POSTAPCALYPTIC ENVIRONMENTALISM: A MOVEMENT FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CLIMATE ADAPTATION?

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CITATION


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ABSTRACT

As climate movements are growing around the world, so too is a postapocalyptic form of environmentalism. While apocalyptic environmentalism warns of future catastrophe in the case of inaction, its postapocalyptic sibling assumes that catastrophe is already here or unavoidable. In this paper, I explore the so far overlooked strategic implications of this presumed postapocalyptic current on strategizing within the climate change movement (CCM). I analyze whether it affects activists’ ability to continue working on climate mitigation, and in particular, whether it may cause a shift in focus to adapting to those consequences that may now be considered unavoidable. This shift is arguably desirable from the point of view of transformational adaptation, which opposes business-as-usual climate adaptation by arguing that climate adaptation should include a radical transformation of society that addresses the systemic drivers of environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, and inequality. Some have argued that this view is still an idea without an agent. A postapocalyptic climate movement, with its focus on unavoidable catastrophe, could fill that gap. The paper presents data from a comparative qualitative study of climate activism in five European cities: Malmö, Hamburg, Antwerp, Bristol and Manchester. Based on 46 qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations, it is concluded that while elements of postapocalyptic environmentalism appear to be widespread in Northwestern Europe, it exists in parallel to the apocalyptic variant. The latter continues to inform strategies that therefore remain focused on mitigation, whereas the former is treated as a dark thought to be dealt with in a more ‘therapeutic’ fashion. Still, many signs are found of a cautious exploration of engagement with adaptation. This, however, falls short of the encompassing project that proponents of transformational adaptation advocate.
SERIES FOREWORD

This working paper was written as part of the Earth System Governance Project — a global research alliance, the largest social science research network in the area of governance and global environmental change. Earth system governance is defined in this Project as the system of formal and informal rules, rule-making systems, and actor-networks at all levels of human society (from local to global) that are set up to steer societies towards preventing, mitigating and adapting to environmental change and earth system transformation, within the normative context of Sustainable Development.

Based on this general notion, the Earth System Governance Project advances the 2018 Science and Implementation Plan that is organized around five research lenses and four contextual conditions, which are brought together in a research framework. The Science Plan emphasizes four key conditions that characterize the context within which earth system governance research takes place: (a) the numerous political, technological and socio-economic transformations that are shaping and being shaped by governance processes; (b) the increasing and multifaceted inequalities across and within countries and socio-economic groups; (c) the tremendous as well as contested impact of human beings on the entire planet and the changing human-nature relationship captured by the notion of the Anthropocene; and (d) the opportunities and challenges offered by the diversity and pluralism of human societies in knowledge, culture and identities in addressing sustainability challenges in the contemporary world. In addition, the 2018 Science and Implementation Plan present five interconnected research lenses that constitute the central element of the Earth System Governance research framework: architecture and agency, democracy and power, justice and allocation, anticipation and imagination and adaptiveness and reflexivity.

The Earth System Governance Project is designed as the nodal point within the global change research programmes to guide, organize and evaluate research on these questions. The Project is implemented through a Global Alliance of Earth System Governance Research Centres, a network of lead faculty members and research fellows, a global conference series, and various research projects undertaken at multiple levels (see www.earthsystemgovernance.org).

Earth System Governance Working Papers are peer-reviewed online publications that broadly address questions raised by the Project’s Science and Implementation Plan. The series is open to all colleagues who seek to contribute to this research agenda, and submissions are welcome at any time at ipo@earthsystemgovernance.org. The Earth System Governance Project does not assume the copyright for working papers, and we expect that most working papers will eventually find their way into scientific journals or become chapters in edited volumes compiled by the Project and its members.

Comments on this working paper, as well as on the other activities of the Earth System Governance Project, are highly welcome. We believe that understanding earth system governance is only feasible through joint effort of colleagues from various backgrounds and from all regions of the world. We look forward to your response.

The Scientific Steering Committee
Earth System Governance Project

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1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change movements (CCMs) have been organizing to promote and demand a scientifically sound and socially just response to the climate crisis for more than two decades. Since late 2018, a rapid expansion of the movement has brought millions more to the streets through campaigns like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion (Saunders, Doherty, & Hayes, 2020; Wahlström, Kocyba, De Vydt, & de Moor, 2019). Yet while demands for climate action are increasing, so too seems to be a realization that we are now beyond the point where environmental crises like climate change can be ‘solved’ – as ‘frontline communities’ have already experienced for a long time. Instead, many believe we are now in the terrain of ‘damage control’. Some therefore argue that we are witnessing the emergence of a ‘postapocalyptic environmentalism’, or the spread of “environmental activism based on a catastrophic loss experienced as already having occurred, as ongoing or as impossible to prevent, rather than as a future risk or threat” (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018, p. 563).

Yet few have analyzed the spread and impact of such a postapocalyptic turn in CCMs. Some studies have begun to address its emotional effects – for instance by looking at feelings of hope and fear among activists (e.g. Kleres & Wettergren, 2017) – but very few have looked at its strategic implications. Considering the instrumental role of CCMs in advancing and shaping societies’ responses to climate change, the current paper will explore how climate activists relate to the idea of postapocalyptic environmentalism, and especially whether and how it is affecting what they perceive as meaningful climate action and how this affects their goals and strategies. In so doing, it focuses on self-identified CCMs from the Global North, and in particular from cities in Western Europe where the most recent CCM campaigns emerged. Research has so far focused on the ways in which frontline communities have had to deal with the impacts of climate and other ecological crises (e.g. Bullard & Wright, 2009; Dawson, 2019). Yet how those more privileged ‘Northern’ CCMs that are currently responsible for mobilizing millions and who have considerable agenda-setting power engage with the topic has been largely overlooked.

In fact it is generally assumed that such CCMs promote climate justice by demanding stronger climate mitigation while avoiding adaptation because of its reputation as an excuse for inaction and for its defeatist and conservative connotations (Simonet & Fatović, 2016). However, if major impacts of climate change become increasingly seen as unavoidable with the spread of a postapocalyptic narrative, how do activists perceive the need to continue focusing on mitigating climate change and to what extent and how do they shift focus to adapting to its consequences?

Addressing both questions is crucial. On the one hand, even those who are skeptical that we can keep global warming within ‘safe’ limits often believe that there is a meaningful difference to be made between more or less catastrophic scenarios. The difference between, say, 2 and 3 degrees will have major climate justice implications (e.g. Steffen et al., 2018). It therefore remains important to analyze how activists are able to keep exerting pressure on society to mitigate climate change despite dire forecasts. On the other hand, there is increasing agreement that “virtually all adaptation interventions have complicated benefits and trade-offs” (Adger, 2016, p. A2), and that their necessarily political nature therefore merits the democratizing potential of social movement involvement. In particular, the priorities of dominant adaptation models (e.g. economic
and urban growth over the protection of vulnerable communities) is likely to result in climate injustices (Anguelovski et al., 2016), whereas more radical approaches are likely to be resisted by those in power (O’Brien, 2012). A just climate adaptation will therefore require the explication and negotiation of trade-offs through broad public engagement, including in the form of climate justice activism (Schlosberg, Collins, & Niemeyer, 2017).

