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'The slow pandemic': youth's climate activism and the stakes for youth movements under Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Pandemic conditions have affected social movement activity in various ways. In this article, we explore how young Cypriot climate activists, associated with the global Fridays for Future movement, attempt to integrate pandemic conditions in their mobilizing tactics, as well as how such conditions affect their collective youth agency. We first look into the strategic antagonistic framings they develop to counter dominant discourses of the pandemic as an unprecedented crisis and explore how these are informed by their understandings of, and emotions on, climate change as an effect of capitalism and overconsumption and as a type of 'slow pandemic'. We argue that by extending climate change crisis discourse to encompass the cause of the pandemic, young activists assert temporality as continuity, rather than rupture, and challenge the distinction between the exceptional and the everyday on which Emergency governance is based on. By doing this, they unsettle adult hegemonic discourses on temporality, emergency and crisis that lead to an uneven world. Secondly, we reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on non-institutional youth activism by exploring the challenges these activists face to their sustenance and reproduction, given that access to public space, as we claim, is crucial for teenagers in developing the necessary relationality that is key for the maintenance of their social movement activity. We argue that youth movements emerge and operate within particular conditions which are currently under threat given the distinct mechanisms of governing populations engineered during Covid-19.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has altered the everydayness of people all over the world in a number of fundamental ways, including the lives of young people (ILO 2020). Restrictions on movement, alienating attire and social distancing rules do not foster relationality and enhance feelings of isolation and disconnection. Building and maintaining relationality, however, in the sense of creating and sustaining social relations and connectedness, is a crucial aspect of social movement action (della Porta and Diani 2006) that seems to be currently under threat. Calls for national unity in response to the pandemic from a number of states can be seen as further threatening progressive social movements (Pleyers 2020), while at the same time diverging attention from a variety of equally urgent issues that such movements engage with. One such issue is the climate change crisis that mobilizes increasing numbers of young people on a worldwide scale (Foran, Gray, and Grosse 2017).

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It is well-documented that social movements contest with governments and other powerholders for the meaning assigned to situations that have a major socio-political impact on societies (Melucci 1989; Crossley 2002). What counts as an emergency, therefore, and what issue should be given priority is a constant battle between governmental authorities and social movements that contest with their counter-frames the dominant discourses in relation to what are often termed as 'crises'. Framing and discursive repertoires are well-established forms of contentious collective action. Framing has been conceptualized as a strategic, communicative and meaning-making process (Tarrow 1998; Crossley 2002) that social movements employ in order to challenge and discredit the truth and common-sense claims of hegemonic discourses (Steinberg 1999), but also as an attempt to acquire more supporters to their cause. As Snow et al. (1986) show, this can happen in multiple ways depending on each current situation and context of struggle.

In this article, we focus on how young climate activists integrate pandemic conditions within their mobilizing framing tactics, as well as how such conditions, and related measures, potentially affect the continuation and reproducibility of their activist endeavors given the limitations of access to public space that is seen as crucial for youth's autonomous activism. To achieve this, we analyze data we collected through ethnographic research with Youth for Climate Cyprus, a Cypriot activist group on climate change associated with the international Fridays for Future (FFF) movement. In the first empirical part of the paper, following the methods section, we explore the meanings that young climate activists assign to the pandemic, how these relate to their understandings of, and emotions on, climate change, and how such perceptions and emotions inform the antagonistic framings they use as mobilizing tactics to counter official pandemic narratives and engage more people to their cause. We further relate such framings to those of the wider FFF movement by focusing especially on the period of the stricter lockdown measures between March and May 2020.

Given that developing collective action frames is largely seen as a contested process (Benford and Snow 2000), we use the adjective 'antagonistic' here to emphasize how these young activists' framings largely aim at unsettling adult hegemonic discourses about temporality, emergency and crisis brought to the fore in this case through the promotion of the idea of a pre-pandemic normality. We argue that what has been termed as the biggest global crisis in decades, namely the COVID-19 pandemic ('COVID-19 pandemic most challenging crisis since Second World War' 2020), is framing that does not align much with young climate activists' perceptions of the issue. They contest this framing as they attempt to bring to the fore their own framings of the debate that are based on perceptions of the pandemic as a condition that comes to complement, rather than rupture, the already existing anxiety-ridden environment in which they live, and which is associated with what they term as the 'slow pandemic' to refer to the climate change crisis and its mismanagement by states.

At the same time as looking at young climate activists' social movement tactics during the pandemic, in the second part of the paper, we take a closer look at how governmental measures to fight Covid-19 impact the activist endeavors of Youth for Climate Cyprus and reflect on the alarming potential that such measures might engender for youth movements more generally. We argue that youth movements emerge and operate within particular conditions that differ from adult-centered movements. Such conditions are particularly under threat given the distinct mechanisms of governing populations engineered during the current pandemic.

