "performative," instead positioning them as strategic actors navigating intersecting crises.

Social Movement Theory:

There is vast academic literature on the efficacy and strategic foundations of nonviolent protests, which provides crucial frameworks for understanding how civil resistance operates as a political force. Social movement theories emerged from empirical observations of historical movements and have been refined through contemporary research, particularly through the work of scholars like Erica Chenoweth, Gene Sharp, and others. These works tend to focus on the nature and impact of the movement itself, with a strong focus on the 'nonviolence' element of nonviolent civil disobedience (with sometimes differing definitions of what violence means). Their findings challenge conventional assumptions about power and social change while offering insights into why nonviolent movements often succeed where violent ones fail.

Early frameworks of social movement theory traditionally emphasize the structural conditions and organizational resources that enable collective action. Resource mobilization theory argues that popular movements succeed when they manage to leverage both material and immaterial resources (which can include networks legitimacy, for example) to maintain and grow participation and pressure on decision-making elites (Golhasani and Hosseinirad, 2017). Resource mobilization theory was one of the first to shift the academic focus away from grievances themselves to the capacity for and power of mobilization, highlighting the success of the Civil Rights Movement through its use of churches, unions, and student groups to coordinate sit-ins, boycotts, and marches (ibid.).

More recently, influential research by Chenoweth and Stephan, authors of *Why Civil Resistance Works,* demonstrates that nonviolent campaigns are twice as likely to succeed as violent ones, achieving their goals 53% of the time compared to 26% for armed struggles (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2011). Chenoweth and Stephan famously coined the "3.5% rule", arguing that where movements mobilized 3.5% of a population, they have managed to consistently topple regimes. This research underscores the power of mass participation, with emphasis on nonviolent methods (ibid.). Chenoweth and Stephan highlight these factors in the success of civil resistance:

1. Lower Barriers to Participation: Nonviolent actions allow broad demographics to join in various capacities, as opposed to armed struggles which demand extensive training and commitments (ibid.).
2. Loyalty Shifts Among Elites: Nonviolence in the face of state violence provokes sympathy. Security forces and state bureaucrats are more likely to defect or refuse to suppress protests when confronted with disciplined nonviolence (ibid.).
3. Moral Legitimacy: Nonviolence can encourage larger domestic and international support, isolating repressive regimes. Violent movements, by contrast, are often used as a justification for state crackdowns (ibid.).

Andreas Malm's work provides a radical counterpoint to classic social movement theories by arguing that strategic nonviolence alone is insufficient to confront the urgency of the climate crisis. In *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, Malm critiques the pacifist orthodoxy of mainstream climate activism, championed by Chenoweth and Stephan, arguing instead that property destruction, such as direct dismantling of fossil fuel infrastructure, is both morally justifiable and strategically necessary when mass nonviolent protests fail to halt rapid climate catastrophes (Malm, 2021). Malm builds his argument by drawing historical parallels to abolitionist and anti-

colonial movements, where violence against property (burning plantations or sabotaging railroads, for example, was key to disrupting oppressive systems (ibid.). Malm maintains a strict distinction between targeting infrastructure and harming people, building on anti-capitalist arguments on private property as a source for unchecked emissions for profits to begin with (Malm, 2021). Therefore, Malm advocates for a disciplined militant flank within the climate movement that would force systemic change, arguing that capitalism's dependence on fossil fuels requires more confrontational tactics to "shift the Overton window" and demand state action (Malm, 2021).

However, while traditional social movement theories analyze the strategic efficacy of civil disobedience and its various methods, they often overlook *why* individuals, especially youth, choose high-risk actions. To address this, I attempt to bridge social movement theories with theories that focus on the psychology identity politics of political action and risk-taking.

'Dual Horror':

The work of Uysal et al. (2024) in *The Horror of Today and the Terror of Tomorrow* provides an interesting psychological approach for understanding youth participation in high-risk climate activism. Uysal et al. analyzes the concept of 'dual horror'- meaning the tension between present repression (risk of action) and future climate catastrophe (risk of inaction). Their research, based on surveys German climate activists, reveals that activists are more likely to engage in the risk of action, through tactics like property damage or blockades, when they perceive institutional channels as ineffective (Uysal, Martinez and Vestergren, 2024).