An increasingly popular concept that captures both these ideas is that of transformational adaptation, which sees adaptation as part of an effort to fundamentally transform society in response to climate change by mitigating environmental impacts while taking an intersectional approach to redressing underlying drivers of climate vulnerability (O’Brien, 2012; Pelling, 2011; Schlosberg et al., 2017). Yet as some have noted recently, literature on transformational adaptation has remained largely conceptual (Blythe et al., 2018; Zografos, Klause, Connolly, & Anguelovski, 2020). Concurrently, Boda and Jerneck warn that such “calls for major structural transformations remain vague without identifying what viable agent and through which particular processes such changes can be accomplished” (2019, p. 633). Transformational adaptation is a useful concept to understanding how adaptation can be added to the traditional climate movement agenda focused on mitigation, but more research is needed to understand whether and how CCMs may actually contribute to its realization.

The goal of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it seeks to advance literature on climate activism by increasing our understanding of postapocalyptic environmentalism and its strategic implications – particularly for the balance between adaptation and mitigation in Northern CCMs. Second, it contributes to the literature on transformational adaptation by exploring how the CCM can contribute to this project. Here the paper complements the small number of existing case studies that focus on instances where social movements have engaged with transformational adaptation by looking at CCMs more generally and ask what both enables and limits their engagement with the topic. Focusing on urban contexts, the paper explores the hypothesis that CCM activists who increasingly see the impacts of climate change as unavoidable in their cities will therefore become more inclined to promote climate justice by focusing on (transformational) adaptation. This could happen, for instance, by demanding a shift in focus from increasing the resilience of current arrangements, to redressing climate injustices by changing the practices and institutions that currently produce unequal climate vulnerabilities.

The paper presents a mixed-methods case study of how climate movement organizers in four Northwestern European countries (Belgium, Germany, Sweden and the UK) relate to postapocalyptic environmentalism and how this affects their strategic focus on mitigation and (transformational) adaptation. First, the analysis draws from 46 qualitative interviews in five cities (Malmö, Hamburg, Antwerp, Bristol and Manchester) to explore in depth whether, how and why adaptation becomes a topic for CCMs. Second, the paper draws from an ethnographic case study of one climate movement organization in Bristol to go beyond activists’ personal reflections and include the more elusive everyday processes through which CCMs collectively produce an image of the state of the climate crisis and the responses it requires in terms of mitigation and adaptation.
Findings suggest that most climate activists can relate to some elements of postapocalyptic environmentalism, and agree on the need for adaptation. However, postapocalyptic notions are kept out of strategizing to prevent them from demotivating or otherwise disturbing a continued focus on mitigation, which is in turn enabled by developing parallel apocalyptic narratives that frame climate catastrophe as in the future and thus preventable. Moreover, an awareness of the political nature of adaptation, and of the potential role for CCMs to play in that, is often limited by a general inability or reluctance to engage with the topic more deeply. Where there is a political awareness and even ambition in relation to (transformational) adaptation, factors such as resources and tradition still tend to limit engagement with adaptation. Groups that do work on adaptation do so either implicitly, within the context of their mitigation work, or by taking up the role of ‘co-creator’ in collaboration with local governments. Neither of these approaches clearly delivers the politicization of adaptation that advocates of transformational adaptation have tended to promote. Still, the study identifies potential paths for CCMs to engage more with (transformational) adaptation.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 gives a more detailed theoretical account of postapocalyptic environmentalism, the concept of transformational adaptation, and social movement engagement with the latter. Section 3 outlines key insights from social movement scholarship about the factors that affect whether issues with a ‘need’ for social movement involvement indeed generate contentious action. Section 4 and 5 present the design and findings of this study, respectively. Section 6 concludes by presenting the main take-away from the study.

2. THE CONTENTIOUS POTENTIAL OF TRANSFORMATIONAL ADAPTATION

Postapocalyptic environmentalism as a demand for transformational adaptation?

Existing research on CCMs depicts important differences within the movement, such as between reformist or radical and insider or outsider approaches (de Moor, Morena, & Comby, 2017). Yet how the movement defines its goals in relation to climate change has received little attention and has instead been largely assumed to evolve around mitigation. However, as the window to prevent a “Hothouse Earth” in which “a cascade of feedbacks” irreversibly accelerates climate change is closing (or is already closed according to some), this goal can no longer be taken for granted (Steffen et al., 2018). Indeed, recent climate mobilizations have happened against a background of alarming reports by the IPCC (e.g. 2018) and a public imagination that is increasingly captured by titles like The Uninhabitable Earth (Wallace-Wells, 2017), We’re doomed. Now What? (Scranton, 2018) and What if we Stopped Pretending? (Frantzen, 2019).

Against this background, the idea that crises can no longer be prevented begins to take center stage. According to Cassegård and Thörn (2018), we are now witnessing an increasingly dominant postapocalyptic narrative in environmentalism. The authors argue that while environmentalists in the Global North previously used an ‘apocalyptic’ framing that put disasters as lurking in the future, combined with utopian promises
resulting from appropriate action, movements now increasingly conceive of the apocalypse as present, imminent or unavoidable. It is important to stress the privileged nature of this shift, as it implies that an awareness of (likely) catastrophic environmental impacts is only recently emerging. Frontline communities – in particular in the Global South and among indigenous peoples – have already been exposed to “socio-environmental Armageddon” (Swynegedouw, 2013, p. 15). As Whyte argues, “Indigenous peoples often understand their vulnerability to climate change as an intensification of colonially-induced environmental changes” (2017, p. 154). Consequently, indigenous and Southern environmentalisms have long included a ‘postapocalyptic’ element. What is new is that this view is arguably becoming more central in typically Northern self-identified CCMs.

While recent survey research indeed suggests widespread reservations among climate activists about the ability of policies to address climate change (Wahlström et al., 2019), we are only just beginning to explore the implications of postapocalyptic environmentalism for CCMs. Until now, research has focused in particular on the emotional implications on climate activists and their ability to keep going in their uphill effort to demand appropriate action to mitigate climate change. In particular, how activists deal with emotions like fear and hope(lessness) has received considerable attention. Kleres and Wettergren (2017) argue for instance that in Northern CCMs, emotions like fear and hopelessness are seen as unproductive and are therefore kept out of strategizing through ‘feeling rules’. In contrast, Cassegård and Thörn (2018) emphasize that postapocalyptic narratives may sound defeatists, but are seen by some to produce hope through the acceptance of loss and the imagination of what is possible after the apocalypse.

Yet beyond emotions, postapocalyptic environmentalism could have strategic implications as well. For instance, according to Jem Bendell, an influential thinker within Extinction Rebellion:

“Bold emissions cuts and carbon drawdown measures are still necessary to reduce as much as possible the mass extinction and human suffering of climate change, but we must also prepare for what is now inevitable (...) as we no longer assume that society as we know it can continue.” (2019, emphasis added).

A shift in focus to such ‘preparation’ likely implies a very different strategic focus. In particular, while mitigation is unlikely to disappear from the CCM’s agenda, the shift to preparation might introduce an increased focus on promoting climate justice through adaptation to climate impacts.

Does transformational adaptation require climate change movements?