Teenage social movement participation and climate activism

In general, literature on non-institutionalized youth activism, and particularly teenage activism, has been limited (Gordon 2010; Taft 2011), while children's participation in social movements is heavily underexplored (Rodgers 2005). In terms of youth's climate activism, this has been explored in the form of everyday or mundane activism (Walker 2017; Börner, Kraftl, and Giatti 2021; Trott 2021), that must, however, be separated analytically from youth's social movement action which is more directly political and collective in nature. Furthermore, recent research in this field has explored the salient factors that contribute to youth's commitment to climate activism (Fisher

2016), and the role of emotions such as hope, fear, despair and anger in such processes of commitment and motivation to action (Ojala 2012; Kleres and Wettergren 2017; Nairn 2019). Beyond exploring young climate activists' motivations, however, there is limited research that explores their mobilization strategies and how emotions and perceptions on climate change actually inform such strategies and the antagonistic framings youth use to promote their messages. Instead, what has mostly been explored are the various framings and knowledge-transmission strategies adults (e.g. educators) or the media use to engage youth in climate activism (see Schreiner and Sjøberg 2005; Corner et al. 2015; Stevenson et al. 2018).

With this article, we aim to contribute to this under-researched area by exploring how young activists' understandings of climate change inform the antagonistic framings they themselves develop to counter official renderings of the pandemic and promote visions of alternative futures that aim to mobilize more people to their cause. We recognize this as a form of disruptive and dangerous dissent (O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018, 5), in the sense of youth's attempts to question the official 'script' of hegemonic powers and what are presented as 'neutral, unavoidable and common-sense arrangements and policies', and propose alternatives. Such forms of dissent are in line with the fact that increasing numbers of young people recognize the limits of dutiful dissent (Collins 2021) and seek other means to effect change that simultaneously challenge and move beyond existing power structures. We further aim to contribute to the emerging literature of how social movements, and particularly young people participating in them, make meaning of the current pandemic and take action in this respect. This is in response to Collins (2021, 6) call of the increased need, in these very restrictive times, for research that will 'enable young people's agency through understanding of its workings, and its stumbling blocks'. In an attempt to also explore these stumbling blocks, we consider the potential dangers that pandemic measures might engender for non-institutional youth activism given the pivotal role that public space has for youth's autonomous action, community formation and participation in public life (Skelton and Valentine 1998; Valentine 2004; Hopkins 2010).

Methods

In this article, we draw from a year-long ethnographic study with Youth for Climate Cyprus, hereafter Y4C, a self-organized youth group with no institutional affiliations, which has been inspired by the international FFF movement. The FFF movement has been stirred by the now iconic activist Greta Thunberg and her successive school strikes outside the Swedish parliament in an effort to draw attention to the detrimental effects of climate change and the urgency to act in this respect. Y4C have been active since they were established as an activist group in early 2019 within the Republic of Cyprus (ROC), as well as internationally, by attending international meetings and conferences, through the networks they maintain with the FFF movement. During this time and until the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in Cyprus, Y4C organized a series of protests in parallel with the international protests organized by FFF, as well as a variety of other events centered around climate change and action. Y4C organized itself around a number of working groups aimed at carrying out more efficiently and effectively a variety of tasks related to the organization of events and the production and dissemination of information, research and knowledge about climate change. During this time, Y4C also established their online activist presence primarily through the use of Facebook and Instagram.

Y4C have no official membership and participation in their events vary significantly (from around a hundred to several hundred). However, the young people who are actively involved, to different degrees, within the group are fewer than 100 with most of the organizing work carried out by a handful of those who hold unofficial leadership roles. The majority of them range in age from 15 to 25 and are overwhelmingly female.

Overall, our research mainly aimed to explore how young activists make meaning of climate change and their activism on this matter, the forms this activism takes and how these youth

organize and mobilize for this purpose. After attending and documenting a number of protests that Y4C organized in 2019, we began to research the group more fully beginning of 2020. Our initial contacts with Y4C members were through personal acquaintances who provided us with additional contacts of other members.

We conducted 20 individual in-depth semi-structured interviews, that is two consecutive interviews per person with 10 participants, as well as two focus groups (each constituted by four participants) with young activists from the group. We also continued to ethnographically register their various events, and follow their social media activities, as well as those of the international FFF movement, while further documenting the way Y4C were represented in the local press. In this article, we mostly analysed data from the above sources with the bulk of our analysis, however, focusing on data collected through interviews and focus group discussions. ATLAS.ti was used to analyse the data collected and to identify and explore emerging thematic categories.