Uysal et al. argue that activists operate within a 'double bind'. The risk of inaction fuels urgency, but often leads to moderate tactics like protests or lobbying, as these are seen as more inclusive

and sustainable long-term. On the other hand, the risk of action correlates with confrontational tactics, as activists who are already facing immediate repression (e.g., police brutality) may adopt a 'nothing left to lose' mentality (Uysal, Martinez and Vestergren, 2024). In that sense, Uysal highlights how politicized and oppressed identities mediate risk perceptions: Politicized identities ("climate striker", "frontline defender") shape risk assessments. Youth of color, for example, who face disproportionate police violence, report higher willingness to risk arrest, framing inaction as complicity and seeing police violence as somewhat inevitable regardless of type of action (ibid.). This mirrors findings from the Standing Rock protests, where Indigenous youth linked fossil fuel resistance to ancestral survival.

'Feminist Killjoy':

Sarah Ahmed, coining the term 'feminist killjoy', can be related back to the tradition of affect theory, which challenges the notion that activism is purely strategic, highlighting how emotions like anger, grief, and hope drive participation (Ahmed and Bonis, 2010). The concept of the "feminist killjoy," as provides us with a powerful lens for understanding the emotional and political labor of activists. Ahmed's theory argues that the feminist killjoy is a figure who disrupts the false harmony of oppressive systems by refusing to, for example, laugh at sexist jokes or calling out racism. In the case of climate activism, the feminist killjoy can do this by, for example, interrupting the complacency of those who benefit from ecological destruction (ibid.). Applied to the context of youth climate civil disobedience, Ahmed's work can explain how young people embrace the role of the killjoy as both a survival strategy and a radical act of alternative world-building. The affective dimension of this identity is crucial: climate activism is not just a rational response to scientific data and strategic social movement theory, but a deeply emotional, not always rational, reaction to the violence and anxiety of climate collapse.

Ahmed shows how the killjoy is often pathologized: it is accused of being too angry, too disruptive, or too unwilling to compromise (ibid.). However, Ahmed argues that this very disruption is what makes the killjoy politically powerful. In the context of youth climate activism, the killjoy's refusal to perform gratitude or hope on demand (e.g., the trope of the 'hopeful young activist' who joins a march with a witty sign as opposed to the reality of young activists who take high risks) becomes a form of resistance in itself. For example, when Greta Thunberg famously declared, "I don't want your hope, I want you to panic", she was embodying the killjoy's rejection of empty optimism (Thunberg, 2021). This dynamic is particularly pronounced for young activists of color, who are forced to navigate the additional burden of racialized stereotypes that dismiss their anger as irrational or dangerous. The killjoy framework helps explain why young activists in NYC, particularly those from frontline communities, are drawn to confrontational and highly disruptive tactics like body blockades or fossil fuel infrastructure disruptions: these actions are not just strategic but also deeply affective, a way of channeling grief and rage into collective action.

Resisting Adult Tyranny:

One of the most critical yet understudied factors shaping youth climate activism is adultism: the systemic marginalization of young people's political agency. Adultism manifests in multiple ways within social movements, from the infantilization of youth voices in media coverage to the structural barriers that prevent meaningful participation in the political life. Bowman's analysis of youth climate strikes as "subaltern activism" highlights how adult-centered institutions and thinking often dismiss young activists as either naïve or performative, obscuring the radical political ideas that drive their actions (Bowman, 2020). Bowman argues that young activists are often framed as 'political apprentices' or 'citizens in training' rather than agents in their own

rights, meaning their political actions are seen as an act of learning about politics rather than a meaningful act of protest (ibid.). Dupuis-Déri's study of Québec student strikes reveals how school administrations and adult policymakers frequently suppress youth-led movements, framing civil disobedience as illegitimate childish tantrums rather than as a necessary response to institutional failure (Dupuis-Déri, 2021).

Institutionalized exclusion from mainstream and 'legitimate' political spaces, according to Bowman, leads young activists to take a radical turn. The structural exclusion of youth from formal political processes, such as voting age restrictions and the co-optation of youth activism by NGOs, creates a paradox: young people are simultaneously hailed as the 'future' of the world and denied the agency to shape that future. This exclusion fuels what Bowman terms a 'subaltern' resistance, where young activists, particularly those from marginalized communities, adopt disruptive tactics not just to demand climate action but to assert their legitimacy as political actors (Bowman, 2020). The climate strikes, for example, are not merely about reducing carbon emissions; they are a direct challenge to the adult tyranny that governs not just political institutions but also mainstream environmental organizations (Bowman, 2020).