Meanwhile, the notion of transformational adaptation paints a clear need for the involvement of social movements to achieve just climate adaptation. Mainstream approaches present adaptation as a techno-managerial effort to address specific risks of typically material damage with ‘apolitical’ engineering solutions (O’Brien, 2012; Pelling, 2011). However, according to Eriksen et al.:
“what counts as ‘adaptive’ is always political and contested. What is seen as positive adaptation to one group of people may be seen as mal-adaptation to another, and political processes determine which view is considered more important at different scales and to different constituencies.” (2015, p. 523).

Others have made similar arguments in recent years (see also: Adger, 2016; Adger et al., 2009; Blythe et al., 2018; Meerow & Mitchell, 2017; Ribot, 2011). To capture how adaptation can be understood along more political lines, scholars have begun developing an alternative, ‘transformational’ view. Some define adaptation as transformational if an intervention is large-scale, new, or transforms a place (Kates et al. 2012). Yet the political nature of the concept becomes clearer following Pelling’s definition of transformational as “concerned with the wider and less easily visible root causes of vulnerability.” (2011, p. 86) — especially inequality (Pelling 2011, p. 3; Pelling et al. 2015). Following Schlosberg et al. (2017), this focus aligns adaptation with the agenda of the climate change movement in general and the climate justice movement in particular:

“Only an approach to adaptation that moves beyond a sole focus on the biophysical risks of climate change, to one that considers the larger and more complex processes that interact and produce vulnerability, can address social, environmental, and climate injustice.” (p. 414).

In relation to this paper’s focus on urban climate adaptation, “transformational interventions in urban adaptation would respond to climate change by pursuing fundamental and structural shifts in urbanization processes and outcomes, which are meant to challenge unsustainable development pathways in a radical way.” (Zografos et al., 2020, p. 1). These shifts would aim to address the city’s production of climate vulnerabilities and injustices within and outside its territory by promoting both local adaptation and global mitigation, thus challenging the traditional juxtaposition made between the two (Anguelovski et al., 2016). Moreover, they would address “generative causes of vulnerability to climate change,” including social inequality, and they would change “existing local politics in order to overcome barriers embedded within entrenched institutional norms protected by uneven power structures, often supporting growth.” (Zografos et al., 2020, p. 2).

Following these definitions, transformational adaptation clearly challenges entrenched systems, and is therefore unlikely to originate from inside political institutions, instead requiring the disruptive engagement of outsiders like CCMs (Boda & Jerneck, 2019; O’Brien, 2012). Moreover, if it is assumed that cities and societies will have to be radically transformed in the face of climate change, democratic imperatives demand the involvement of citizens in those processes — beyond the typically tokenistic role they play in formal consultation processes (Few, Brown, & Tompkins, 2007; Schlosberg et al., 2017). Therefore, according to Carmin et al. “research on social movements and collective action are important for understanding the origins, dynamics, and impacts of social movements that both promote and resist adaptation to climate change.” (2016, p. 186).
3. EXPLAINING MOBILIZATION AND NON-MOBILIZATION FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL ADAPTATION

In sum, there may well be a motivation within, and a need for, CCMs to promote transformational adaptation. Indeed, according to Schlosberg, environmental justice movements “are turning increasingly to adaptive responses to a changing climate” (2013, p. 47). In particular, research on communities affected by climate disasters shows radical and transformative responses that combine demands for adaptation and mitigation, for instance following hurricanes Katrina and Sandy in the US (e.g. Bullard & Wright, 2009; Dawson, 2019). Relatedly, racial and ethnic minority groups have been campaigning for environmental justice in their cities for decades (again, particularly in the US), and are increasingly adopting demands for just adaptation measures (Méndez, 2020). Historically, these frontline communities have been central in shaping the frames and narratives of the more mainstream ‘white’ or ‘Northern’ CCM, including the latter’s increased focus on climate justice (Schlosberg, 2013). It is therefore imaginable that the campaigning of minority environmental justice groups on transformational adaptation will eventually have a similar effect on the CCM.

Yet for now, what role adaptation plays in the CCM has remained largely overlooked. Given its clout within current political and societal debates on climate change, and the limited knowledge we have of its attitudes towards adaptation, more research is clearly needed. CCMs are in the literature almost always described as focusing on mitigation (de Moor, 2019). The Routledge Handbook of the Climate Change Movement describes the CCM as struggling “against the causes and perpetrators of global warming and for a socially just approach to climate change mitigation” (Dietz & Garrelts, 2014, p. 1). However, if the goal of the CCM is to promote climate justice, then the discussion so far makes clear that adaptation is a relevant issue for the movement as well. If the CCM is involved in the politics of climate adaptation, we need to know how. If it is not, we need to know why.

When investigating CCM involvement with climate adaptation, we may – given the movement’s traditional focus on mitigation – be dealing as much with mobilization as non-mobilization. Drawing on the work of McAdam and Boudet (2012), social movement studies have in recent years increasingly focused on explaining why some contentious issues become the subject of political mobilization while others do not (e.g. Goss, 2006; Levitsky, 2014). This work is instructive for the current paper, yet its focus on strategic framing, resources and opportunities (see below) has limited analyses to a ‘logic of consequences.’ Hereby activists are mainly considered as instrumental actors who pursue strategies that maximize success within the confines of limited resources and opportunities. While providing a useful starting point, this approach misses that such strategic pursuits are simultaneously embedded in a ‘logic of appropriateness’ by which traditions in movements determine what is considered appropriate, thus presenting a driver of strategic continuity (March & Olsen, 1998).

Therefore, in addition to McAdam and Boudet’s work (2012), this study also focuses on the importance of movement tradition (Doherty & Hayes, 2012). More concretely, when
studying how climate and environmental activists engage with adaptation, it is important to keep in mind that we are essentially asking under what condition CCMs decide to divert attention away from their traditional focus on mitigation. Even though transformational adaptation aims to integrate both, it does imply a shift from a tradition of exclusively focusing on mitigation to considering adaptation as well. The logic of appropriateness, by which strategic decisions may be intentional but are also constrained by path dependency and are part of the habitus of a group or movement, thus provides an important background factor when considering the role of fundamental issues like framing, resources and opportunities (Doherty & Hayes, 2012; Holdo, 2019; Tilly, 1995).

As for framing, a first task is to understand whether what is in the literature perceived as a contentious issue is also perceived by movement actors as deserving of their attention. The framing approach to social movements places questions of how social movements make sense of problems against the broader background of sense making in social movements that also covers issues like envisioning solutions and the attribution of responsibility (Snow, Benford, McCammon, Hewitt, & Fitzgerald, 2014). Following this theory, we must develop an understanding of how social movement actors perform the “diagnostic framing” of the problem of climate change (e.g. in an apocalyptic or postapocalyptic way), the “prognostic framing” of the need to respond to this (e.g. through transformational adaptation), and the “motivational framing” of a need for them to become involved in this. Yet we also need to understand whether the implied logic of consequences by which an understanding of the problem informs perceived solutions is accurate. Namely, the alternative logic of appropriateness suggests that strategic traditions may also necessitate a framing of climate change that legitimizes the continuation of this tradition.