In total, 18 young activists (13 females and 5 males) participated in both individual and focus group interviews with an age range between 14 and 22 years old. From these youth, some had leading roles in organizing and coordinating the actions of the group, while others were members of different thematic working groups within Y4C and contributed in various ways to the overall activities of the group. Ethics approval for the project was granted by the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee. All participants provided written consent for their participation in the project. Underage participants provided their own assent in addition to their parents' or guardians' consent.

With the outbreak of the pandemic and lockdown measures in Cyprus in March 2020 we moved our fieldwork and interviews online. Though a few interviews were conducted in February, the majority were carried out between March and May 2020. This did not prove as challenging as initially feared as most of these youth came from middle class, urban backgrounds with access to the internet and the necessary equipment. Most of them were also quite literate of, and relatively comfortable within, an online environment. Moving the fieldwork online meant giving particular attention to how the group reconvened itself in an online environment and how they continued to promote their demands and organize their actions in a time of great restrictions to physical interaction and access to public space. It further meant partly re-conceiving the initial research questions to include reflections on youth's experience and understanding of the pandemic and how these related to, and influenced, their ongoing activism towards climate justice. As a matter of fact, since the start of the pandemic and until the completion of our fieldwork, no physical protests or other public events were organized by Y4C.

Framings and meanings of the pandemic by young climate activists

Challenging adult temporalities by framing the pandemic within the climate change crisis discourse

Producing and digitally promoting antagonistic framings to the mainstream renderings of the pandemic was a key aspect of young climate activists' mobilization during lockdown partly due to the restrictions on physical protests and access to public space that limited the possibilities for youth to make their will visible in the public arena. Like other progressive movements (della Porta 2020; Pleyers 2020), young people participating in Y4C strongly contested the framing of the pandemic as a radical break from the already existing socio-political conditions. More specifically, they challenged 'the return to normal' call by national leaders by arguing that the situation before the outbreak of the pandemic was far from normal. Rather, it was one that was actively threatening young people's futures causing feelings of anxiety, despair, fear and distress (Kleres and Wettergren 2017; Nairn 2019). The pandemic then came to exacerbate these already intense feelings of concern about the potential for a livable future as indicated below by 18-year-old Chara, a coordinator of one of Y4C's sub-groups that focused on preparing articles related to climate change and press-releases for dissemination:

Yes you can call it like this, disempowerment, yes it's true, because unfortunately, especially now with the coronavirus, the priority will first and foremost be given to the economy, and these aims, what can I say ... if you study it from a historical perspective and we consider one by one the examples where the economy was against the environment we obviously know who wins so that we find ourselves in this situation today. And this is why I'm feeling pessimistic, because as much as I want to be idealistic I can't, because I see the reality. However, this doesn't mean that I stop trying to the maximum of my abilities, and this maximum is through activism and that's why I'm here.

The pandemic enhances feelings of disempowerment and pessimism shared by many young activists about the potential of effecting change on policies related to climate change. These feelings emanate from young activists' broader understandings of climate change as being both a consequence of the capitalist system and the overexploitation of natural resources, as well as an issue of overconsumption that is associated with an apathetic and environmentally careless way of living characteristic of the current age. In fact many, such as 18-year-old Erica, an active member in Y4C's coordinating activities, emphasized how the pandemic and the climate crisis have been handled by governments in a similar fashion in terms of putting the welfare of the economy and profit above people's well-being:

The way that some states have been handling Covid reminds us of how they handle climate change. For example, America that has been neglecting Covid for so long and not taking the necessary measures. It is exactly the same politics that they follow with climate change, that the economy can somehow save the world from such an enormous threat, be it Covid or climate change.

In the context of such understandings then, young climate activists see the pandemic as only enhancing, rather than deterring, the precedence that the economy and profit-making take over environmental protection as expressed to us by 17-year-old Melpo who has been an active participant in Y4C's protests:

I've always felt that we're not doing enough (to combat climate change), but especially now with this virus and with this, with the economy stopping, I'm a bit concerned about what's gonna happen with climate change after the economy restarts, 'cause I think ... [...] I think they're gonna want to take the economy back to where it was, so I think things are gonna go more ... I mean, people are gonna work overtime, and things are gonna be produced more than what we need and all that. And I'm also a bit concerned about whether climate change is gonna become a priority for us now, or if we're gonna forget it and focus on our economy. And it's again the concept of people over profit, and the balance between ... OK, we need to stabilize the economy, but at the same time, we need to have a future to somehow enjoy this stable economy.