The interplay between adultism and subaltern resistance reveals a broader tension in the climate movement between a fight for institutional legitimacy and a fight for radical change. Mainstream environmental organizations often prioritize policy reform and public advocacy, strategies that rely on access to adult-dominated spaces like legislatures. In contrast, youth-led movements like Sunrise Movement or Fridays for Future work from a position of structural exclusion, which shapes both their tactics and their goals. Young people are much more likely to perceive institutional channels (e.g., lobbying, voting) as futile, justifying the turn toward disruption as the only viable means of forcing change (ibid.). This is especially true for youth from communities

already bearing the brunt of environmental racism, who see climate activism as inseparable from struggles for abolition, housing justice, and migrant rights.

Additionally, this points to a generational conflict within the climate movement. Bowman points to a pattern of adult co-optation of youth activism: where young people are tokenized as 'inspirational' figures but denied decision-making power (Bowman, 2020). Paired with Ahmed's work, which shows how systems often absorb critique in ways that neutralize its transformative potential, show how young people choose to be killjoys within movement spaces, to resist this absorption, and to insist on the radical edge of their politics even at the cost of being labeled 'divisive' or 'unrealistic'.

Reflections:

The literature's insights invites reflections for activists navigating intergenerational movement-building and strategic escalation. In order to foster coalitions across generations without adult co-optation, youth must be centered as decision-makers, not mascots. This requires structural shifts: adult allies should cede institutional and material power (such as funding or media connections) while supporting youth-led tactics without diluting their radical edge. Meanwhile, older activists must confront their own adultism by recognizing youth expertise on climate trauma, a lived reality many adults don't have to live with as much.

Secondly, Affect reasoning, meaning channeling grief, rage, and joy, is a powerful tool for mobilization, but avoiding doomerism must mean balancing emotional rawness with tangible victories. Movements like Sunrise NYC use affinity groups to process collective trauma while training members in direct action, ensuring emotions fuel strategy rather than paralysis. Climate actions across the world have centered emotions and affect reasoning – not just climate anxiety

and grief but also militant joy and a radical hope for a better future. How we, as activists, leverage and allow space for affect reasoning shapes the actions we lead, the impact we have, and the audience we draw in.

Thirdly, the risk calculation of action versus inaction is deeply contextual. For frontline youth, whose communities already face state violence and climate disasters, repression may be inevitable regardless of tactics, which tends to lead to bolder high risk actions. Yet it is key for us, as the climate movement, to rethink how we think about action and risk without leaving frontline communities to fend for themselves and carry most of the risk. Solidarity is deeply intertwined with 'risk' and the types of actions we take, and we cannot allow only those who feel like they don't have much left to lose to take those risks. However, the key is ensuring escalated tactics serve strategic goals, not just catharsis.

Conclusion:

This literature review examined the complex interplay of structural, emotional, and strategic forces that drive young activists to engage in high-risk civil disobedience for climate justice, with implications for the movement writ-large, and specifically for the climate movement in NYC, where I organize civil disobedience protests. By bridging social movement theory, affect studies, and critiques of adultism, I highlight how youth participation in disruptive tactics is not merely a reaction to the climate crisis, but a calculated response to political marginalization, intersecting injustices, and the affective weight of climate grief and radical joy.

Traditional frameworks like Chenoweth and Stephan's research on nonviolent resistance provide critical insights into the efficacy of mass mobilization, yet fail to fully capture why people adopt confrontational tactics. Uysal et al.'s dual horror framework and Sara Ahmed's feminist killjoy

theory help explain how emotions like rage fuel action, while Bowman and Dupuis-Déri's work on adultism reveals how structural exclusion pushes youth toward subaltern resistance.

Future research should prioritize youth-led participatory methods to avoid replicating the very marginalization this literature critiques. Meanwhile, movements must grapple with practical questions: How can intergenerational coalitions share power equitably? How can activists balance militant escalation with broad mobilization? And how can affective resilience be sustained in the face of escalating repression and climate disasters?

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