Even if climate activists frame a need for them to engage with transformational adaptation, they also need resources and opportunities to do so (McAdam & Boudet, 2012). Concerning resources, it must be recognized that resources such as money and activists’ time are always limited, and that available resources will likely already be committed to mitigation efforts. The question will thus be whether organizers can develop a well-resonating motivational frame to shift focus to adaptation. This may prove a hard sell, since adaptation has long been dismissed by the CCM as a techno-optimistic excuse for not addressing the social, political and economic root causes of climate change (Simonet & Fatorić, 2016). Hence, even if the postapocalyptic narrative may sensitize activists to the importance of adaptation, movement tradition may provide a countervailing force.

Even when movements have the will and means to mobilize on a certain issue, contextual factors may still affect the extent to which they are able to do so. While some polities may provide extensive opportunities to influence meaningful political decisions, other polities may lack access or a capacity to get things done. The literature on political opportunity structures (POSs) suggests that the openness of a polity to social movements and their ability to get things done are both important predictors of the development of, and participation in, campaigns that target that polity (Kitschelt, 1986). Variations in POSs across time or space affect how and to what extent potential mobilizations materialize. Here, the perception and framing of opportunities are
particularly important (Gamson & Meyer, 1996), and these perceptions again need to be understood as part of a movement’s tradition (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019).

In sum, there may be a motivation and a need for CCMs to engage with (transformational) adaptation, yet social movement theory indicates that – while constantly considering the role of movement traditions – we need to ask three different questions if we want to understand whether and why this engagement may materialize: First, can they successfully frame a need to engage with (transformational) adaptation; secondly, do they have the resources needed to engage; and thirdly, are there opportunities to do so? Hence, the argument can be summarized in the following model:

**Figure 1. Theoretical model of conditions for adaptation activism**

![Theoretical model of conditions for adaptation activism](image)

### 4. METHODS

To provide a first analysis of activism around climate adaptation in European cities, this study took a decidedly explorative approach. It was chosen to cast a broad net in several cities that were selected for their likelihood of providing relevant cases – rather than to zoom in on one particular case. The aim of the comparative approach has thus been to increase the chances of finding positive cases (movements working on adaptation) that can be compared to negative cases by exploring a range of different contexts.

**Case selection**

A most different systems design (MDSD) was therefore used to maximize variation in contextual opportunities for movements to shape adaptation-related policies (Yin, 2009). While adaptation involves many policy domains, for case-selection it was chosen
to focus on flood-policy making, as flooding is one of the most salient aspects of climate change in European cities. The selection of four countries—Belgium, Germany, Sweden and the UK—was based on each combination of open/closed and strong/weak policy making, which was expected to represent contexts that ranged from most favorable for shaping adaptation policy (i.e. where there were many institutional openings into a very influential local decision making process) to least favorable (i.e. no institutional openings to a weak process). There is not enough space to fully describe this selection process and the chosen contexts, and ultimately, the empirical findings did not match the case-selection expectation. For instance, the Belgian case of Antwerp was expected to be unfavorable, but ultimately represented one of the most favorable contexts (see discussion below on ‘co-creation’ in Antwerp). What ultimately mattered was the study’s ability to explore whether some of the study’s findings would hold across varying contexts (Yin, 2009).

Within these countries, the cities were chosen based on two criteria. Firstly, they had to be exposed to flooding and other issues like urban heat or sea-level rise that are getting worse because of climate change. This would expectedly make adaptation questions appear more salient. Secondly, they had to have a reputation for having strong local environmental movements that could be expected to politicize any arising issues. Following these criteria, and drawing on secondary literature and expert opinions, the chosen cities were Malmö, Hamburg, Antwerp and Bristol. In addition to these four cases, this paper also draws from data from a previous study of environmental activism in Manchester (UK) (de Moor, Catney, & Doherty, 2020). Many of the interviews that were conducted there two years before the current study covered questions of adaptation and were therefore highly relevant for this study. Manchester took roughly the same place in this comparative framework as Bristol.

Data collection

Qualitative interviews with activists were used to get a detailed picture of the impact of postapocalyptic environmentalism and of views on transformational adaptation in the CCM. In line with the explorative focus of this study, the procedure to select interviewees was focused on identifying movement actors most centrally or most likely involved with local climate adaptation. To do so, firstly, interviews were held with civil servants, local Green Party politicians, and/or local specialists working on adaptation-related issues in each city. These interviews were intended to scope out whether there were any adaptation-related conflicts in the city, whether and how citizens were involved in decision making around adaptation, and to identify possible civil society actors who had been actively involved with the city’s climate adaptation. These interviewees often could not identify adaptation-related conflicts, but did identify activist groups with some potential focus on adaptation.

This selection procedure yielded a mix of environmental and neighborhood groups that were active in similar networks. These were therefore distinct from the kind of minority environmental justice groups that were found to be central in abovementioned research on the US. This is likely because the selected cities had so far only been exposed to relatively minor climate impacts, as compared to the disasters that in the US exposed the severity and intersectionality of climate vulnerability. Building on the resulting interviews, a snowball technique was applied to recruit further interviewees who were
identified as potentially working on climate adaptation in the city, leading to the inclusion of several additional yet largely similar groups. In addition, in all four cities interviews were held with representatives of Extinction Rebellion, who have recently become central players in the CCM, and who have been described as popularizing a postapocalyptic element in the CCM.

Ultimately, the number of interviews differed slightly between cities, with eleven in Antwerp, eleven in Bristol, ten in Malmö and eight in Hamburg. While many of the selected interviewees could be said to belong to the CCM as climate change featured centrally in their activism, some groups also had additional orientations, such as a group working on air pollution in Antwerp, and a nature conservation group in Malmö. From Manchester, out of a larger body of data, six interviews that focused on adaptation were included. In total, 46 interviews of typically one to one-and-a-half hour were held, and all but one were recorded and transcribed. See Appendix 1 for an overview of organizations covered in each city.

While interviews gave a good overview of what was or was not going on in the various cities, it became clear that some topics were hard to cover. For instance, activists often found it difficult to explain why they did not focus on a certain topic, or how their perceptions of the climate crisis informed what they did do. I therefore chose to complement the interviews with ethnographic fieldwork in one Bristolian organization that will be referred to with the pseudonym Carbon Free. Carbon Free is a grassroots organization based in Bristol that aims to bring together citizens, civil society organizations, politicians and companies to speed up the transition to zero carbon in the wider Bristol region. From my interviews, it had become clear that Carbon Free was seen as one of the organizations most explicitly dealing with climate scenarios, and strategic questions about its implications. For four weeks in October 2019, and one week in January 2020, I observed all meetings and activities of the group to gain an insider perspective on how climate change was discussed, and whether and how this was related to strategizing.