Like Melpo, many other young climate activists make meaning of the coronavirus pandemic by connecting it with an already-existing crisis and the fears and anxieties about a livable future that it exacerbates. They do this by re-framing the pandemic as a problem of profit over people, thus associating it with the same priorities that they see being undertaken by governments that take a toll on efforts for environmentally sustainable futures. In this sense, they extend a common frame and slogan used in climate justice discourse, 'people over profit', to encompass the problems generated by a global pandemic and such framing process is reflected in their public outreach posts presented below.

Rendering assumingly unassociated issues through the grammar and language of a broader frame is a common practice of frame extension by social movements in their attempt to win supporters and discredit opponents (Snow et al. 1986). Extending the frame of the climate change crisis, in this case, works to challenge the ahistorical presentation of the pandemic by governments reflected in their use of the term 'emergency' to describe the pandemic. Emergency governance heavily depends on the distinction between the event, the exceptional and the everyday, the ordinary (Anderson 2017). It presents a situation as an exception 'to the normal state of affairs', thus partly absolving governments from responsibility for its cause. Embedding the pandemic within climate change discourse, thus, becomes a strategic move for this youth to call into question the lack of responsibility promulgated by states. This is directly related to young activists' understandings that

both conditions emanate from extensive anthropogenic intervention, as 19-year-old Rania, one of the founders of Y4C, supports:

What caused Covid, also causes climate change. With the abuse of the physical resources, the abuse of animals to satisfy our own needs [...] They were both caused ... They didn't come from the universe and found us. We did something to make them happen. This is what I want to emphasize, that nothing comes to us out of nowhere. We did something to make it happen.

Such understandings informed the outgoing antagonistic frames Y4C employed to challenge and discredit official renderings of the pandemic evident in their social media posts during lockdown, such as the ones cited below from Y4C's Instagram account, through which Y4C, like FFF international, attempted to actively reconstruct the terms of the debate around Covid-19:

As the world stays home to stop the spread of coronavirus, we have seen a temporary decrease in carbon emissions. Meanwhile, governments seek (sic) to quickly jump-start the economy will work to further reduce regulations, clearing the way for polluters to destroy the delicate balance of the Earth. Scientists have long voiced concerns that climate change does not just impact the environment, but also our health by increasing rates of infectious disease. Until we address the issue of climate change on a global scale — we'll be facing new and more damaging pandemics for years to come. How can we go back to normal, when normal was the problem? Credits: @fridays-forfutureusa #climatechange #environment #activism #globalwarming #earth #fridaysforfuture.¹

Y4C make meaning of the pandemic within the terms of climate change discourse and this translates into the framings they use to strategically set the terms of the debate over the pandemic. Such framings provide an antagonistic rendering to the return-to-normal call by showing how the pandemic should be framed as a problem that is a side-effect of an already larger crisis – and not as one-off event. In this sense, extending the frame of the climate crisis works to place the pandemic within a continuum of socio-economic problems and struggles, resisting its 'misframing' (Snow et al. 1986; Crossley 2002) as a calamity that came out of nowhere by actors who benefit from the status quo and attempt to present such a narrative. This insistence of young activists in historicizing the pandemic, by emphasizing its continuity rather than rupture with existing conditions, constitutes an attempt to hold the past generation – that they perceive as passive about, or in denial of, climate change – accountable. In this sense, connecting the temporalities of the past, present and future becomes a key strategy to fight an adult, authoritarian governing of time that often works through separating it into different blocks (Jenks 2005) and presenting issues as exceptional through the use of the language of emergency in order to avoid responsibility, sideline issues of common and urgent concern or govern them in an authoritarian and non-inclusive way.

The slow pandemic': appropriating emergency and hopeful language to mobilize action

Historicizing the pandemic through frame extension was further reflected in posts that included a motivational component and which exposed the fact that both the pandemic and climate change are but the consequences of the abuse of nature for profit and the lack of political will to effect change and not really the problems themselves, insinuating thus that change is possible if we take action:

Nature is in crisis, threatened by biodiversity and habitat loss, global heating and toxic pollution. Failing to act is failing humanity! Covid-19 or climate change are not the problems but the consequences of the problems. The problems known as modern way of life and lack of political will/policies. Let's reconsider everything before returning to normality! #covid_19 #climatechange #nature #environment #unep #fridaysforfuture #health #ecosystem.²

Motivational framing consists of a 'call to arms' often engaging in this process 'appropriate vocabularies of motive' (Benford and Snow 2000, 617). In this case, the language and grammar of climate change, and its associated vocabularies of crisis, severity and urgency, are used to expose the assumed pre-pandemic normality as problematic and thus in need of repair and change. Emergency and crisis here, as also depicted in analyses of the Black Lives Matter movement (Anderson 2017), become a resource in the hands of activists that use it to intervene in the 'uneven distribution of temporalities that structure existing situations of harm and damage' (Anderson et al. 2020, 633).