Combined, these data thus offer an overview of climate activists’ views of, and (lack of) engagement with, (transformative) adaptation across five European cities, providing an optimal basis for exploring this under-researched topic. Data were analyzed using a two-step process guided by the method of theory-driven observation (Lichterman, 2002). First, directly after each interview and observation, a brief summary was made that captured the data’s main implications in relation to the research questions. These summaries enabled an ongoing back and forth between theory and analysis throughout fieldwork and provided abstracts that facilitated an overview of the large body of empirical material for later stages of the analysis. Second, and in order to verify these initial summaries, thematic coding of transcripts was done using NVivo software. By coding data according to key topics, such as perceptions of the severity of the climate crisis, the use of specific information sources to support this, arguments about the (lack of) strategic implications of such perceptions, and statements about the need for activism on adaption, the data was organized to facilitate thematic analysis whereby relevant parts of the data could be reviewed in light of the main research questions.
5. FINDINGS

The first part of this section addresses how the climate crisis is perceived and diagnostically, prognostically and motivationally framed. In other words, it assesses activists’ perceived need to work on mitigation and/or (transformational) adaptation, and their motivation to do this work, potentially because of their relation to postapocalyptic environmentalism. Note that while transformational adaptation is often defined as including mitigation, when discussing activists’ focus on mitigation, it is meant that they do so in a ‘traditional’ way that is disconnected form adaptation. Moreover, the analysis looks not so much for the explicit use of the term transformational adaptation as for signs of engagement that align with its principles (as discussed above). In the second part, conditions like resources and tradition are considered to explain why in many groups the perceived need and motivation that are present largely fails to materialize into action to promote transformational adaptation – as a logic of consequences would predict. In the third part, a logic of appropriateness is therefore considered as an alternative model to link perceptions of the climate crisis to movement action. In the final part, I outline the (often-limited) way in which some groups do engage with adaptation.

Perceiving and framing the climate crisis

In terms of diagnostic framing, many activists indicate they believe that – theoretically – there is still a window of opportunity to avert the worst impacts of climate change, but that they often feel that humanity is unlikely to catch that window. They add that it differs day by day how optimistic they are about this, thereby constantly moving on what seems to be a spectrum, rather than a binary distinction, between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic environmentalism. Regardless of their optimism, most interviewees recognize that some impacts of climate change are already here or inevitable. They often recognized their privilege by acknowledging the relative mildness of local impacts compared to that elsewhere – especially in the Global South – thereby downplaying the importance of local adaptation. During various ethnographic observations, I observed activists who publically promoted mitigation, but privately expressed skepticism in relation to those goals. Thus, while there is still apocalyptic elements of likely but therefore preventable disasters present in most activists’ framing, postapocalyptic elements of unavoidable or ongoing disasters claim their place too. This mix can differ between people and within individuals over time. This ambiguity was captured by one interviewee saying:

“Well, of course, sometimes there are reports it says it’s already too late. But many reports say there is a chance that we still have these 10 years. And it’s kind of like, yeah, we are all aware that there is no guarantee that this will work. Either it might fail or it’s already too late.” (Interview, XR Hamburg, 2019)

In terms of prognostic framing, most interviewees thus continued to see mitigation as a necessary response but also agreed that adaptation had become an important task within their cities. Still, views on the political or contentious nature of adaptation were often limited, and views of the need for groups to get involved varied. Some activists did not recognize the political nature of climate adaptation as described in scholarship on
transformational adaptation, and consequently, did not perceive a need for them to get involved. They often had not developed ideas about what adaptation would mean for their cities or of what particular problems or injustices might be related to it. Many interviews did not bring up political dimensions of adaptation, and even when prompted with ideas of transformational adaptation, most interviewees could not relate to them. They often did share some of the ideas underlying transformational adaptation – such as a critique of business as usual climate politics and a preference for climate justice oriented approaches – but these were rarely connected to questions of adaptation. As we will see below, adaptation was seen as a conservative project contrasting the transformational nature of mitigation. Likewise, many saw adaptation as an engineering intervention that should be left to governments and specialists to take care of. Particularly in Sweden, it was felt that “we are still in a country that still trusts that the government will take care of us” (Interview, Naturskudföreningen, Malmö 2019).

Occasionally, interviewees expressed a lack of confidence in government’s capacity to implement sufficient measures. Yet beyond that, critical perceptions remained limited and abstract. Interviewees typically could not point out concrete examples of where governments were failing to adapt or of potential injustices associated with current adaptation plans. While space is lacking to develop an extensive analysis of adaptation plans in each of these cities, a review of their climate plans shows that questions of vulnerability and justice have remained marginal in most of them, with the exception of Bristol, where the most recent ‘One City Climate Strategy’ claims to aim for transformative change and extensively considers the vulnerability of specific communities. From the point of view of transformational adaptation, there could thus be much to gain, yet this was not reflected in interviewees’ attitudes about adaptation. Instead, they largely reflected mainstream, risk-oriented and elite-driven notions of adaptation and, as will be discussed below, one that sees adaptation as opposed rather than parallel with mitigation.

Resources presented a common constraint for developing insights into local adaptation. Interviewees indicated that personally or within their groups, they simply had not had the time and capacity to discuss in depth the state of the climate crisis, its consequences, and the kinds of responses that required. Limited meeting time was typically taken up with arranging the practicalities of upcoming events. Activists sometimes indicated to regret not having more opportunities to discuss the state of the climate crisis and its implications. Yet it was sometimes considered that climate groups are productive, precisely because they do not have to explicitly discuss climate change itself:

“The nice thing is that (...) we don’t have to talk about how big the issue is and that we’re facing a climate crisis. This is basically the premise that we’re all here on and (...) this is really a good foundation for working together.” (Interview, XR Hamburg, 2019)

*What limits adaptation activism*

Thus, most activists share at least part of the postapocalyptic framing by indicating (especially in private) that they perceive the odds of keeping climate change within safe boundaries to be quite low, that adaptation is an important topic, and some even agree that it is a political issue that would benefit from the involvement of social movements
in general or of their group in particular. The presumed motivation for movement action on adaptation thus seems to be there.

Yet interviews indicated that even those who agreed on the latter remained largely focused on mitigation and ignored what might be necessary if the scenario that is perceived to be most likely becomes reality (exceptions will be discussed at the end of the findings-section). This suggests that there is no straight line from diagnostic framing to strategic (re-)orientation. Few made an informed decision not to focus on adaptation. Instead, interviewees either expressed a strong refusal to divert attention away from mitigation or felt they could not prioritize adaptation when attributing scarce resources.

The often-bleak diagnostic framing of climate change was kept largely detached from strategic considerations. For instance, within some XR groups, discussions about how bad climate change would likely get were kept out of strategic discussions. They were relegated to therapeutic or informal spaces where activists could share hopelessness and other emotions in order to collectively cope with them, thus enabling themselves to continue mitigation-oriented activism. In strategizing, focus was on the necessary task of preventing dangerous climate change rather than on having to deal with its consequences, even though many saw the latter as a likely outcome.

Specific motivational frames are in place to deal with this contradiction between strategies and anticipated scenarios. One XR Malmö interviewee indicated that “within extinction rebellion it is talked about that (...) we need to be brave, like we need to act even if we don’t know if we will succeed.” Likewise, a Manchester-based activist argued that:

“It might be a delusion that we’re operating under, but (...) it’s sort of essential in order to be able to (...) continue to do what you do because (...) once you accept that something is too late, then you just fuck it off, don’t you really?” (Interview, Manchester 2017).