They use it in this case to expose the fact that there is no normality to return to and do this by attaching 'the affective registers of emergency -urgency, necessity, exceptionality- to a situation/condition that has become ordinary' (Anderson et al. 2020, 634). In this sense, they challenge the distinction between the exceptional and the everyday that reinforces white, liberal rule and on which Emergency governance is based.

Exposing previous taken-for-granted areas of everyday life as problematic is a key function of framing processes by social movements that as Loader (2008, 1925) suggests aim 'to shape and transform social phenomena into culturally recognizable problems' and provide 'ways to tackle them and the related motivation to act to resolve them'. In this case, the exposure of the pre-pandemic abnormality is used to amplify the moral obligation that both individuals and states have towards taking action to tackle climate change as 'failing to act is failing humanity!'. Frame amplification often works through amplifying a particular belief in the population, or even a moral obligation, such as towards the survival of humanity, in this case, to mobilize action. It is for this reason that the international FFF movement produced the hashtag #fighteverycrisis during lockdown (Thompson 2020) to demonstrate that climate change is still an ongoing crisis that should not be forgotten or sidelined in times of the pandemic. Such strategic framings reflect young climate activists' wider understandings of climate change as a much bigger and long-lasting crisis, as a 'slow pandemic', that should urgently be addressed as 17-year-old Pandora, a key coordinator of Y4C suggests:

Yeah, but you have to be, to arouse that feeling that the pandemic did (sic), that we are in danger, so this is what people need to understand, that climate change is some form of slow pandemic.

Other youth, such as Alexis, (age 18) and Gregoris, (age 17), both active participants in Y4C's mobilizing actions seem to share similar perceptions:

Alexis: This crisis that was created with the coronavirus is just a taste of the much worse crisis that will come in the future with climate change.

Gregoris: For me the problem is that there are many ways right now that, with carbon emissions, we are causing problems to our planet and at some point we will not be able to simply say 'Yes, there is this thing but I just go on with my life'. These will cause actual problems with the economies, with migration and we need to be ... We have to try to prevent this or if we don't succeed to be ready for whatever happens. I mean we see now with the coronavirus how many people were panicking and the measures that we should have taken for something that, it's a problem, but not a huge problem in relation to what I believe climate change will be if we don't do something about it ... it will create problems in all areas [...] It's not that I will wake up tomorrow and we will be flooded. It is done slowly-slowly.

Understanding climate change as a slow pandemic, as a form of 'slow emergency' in the words of Anderson et al. (2020), helps these youth reconcile the geo-historical distinction between emergency and the everyday and translate destructive conditions that have become ordinary into something demanding urgent action. The concept of slow emergencies has been used by Anderson et al. (2020) to bring to light the racially uneven temporal order that underlies Emergency governance. This refers to the linear and cyclical time of Emergency, which is dependent on a return to normality, a return not optional for those who suffer the everyday, slow violence of climate change and racial inequality and for which there is no anticipated future temporality, in the liberal sense of linear progress through control over one's decisions, to return to. The concept of slow pandemic, therefore, reflects this youth's relation to climate change as an everyday concern and their understanding of it as a social justice issue, beyond an environmental one, that affects the lives of less privileged others in the now:

Erica: But I can tell you what interests me even more than the environmental dimension of climate change is the social dimension. That the most vulnerable groups of the population are those who suffer the worst consequences from climate change [...] Soon it's gonna be too hot to stay out, we'll be staying put in our air condition. [...] But you who can't afford to pay the air condition [...] you won't have any other choice but to, excuse me for the expression, slowly-slowly die.

Such perceptions of climate change as a slow process informs young activists' conclusions about the lack of mobilization, especially by the older generation in affluent countries, in relation to this cause. They attempt, therefore, to mobilize them by transplanting the emergency language into a condition that has become commonplace, as well as by further framing the pandemic as a current opportunity for states to implement more environmentally sustainable policies. Framing it as an opportunity constitutes a call for mobilization in the present that encompasses a vision towards a more sustainable future and exposes hope that action can make a difference. The following excerpt from a focus group, where Josie (age 17) and Anastasia (age 16), both active participants in Y4C's mobilizations, took part demonstrates this:

Josie: We shouldn't go back to how we were. I think this phrase that we use 'to go back to a normal way of life' is quite wrong because we shouldn't go backwards, we should move forward. Therefore, we should find ways to use what has happened now with the reduction of greenhouse gases. In Italy, for example, the water in Venice is again clear, something that hasn't happened in years. I mean we should go forward, not backwards. I think that now we have a very good opportunity to start over.

Anastasia: I would say that beyond thinking about more creative ways to protest, it's good to start putting forward ideas about a sustainable restart of the economy. The opportunity that we are given now with Covid is an opportunity for a new beginning. And despite the fact that the restart of the economy is number one priority for the government right now, this can be done while simultaneously paying attention to the environment and to the ways we can transform the economy.

This urge to motivate and push people to action, as well as provide ways to tackle the issue responds to many young activists' own perceptions of the role of the younger generation in this struggle as having the responsibility, often also described to us as 'a burden', to 'wake people up' in terms of the urgency of the climate crisis. This attitude is further associated with their perception of 'youth', which is similar to that of other young activists explored elsewhere (Gordon 2010), as able to 'provide a fresher alternative to the situation' (Eirini, age 17), as having 'a more rebellious spirit' (Erica), and as more able to 'think out of the box' (Klelia, age 20), therefore provide alternative scenarios for the crisis at hand. Understandings of climate change as a gradual process, therefore, translate into framings which present possibilities and proposals for alternative futures and aim to unsettle hegemonic adult framings of the climate crisis that present it as irrelevant for the current moment.

Framing the pandemic as an opportunity or as was otherwise phrased by 17-year-old Chinese environmental activist Ou Hongyi as 'a climate wake-up call' (Baptista 2020) for states and others to start implementing new, more sustainable policies demonstrates a way forward, an imagined desirable future and a proposed narrative about other ways of living. The concept and frame of 'the future' has been key to the FFF movement as a mobilizing tool to bring more young people into the struggle, as well as to relate climate change to older generations by raising emotional and moral concern on the fate of their children. As a critical function of social movements is to provide the public with alternative knowledge and narratives to the mainstream (Ranci re 2003), a function which took center stage during the pandemic due to restrictions on physical protests, making the connections between climate change and the pandemic was a key tactic for young climate activists. By providing such alternative narratives, they attempt to set the stage for the imagination of alternative futures, at the same time as claiming their role as future-makers (Appadurai 2013; Spyrou 2020), who expand the horizons of hope and possibility. By setting the terms of how we talk and understand the current pandemic, they attempt to promote particular visions of a post-pandemic era that are in alignment with their own desires and hopes for a more sustainably equitable world.

The stakes for youth social movements under the Covid-19 pandemic

The mobilization of alternative frames and narratives of the pandemic was a key function of Y4C and the international FFF movement that focused their efforts on online awareness-raising of the

interconnections between the emergence of pandemics and climate change. Cypriot youth's understanding of their activism as a mediating act between science and the public was evident even prior to the pandemic and this aspect was exacerbated during the lockdown period due to restrictions on physical protests that forced Y4C to move their entire activism online. Despite, however, efforts to maintain, through online activity, the momentum that the surge of physical protests had created in 2019 (Thompson 2020), the lack of access to public space has proven challenging for young activists, at least in the case of Cyprus.

Public space is crucial to the potential of youth becoming active in a self-organized way (Valentine 2004; Hopkins 2010), as well as to creating and sustaining their activist groups and communities (Malone 2002) in ways that for adults is not. Teenage youth engaged with non-institutional forms of activism often use public space *as a resource* for organizing their activist initiatives and maintaining the types of relationships necessary for one to be continuously engaged in such action (Christou 2018). Since youth, and particularly children, do not often have the ability to own space, public space becomes pivotal, in terms of providing the material infrastructure (McCurdy, Feigenbaum, and Frenzel 2015), for bringing their activities to fruition. For the Y4C group, a central public square in Nicosia in the area outside the old municipal market of the city has been a key place of gathering for various activities such as banner-making before a protest. The open calls for banner-making at the square brought youth interested in climate change to meet the local movement organizers. Through engagement in a fun activity, bonds were created enhancing the community of climate activists and helping sustain the movement. The old market itself at that stage hosted another non-institutional youth initiative entitled AGORA project³ that reclaimed it as a space for youth self-organized activities. The networks built between Youth for Climate and AGORA project helped Y4C gain further support by an even larger constituency of young people that were not directly engaging with climate change at the time.