This quote suggests that the continuation of activism is at least in part a goal in itself, because it is the only option that is seen as ethical or bearable. This is reflected by others who indicate that they and the people around them became active in the climate movement, precisely to overcome the feeling of desperation they felt when ‘passively’ consuming climate news. In line with many climate groups’ motivational framing, they indicate that becoming active to ‘solve’ the problem was the best way to fight desperation and depression. Therefore, they felt that it would undermine their primary motivation if they were to consider desperate scenarios and the need to adapt:

“I guess it’s very simple. If you’re active, if you’re doing something, and you’re into it then you’re not sitting looking at the figures the bad, the black horizon. Because you are doing something. So maybe it’s a way of protecting myself from that.” (Interview, Friends of the Earth Malmö, 2019)

Others indicated that this attitude was not only a reason to start working on mitigation, but also a necessary condition to continue their work:
“Obviously there's the bushfires in Australia. It can't get much more in your face than that. But emotionally I can't deal with both [mitigation and adaptation].” (Interview, Carbon Free, 2020)

Compared to frontline communities’ fights for just disaster responses, these interviewees thus experience the privilege of still having the choice not to focus on adaptation. In line with previous research (e.g. Kleres & Wettergren, 2017), some groups responded to the perceived need to remain focused on mitigation by installing “feeling rules” that made it taboo to even talk about adaptation. Consequently, narratives such as those around bravery foreclose discussions that go beyond mitigation and that could introduce a transformational understanding of adaptation.

Furthermore, some climate activists still see adaptation as defeatist and as a techno-optimistic excuse for accepting the status quo:

“There is this sort of iron curtain between the green tech way of looking at the future that we're going to adapt our way out of the situation by technology and sort of not really mitigating stuff in any powerful way. And the other way is the way of the environmental movement, I would say, which is really focused on mitigation and very skeptical about any technological solutions” (Interview, Fossil Free Malmö, 2019).

Thus, these activists perpetuate a view of adaptation as a conservative approach not to transform society to mitigate. As the window of opportunity for effective climate action is perceived to be closing, activists are believed to simply become more radical in their demands for mitigation.

These sentiments were more strongly indicated in Malmö, Hamburg and Manchester. In Antwerp and Bristol, activists indicated that the defeatist connotations and ‘taboo’ around adaptation were disappearing in the CCM, thereby creating more space to address these topics. Consequently, some actively considered the relevance of focusing on adaptation, even though they often still hold similar reservations vis-à-vis adaption and are inclined to prioritize mitigation in the spending of limited resources.

This willingness to consider adaptation is typically held by activists who have been active in climate politics for a long time, and have gradually accepted the idea that adaptation is at least partially unavoidable. Indeed, some even believe that this is a wider trend in the climate movement that has been induced through disappointments like the failed 2009 Copenhagen UN Climate Summit:

“It’s become more about the adaptation thing. (...) For myself – and I have a sense that it’s a motivating factor for quite a lot of people in the world I inhabit in this movement – is that people got very motivated about climate in the late 90s, early noughties, and it felt quite depressing and disempowering very quickly – Copenhagen being the main spike in that” (Interview, Bristol, 2019)

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1 Curiously, and of relevance to future research, some also indicated that activists have less difficulty talking about resilience than adaptation, even if the two may have strong overlaps.
This willingness to consider adaptation is also related to a more local interpretation of climate justice. Particularly in the UK, activists exhibit an awareness of the relation between social inequality in their cities and climate and energy politics (e.g. in discussions of fuel poverty). Yet this perspective was often outweighed by a global justice perspective that made them consider mitigation to be the most efficient in reducing global climate-induced injustices. A Manchester-based activist who indicated that she was “really interested personally in bringing more of that (...) very community-based adaptation” into their group said that:

“Although actually, if you take a wider view at climate change, the point of working on reducing carbon emissions fits into issues around justice, because really, (...) the climate change effects are going to be unjust.”

Thus, while this approach more clearly considers the importance of adaptation than the first one does, it was considered that adaptation could always be done at a later stage, whereas the window of opportunity for mitigation was inevitably closing. It was therefore imperative to focus on mitigation as long as the window to do so was still open, even if only to make the difference between more and less catastrophic outcomes:

“We definitely have to prepare for a different future. Many of us are thinking about that. And I heard people talking about like making eco self-sustaining community. And yes, I could also imagine that. But I think it’s a matter of priority for now. We only have 10 years and this one to three next years are kind of like crucial. So in preparing for a future which will maybe be there in 20, 30, 40 years, that’s like long time.” (Interview, XR Hamburg, 2019).

Finally, some of those most inclined to focus on adaptation indicated that it is not at all clear at this stage what would need to happen more specifically, because the nature of local threats and potential injustices was still unclear. By contrast, mitigation is seen as a clearer task. A Bristol-based activist linked this problem to the emotional challenges of working on adaptation:

“At times when I feel more the pessimistic side of it (...) I think we should all do to something like the work that reconnects and feel the reality of what’s happening and act from that place. But it’s very difficult to understand what that action would be. And I think myself, I have a desire to avoid feeling the despair of what I think is really going to happen and to avoid that by doing action (...). And I see that in other people as well.” (Interview, Carbon Free, 2020)

These activists thus perceive a hypothetical need to work on climate adaptation. However, they generally indicated that given limited capacity, even considering what would be needed in terms of their involvement with local adaptation – let alone actually engaging in that – was something they could not prioritize. Notably, the argument that it is not yet clear what adaptation would require, or that adaptation is something that can always happen sometime in the future when the effects of climate change become more apparent is based in conventional understandings of adaptation that focus on specific risks, rather than root causes of vulnerability, which is both a more diffuse issue and one that requires long term engagement.
A logic of appropriateness?

Thus, while many interviewees at least privately shared parts of the postapocalyptic framing of climate change, this often did not affect their strategizing. Contrary to a logic of consequences, they did not shift focus to dealing with presumably inevitable effects of climate change. Instead, following a logic of appropriateness, groups often produced alternative, apocalyptic frames for more public use to legitimize continuing to work on mitigation. For instance, many referred to the IPCC report from 2018 to argue that there was still a 12-year window of opportunity to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees.

Some groups developed more tailored apocalyptic frames as became directly observable in the ethnographic study of Carbon Free. The case study illustrated that even in a context of postapocalyptic environmentalism, CCM groups enable themselves to continue working on mitigation while leaving questions of adaptation largely unaddressed by developing parallel apocalyptic framings.

Carbon Free divides its work into three ‘streams’: visioning, infrastructure and community. The development of scenarios happens in the first stream, and informs what needs to be done in the second and third, which focus on promoting the development of green infrastructure in the wider Bristol region, and the promotion of environmental action by citizens to support this. The latter is in turn divided into promoting individual responsibility taking (e.g. reducing household energy use) and collective action to demand policies that support a renewable energy transition. The visioning is about showing what would be needed to get the region to zero carbon by 2030. The aim is to show that a pathway is open to achieve this but also that doing so is challenging, providing a motivational frame for people to get involved in pushing for its realization.

The model essentially consists of a spreadsheet that collects input on various assumed energy expenditures, generation, storage and import, and ties this information together using more or less optimistic scenarios about developments over time. When the model was presented during various workshops organized by Carbon Free, it was heralded by audiences and some of the group’s leaders as a success in showing that getting the region to zero carbon by 2030 was possible, and that action to push for that was therefore not only necessary but also realistic. Yet this interpretation was contested by more skeptical members of the group’s leadership; in particular the individuals involved in developing the model. One of them explained that:

“The whole thing has been an exercise in exploring uncertainty. And I found my point quite hard to put across, really, because people kind of hope that the data work sort of gives answers.”