This speaks to how streets, public squares and even parks become key forums for the sustenance of youth's activism, but also spaces of appearance of their political will. Youth's, and particularly teenagers', appearance in such spaces renders them public (Christou 2021). Their appearance on the streets demonstrates a move from the private and institutional spaces of the home and the school to the public arena. By occupying the streets through protesting or other forms of active gathering youth make themselves visible (Matthews 2003) and call for participation in the spheres of public life. In this sense, lack of access to public space, a limitation on public gatherings and the enhanced stigmatization of youth's presence in the streets initiated due to the pandemic (Börner, Krafl, and Giatti 2021) have the potential of taking a toll on youth social movements as young climate activists claim:

Tahir (age 17, member of Y4C's research working group): I also believe that it's gonna be way more difficult to hold protests now, because if there's a limit to mass gatherings, then I feel like the only option is social media protests, like things online, which, to be honest, is not as effective as physical protests. So, I feel like the Youth for Climate would take a big ... It would be problematic due to this, but I think that it might actually allow Youth for Climate to improve their social media presence. So, I feel like it ... It depends on how we take these days and these months to come.

Erica: I liked this spirit, this passion that they (youth in a Y4C protest) have shown and I wish it to be the same everywhere. I wish that we can achieve this ... in our following protests, among our members that is often difficult to maintain their constant interest. For example now, in the midst of the pandemic, where there are no events happening, it's difficult to keep our volunteers alert and to remind them to continue to be ambassadors of our messages even in such difficult times where we will not hold an event for quite some time.

Researcher: So do you think that the pandemic affects activism?

Erica: Of course it does in terms of not being able to meet many people in a physical, practical manner, but also due to the fact that there are other priorities now in Cypriots', and generally people's, minds so that if climate change was already low in the list (of priorities), I don't want to know where it ended up now.

Being able to occupy public space in the form of protesting and social gathering is important not only for transmitting more effectively the groups' claims to an external public, but also for the internal process of cultivating and maintaining bonds among Y4C members and the enthusiasm of young activists. In physical protests and events, the enthusiasm and unity coming from holding an action together against the status quo are necessary for the nourishing and renewal of bonds among members of movements (Ehrenreich 2007), but also for the recruitment of new members. As Erica suggests, the circumstances of the pandemic make it hard to maintain the enthusiasm of younger members as the relationality built during physical protests and gatherings is under threat. Such relationality and engagement seem not so easy to replicate in an online environment according to other members' experiences:

Klelia (age 20, regular participant in Y4C's protests): First of all, about a month ago, it was during quarantine, there was something going on in Y4C, which was how ... It wasn't only Y4C. It was also more of a global thing where people would take pictures of a poster that they made at home and then post it on social media. But after trying to make that work, we noticed that a lot of people just weren't doing it, because it's so much harder to reach people at their homes, including myself. I mean, I can see this in myself, where in reality I would have liked to be a lot more involved in something. It's very difficult when you're at home and you're dealing with things at home with the rest of your family to be interested in something happening online. So, I think some of the members of Y4C, we did come to the conclusion that maybe online interactiveness isn't the best way to go. But then again, it's very difficult to make a decision of putting people's safety and health at risk when it comes to a protest in the future. So, it's very hard to decide what to do moving onwards.

The transfer of the group's activities, and more particularly of their forms of association, to an online environment seems not to have worked as effectively as Y4C would have wished, despite the fact that they had an active social media presence even before the pandemic. Their potentially successful online promotion of alternative framings of the pandemic, discussed earlier, did not seem to extend to an equally successful online maintenance of community bonds and excitement in participating in the movement. This is partly due to youth's dependence on public space and face-to-face interaction for maintaining and cultivating relationality and, therefore, to the very distancing and isolation within the private sphere that the lockdown measures effectively imposed. This condition of isolation was exacerbated for youth due to the further measure of closing down schools and after-school activity centers. Such a measure has an effect on youth movements in particular, as schools and after-school activity centers constitute key grounds to form peer groups and friendships that many times become cornerstones for the future collective activism in which youth engage (Dyson 2010; Christou 2018). In our research with Y4C, it was often mentioned to us how many peer groups and friendships formed on school grounds have been pivotal for the later engagement of youth in activism for climate justice, as well as for the very formation of Y4C. All this reflect wider conclusions reached on the limitations of digital activism, which despite enhancing greater mobilization, dissemination of activists' causes and transnational coordination of social movement action (della Porta and Mosca 2005), it can in no way replace face-to-face interaction that is deemed indispensable for the building of stronger activist community bonds of trust and camaraderie that are crucial for long-term commitment to social movements (Hemmi and Crowther 2013; Cammaerts 2015; Massarenti 2020). For this reason, a potential future institutionalization of restrictions on public gatherings and protests or institutionalization of blended or even complete digital learning, with a substantial period of school or university time being spent online, must be seen with precaution as it directly affects processes of community formation for youth that often give birth or sustain antagonistic forms of politics that are crucial for the sustenance of inclusionary and participatory democratic societies.