Yet another expressed similar doubts about the chances of achieving the model’s predicted scenario, but argued that action had to start from a potentially self-fulfilling prophesy:

“We’ve had a lot of discussion about what the value is of those numbers within that process, but there is some sense of like being able to say, ‘yeah, we’ve done the calculations. This is what’s possible.’ (...) Is it really possible? I don’t know.
It feels like saying it’s possible is almost necessary to be able to have a conversation that leads to some action.”

This ex ante optimism also became clear from some of the decisions made in building the model itself. Where the option was available, the ‘ambitious’ scenario was chosen over the ‘achievable’ one. While those who developed the model said this was done to underline the challenging nature of the task ahead by showing that only an ambitious scenario would suffice, audiences quite clearly found room to conclude that keeping global warming to below 1.5 degrees was still possible from the point of view of the region’s contribution. In backstage organizational meetings, however, doubts became more pronounced. Some leaders explicitly mentioned that they did not believe the predicted scenario was likely to become reality and that they felt a need to focus also on what society should do in the likely case of failure to mitigate. This was later confirmed in interviews. Hence, there was a clear gap between public and private scenarios of climate change, and it was the optimistic one that informed and legitimized strategies, thereby keeping focus firmly on mitigation and leaving adaptation unexplored.

While it is very difficult to generalize from the workings of one organization, we can draw some tentative conclusions from these observations. Even if organizers question the accuracy of optimistic scenarios and occasionally recognize the need to shift focus to adaptation, several factors inhibit this from having strategic consequences. Essentially, the tradition of focusing on mitigation still has momentum, and diverting from it requires effort. Apart from ambiguities about the motivation to do so, the necessary resources are often also missing, including those to have the fundamental discussions required about why this might be needed and what it would imply, and to execute the imagined work that would come about. More ‘sophisticated’ notions of adaptation like transformational ones thereby also remain unknown, thus precluding opportunities to explore its radical potential or its synergies with mitigation.

The same seems to be going on in other groups. As a premise for activism, a decision is typically made to do everything within one’s reach to mitigate. In turn, climate change is framed diagnostically in such a way that it supports the motivational framing of that work. For instance, the IPCC’s (2018) “12 years” scenario is widely shared. Yet this scenario is not carefully selected from a range of options, based on likelihood or the expected utility of responses. Instead, its viability within the context of motivational framing is decisive. Climate activists are often aware of more pessimistic scenarios, but these are strategically ignored, and at best relegated to therapeutic discussions about how to keep fighting against climate change, despite the odds.

It needs to be stressed that this is of course not to dismiss these groups as irrational, naïve or ineffective. There is clear, viable reasons to minimize global warming, even if the difference made is only regarding the extent of the apocalypse (a way of thinking many activists seem to follow), and it is rational to develop frames that support that work. Yet seeing how this works gives us crucial insights into why (transformational) adaptation remains unexplored and unaddressed within today’s growing climate movement, despite the fact that it fits rather well with activists privately held beliefs.

In relation to the basic model presented in Figure 1, we could thus conclude that at least in some groups there is a motivation among activists who (at times) share a
postapocalyptic view of environmentalism, as well as some agreement on the need to engage more with adaptation. Yet further conditions to turn this into action are not met: the traditional momentum of work on mitigation outweighs these factors and resources needed to change course are lacking. Political opportunity structures hardly come into play as the discussed groups typically never got to the point of considering contextual conditions for working on adaptation.

*How climate activists do engage with climate adaptation*

Even though not all climate activists who participated in this study perceived a need to engage with adaptation, and even though the ones who did were often constrained in developing this further, some activists did find ways to develop exceptions, occasionally with some transformational potential.

For some, engagement with adaptation was strictly individual, as one XR Malmö activist indicated:

“They often say, okay, but parallel with this [activism on mitigation], I’m trying to figure out how I should prepare for a climate emergency, how I should prepare me and my family and my living status and my life to that. And I think, like everyone in this movement have like water in their basement.

I: Do you have bottles of water in your basement?

Yes, [chuckles] I have.”

The primary collective way in which activists did engage in climate adaptation is by considering – often implicitly – the relevance of work they are already doing in the context of adaptation. For instance, some involved in local food and energy projects see what they are doing not just as developing more sustainable ways to produce, but also – and sometimes increasingly so – as advancing resilience to the growing risk of disruptions in global supply chains. A Bristol-based food grower argued that:

“My experience of like trying to develop a locally connected agro-ecological farm is more to do with adapting to climate change really than trying to stop it. It’s to do with trying to be a small part of a new kind of food system that is less carbon intensive, definitely, but also is more connected to local markets and includes local people more, that local people essentially have more power and control over, is less reliant on fossil fuel based inputs, and yeah, is more resilient.”

Other interviewees, also those not involved in alternative food growing projects, point to this logic as main examples of current movement activities that are relevant in terms of adaptation. An XR Malmö activist explained:

“So there are like new ways of thinking about how to do things when the normal systems doesn’t work. And I think that’s something we all sort of need to think
about, really. Like what happens when we can’t grow our own food? (...) How could we create systems that would actually work in the new world?”

Some activists indicated that their mitigation-oriented activities were more generally intended to adapt to climate change by increasing social resilience. Specifically, by organizing collective action, and by trying to do so in an inclusive way, they hoped they would strengthen social capital, bring diverse groups together, and promote equality, so that “society will respond to the consequences of climate change with solidarity instead of fascism” (Ethnographic observation 2020, Carbon Free). As discussed in an earlier study (de Moor, 2019), this choice can conflict with groups’ ambition to mitigate as much as possible as fast as possible by working primarily with the typically less diverse community that environmental organizations can reach more easily. It is perhaps unsurprising then that activists who want to focus on inequality as an adaptive response have arguably done so by leaving the CCM. According to one activist, many who had become disenchanted with climate politics around the failed 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit subsequently became involved with anti-austerity campaigning instead:

“I saw a real shift around 2010 after Copenhagen. (...) I was surrounded by people who were climate activists who then became anti-cuts [austerity] activists. (...) I think it was partly a bit what I was talking about, of like, oh, we can’t achieve the climate objective, so what becomes important is inequality.” (Interview, Carbon Free, 2020).

The most explicit way in which activist groups were found to engage with adaptation were found in Antwerp. Here, engagement with adaptation mainly took the form of co-creation. In the context of the ‘Stadsplan 2050’ program, the local government had invited various civil society groups in the neighborhood of Sint-Andries to participate in the creation of various local adaptation measures, such as the greening of streets, which should alleviate proximate risks like flooding and heating issues. The case of Antwerp thus shows that local governments can play an important role in overcoming abovementioned resource constraints that were found to limit civil society actors in other cities from engaging with adaptation.