Despite these challenging circumstances for community maintenance and formation of alternative youth publics, Y4C did continue to be active during the pandemic effectively through online awareness-raising activities as the ones discussed in the previous section. The same is true for the international FFF movement that further attempted to maintain the momentum of physical protests through digital protesting that succeeded in engaging the participation of hundreds of

youth from around the globe. At the same time, other innovative forms of protesting took place such as 'shoe protests' in London and elsewhere (Campbell 2020), where youth engaged with the FFF movement and Extinction Rebellion would occupy public space by covering it with pairs of shoes to draw attention to the climate change crisis while maintaining social distancing rules. Despite these protests not achieving relationality to the extent of physical gatherings, they do carry with them a great symbolic value manifesting the continued presence of young climate activists and the climate change issue in political life even in times of a pandemic.

Conclusion

Exploring the antagonistic framings young climate activists construct and how such framings challenge hegemonic discourses contributes to research that attempts to shed light on the directly political, strategic and collective forms of action of youth within the climate justice movement, the analysis of which has been limited. Instead, attention has been given to everyday and mundane forms of activism, which despite their importance in often nourishing more direct and collective forms of politics, must be analytically separated from the latter to better make sense of how young climate activists organize collectively and attempt to claim space within international and national public arenas. Furthermore, although there is emerging research on emotions and early life experience that helps us understand youth's commitment to, and action against climate change, there is a need for more research that will explore how such emotions and life experiences translate into forms of activism and into the collective strategies young activists employ to organize and mobilize more people to their cause.

For this reason, through this article, we attempted to respond to this call, as well as move beyond current explorations that mainly focused on the framings adults develop to attract more youth to this cause, by looking at youth's own attempts to translate their concerns and understandings of climate change into antagonistic strategic framings and calls for mobilization. We did this by exploring how young Cypriot climate activists make meaning of climate change and of the Covid-19 pandemic, and how such meaning is embedded within the framings they strategically mobilize to contest mainstream framings of the debate that focus on a 'return-to-normal' and on the need for prioritizing the stability of the economy over other political issues. Young climate activists embed the pandemic within the discourse of climate change crisis and associate it with their pre-existing emotions of anxiety and distress, and with their understandings of climate change as the effect of capitalism and overconsumption and as a form of 'slow pandemic'. They, thus, mark the continuities and dependencies between the two conditions and challenge a dominant rendering of Covid-19 as an unprecedented crisis. By marking such continuities and re-framing the climate crisis as a slow pandemic, as a 'slow emergency', they challenge the distinction between the exceptional and the everyday on which Emergency governance depends on, intervening thus in the uneven distribution of temporalities by showing how the everyday has become an emergency itself and that there is no 'normal' anticipated temporality to return to, at least not for future generations and marginalized racialized others.

Furthermore, connecting the temporalities of the past, present and future, and showing their interdependencies, exposes we believe a greater generational struggle that current youth undertake to challenge the dominant white adult management of time which often works through binary distinctions such as exceptional/ordinary, as well as by constructing linearity, in the liberal sense of progress and development, as the quintessential form of temporality of modernity. In other words, upsetting the linear temporality of liberal rule becomes a key concern of current activist children, a concern we also see reflected in recent childhood studies literature that emphasizes not simply the 'being' a child, but also the 'becoming' and the 'been' (Hanson 2017), exposing thus the need to look at the interdependencies of multiple temporalities. This challenge of linearity and adult dominant temporality further engenders a hope, we suggest, that action can make a difference. For this reason, young climate activists further frame the pandemic as a climate wake-up call,

thus broadening the vision of a post-pandemic era not as a step backwards, but as a move forward to a differently envisioned future that is more sustainable and equitable in nature. Through such re-framings, young climate activists claim their role as future-makers who expand the horizon of hope and possibility.

At the same time, in an attempt to explore, not only youth's activist endeavors but also the 'stumbling blocks' to young people's collective agency during the pandemic (Collins 2021, 6), we reflected on how the very measures of managing the pandemic can prove detrimental for youth movements given their dependency on public space for the reproduction of their communities and the sustenance of their activities, as well as for the very possibility of participation in public life. Public space becomes a public forum for non-institutional youth activism and for children's political participation, therefore, a restriction of access, in addition to the closing down of schools and youth centers, can potentially draw a deem picture on the potential for youth social movement action and reproduction. At the same time, young climate activists resist such conditions by attempting to maintain momentum through digital protesting, as well as by producing innovative ways of protesting that assert their presence in public life even under such very constraining conditions.

Notes

1. Y4C Instagram post, posted on 22 April 2020 accompanied by a video produced by FFF USA that shows people going about business as usual while their house is burning.
2. Y4C Instagram post, posted on 26 April 2020.
3. The very name 'AGORA' in ancient Greece connoted a central space of meeting in the city where citizens would exchange opinions on public affairs.

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