Yet such engagement again does not become clearly transformational. Moreover, critical debates about co-creation have highlighted the differential capacity within society to co-create (e.g. Avelino et al., 2019). Specifically, vulnerable groups often lack this capacity, and a reliance on it will thus reproduce social and climate-related injustices (Mees, Crabbé, & Driessen, 2017). The interviewees in this study were often aware of this tension and argued that government therefore had a responsibility to address it. However, no evidence was found of groups actively campaigning for that. The city, for its part, specifically chose to work with Sint-Andries because its high social capital and privately owned properties ensured the means considered necessary to participate in co-creation, though in future efforts more vulnerable neighborhoods were planned to be included (Interview City of Antwerp, 2019).

Some limited evidence was found to indicate that activists were focusing on urban development and infrastructural responses to climate change as well, resembling Kates et al.’s (2012) definition of transformation as related to scale. In Hamburg, a longstanding debate exists around the development of the Elbe River, which provides
the entry to its inland sea-harbor. While the city wants to deepen it to allow bigger ships to come in, some campaigners argue that this may undermine the strength of dikes, thus increasing flood risks. While some groups saw this debate as adaptation-related, others stressed the embeddedness of the discussion in wider questions of moving away from a growth-oriented economy and nature conservation (and some environmental groups even challenged the idea that the question had any relevance for flooding). Overall, the adaptation-related aspects were only observed in backstage discussions, and much less frontstage.

In Antwerp, a campaign concerning the restructuring of the city’s ring road called Ringland was interpreted in terms of adaptation by one core organizer of a group advocating a tunnel rather than the government’s preferred over-ground solution. The organizer argued that a tunnel would not only serve the purpose of improving traffic conditions and the city’s air quality, the tunnel could be covered by a green park-ring that would act as a sponge for climate-induced flooding and urban heating. As the plans would lock the city into a developmental pathway for decades, it was considered crucial that future risks were taken into account now. This large-scale approach to adaptation was presented in a direct critique of the city’s dominant ‘co-creation’ approach:

“So here and there, a piece of green is created in the city, but like that we will still be working for another 100 or 200 years to address the heat island problem of the city of Antwerp. If you want to do something about the heat island of the city, you need something else. You need a measure that really makes a difference. That is a disruptive measure and Ringland was such a disruptive possibility that has been dragged through the mud.”

This argument was furthermore motivated by a concern that co-creation would mainly benefit privileged communities. Yet ultimately, it was kept out of the campaign’s public framing because it was considered unlikely to resonate with the public.

It is promising that some groups find ways to engage with adaptation while embedding it into projects with a different explicit focus. At the same time, for those advocating the importance of transformational adaptation, it is worrying that across these five cities, no evidence was found of any group working explicitly on adaptation beyond co-creation – not within the CCM, and as far as 46 interviewees knew, neither within other groups. If adaptation is to be about engendering structural transformations, piecemeal and implicit engagement with that project may be unlikely to suffice.

6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This paper has explored how perceptions of already present or unavoidable climate impacts affect CCMs in five Northwestern European cities, including their ability to continue working on mitigation, and in particular, a potential shift in focus to adapting to those impacts.

Individuals and groups differed in their view of the need for groups like them to get involved with adaptation. Most shared with the notion of postapocalyptic
environmentalism considerable doubts about the possibility of keeping climate change within ‘safe’ boundaries. Hence, this study has certainly found traces of postapocalyptic environmentalism, and to some extent, this presence provides a motivation for activism beyond mitigation. However, many at least sometimes still perceived a window of opportunity for meaningful climate mitigation, which they amplified in the public use of an apocalyptic diagnostic framing. This enabled them to continue working on mitigation. Others even refused to consider the window of opportunity, instead arguing that working to mitigate climate change was the only ethical and bearable option.

As for the need for social movement involvement with transformational adaptation spelled out in literature, most agreed that adaptation would be necessary, but only some believed that adaptation was political or required their involvement. Those who did not typically had not given the topic much thought. Yet even those who did generally lacked an understanding of the specific politics of adaptation in their city, or of transformational adaptation and its aim of integrating mitigation into a radical discussion of redressing climate vulnerability more generally. Already in shaping motivations to work on adaptation, we see the relevance of resources: many groups indicated that they simply did not have the time to consider or debate adaptation, let alone strategize around the topic. Relatedly, some worry that a frame focused on adaptation would lack resonance when mobilizing participants, thus further limiting the group’s resources.

Still, some factors enabled certain groups or individuals to engage with the topic more extensively: experience-induced skepticism that gradually gets people used to the idea of working beyond mitigation; a local focus in considerations of climate justice; a city that invites participation in shaping adaptation; and contested infrastructural interventions that are relevant to adaptation. Some groups incorporate adaptation in their work on mitigation by acting in an inclusive way to promote social resilience, as doing so is believed to advance equality, social capital and solidarity. Other groups work on adaptation in more specific ways, though often only implicitly. The development of local food projects – a common phenomenon in the environmental movement – was seen by many interviewees as a measure that could increase local resilience as it would increase independence from global supply chains. Some took up the role of co-creators who, in collaboration with the municipality, helped to shape their neighborhoods in ways that could literally absorb flooding and heat issues. Finally, a few examples indicated that activists are aware of the importance to consider adaptation in urban planning today, and took such concerns on board in campaigns to influence urban development. These examples show that while adaptation is largely invisible in the public communication of the CCM, and indeed is often kept out of strategizing, there are plenty of more implicit engagements with the topic.

Yet while these engagements may form a relevant starting point, so far, few have turned this potential into a broader engagement that can be described as transformational adaptation, because they largely remain piecemeal responses to concrete risks. This is not because they are convinced that more conservative approaches to adaptation are preferable, but because there seems to be little knowledge of what adaptation may otherwise entail. In effect, mitigation and adaptation remain seen as two opposing options by most interviewees and the common desire to continue a tradition of working on mitigation thus becomes the main limiter of work on adaptation – despite often-
strong privately held postapocalyptic views. Models based on a logic of consequences are therefore limited in explaining the link between postapocalyptic environmentalism and action on transformational adaptation. A logic of appropriateness appears to provide important additional insights. That is, within the CCM it is often seen as inappropriate to ‘give up’ on mitigation. Therefore, privately held skepticism about the possible success of mitigation is kept out of strategic discussions, while alternative climate scenarios are adopted or built to publically legitimize continuation of groups’ traditional focus on mitigation. While some accept time windows like 2030 as provided by the IPCC (2018), others build their own local ‘ambitious’ scenarios to show that mitigation is still possible. Transformational adaptation, with its focus on justice, disruption and an integration of mitigation and adaptation, has the potential to render more explicit engagement with questions beyond mitigation more ‘appropriate’, and thus to access a seemingly untapped potential within the CCM to turn postapocalyptic narratives into a transformative force.

In sum, the aim of this paper is not to criticize climate movement organizations for their continued work on mitigation. Indeed, it discusses arguments and conditions to support this continuation. At the same time, it does reveal that some groups are more limited in working on adaptation than they would want to be, and that the way they do engage with adaptation has important limitations from the point of view of transformational adaptation. The study’s focus on Northwestern European cities shows that even though the impacts of climate change are becoming more noticeable, a lack of urgency still prevents a focus on adaptation. However, transformational adaptation is a long-term process, the current study indicates that there is a need for ongoing research into what enables civil society to engage with this topic now.
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Interviews Manchester

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The Earth System Governance Working Papers are available online at www.earthsystemgovernance.org.


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