

**COMMENTS**

**BY THE WG POLITICAL LEARNING  
AND REFLECTION, XR GERMANY,**

**ON THE GERMAN TRANSLATION OF  
ROGER HALLAM'S  
„COMMON SENSE FOR THE 21ST  
CENTURY“**

"Whatever it takes" Roger Hallam said to a journalist when he was handcuffed in the back seat of a police car shortly after he gave the Spiegel interview "Democracy is becoming irrelevant". Probably without him being aware of it, this sentence summed up the formula that has recently increasingly shaped his role as co-founder and prominent spokesperson for Extinction Rebellion: We do what needs to be done. With a smile.

Here the gap between the figure of Hallam and Extinction Rebellion becomes apparent: As a movement we are not willing to accept or endure "whatever it takes". If that were the case, we would not need principles and values. Then that would be our only or at least most important principle: Whatever it takes - if possible without discrimination and hierarchies. "Whatever it takes" stands for the absolutisation of the problem. Everything is clear and we are against it. In this radicalism, the fight against the climate catastrophe and the social upheavals it causes is itself dangerous. The danger of oversimplification, polarisation, lack of empathy, of simple solutions. We know that. But we also know that the principles and values are conditions that give us the chance of a different, better world.



The scandal in November raised questions that went far beyond the person of Hallam. His position (in the movement) combined with his remarks have had an effect that can be felt in our discussions even weeks after a clear distancing. We did not immediately agree - as might have been expected - on whether and where there is a gap between "whatever it takes" and the configuration of Extinction Rebellion. We will probably continue to hold this dissent for a while. At this moment of disagreement, the German translation of Hallam's work "Common Sense for the 21st Century" has been made available to us.

The Working Group on Political Learning and Reflection would like to stimulate joint learning at eye level in our structures and thereby learn for ourselves what we as a movement need for this. With this essay we want to offer you a way of support that draws attention to some of the problematic passages in Common Sense, without

prejudging the debate about the significance of this work within XR. We hope that we can do justice to this claim and thus facilitate a common progress. Parts of the book have already been discussed in the Querfront paper, but we think it is worthwhile to think further about some of the terms and suggestions in the book - also against the background of global climate justice, which is a concern of many people at XR. From here on, the essay is divided into six topics, each of which outlines the problem in its context with references to the original text of Common Sense and other relevant sources:

- *Universality and "the right-wing" within Extinction Rebellion*
- *Holocaust Relativization / Genocide Comparisons*
- *Elites and Friend/Foe Schemas*
- *Nation*
- *Other movements*
- *War*

This version is the first version of the text that captures our engagement with the subject matter. We want to continue working on it, fill in gaps, clear up inaccuracies and misunderstandings and make additions.. Your feedback is very welcome at [politik@extinctionrebellion.de](mailto:politik@extinctionrebellion.de)

## **UNIVERSALITY AND "THE RIGHT-WING" WITHIN EXTINCTION REBELLION**

Increasing the integrability of environmental topics and calling the crisis what it is: a universal, existential threat – is one of the stated goals of Extinction Rebellion. It is assumed that the universality of the threat offers a chance for collective action where group-specific interests or national politics have so far prevented overarching cooperation. For that, Hallam writes, it is also necessary to “build up right-wing support” in order to “build a broad mass civil disobedience coalition” (pp. 59f.). He leaves unclear which “right-wing” he refers to and where he sees the normative basis for common action.

In times where extreme right-wing parties and spokespeople are on the rise in many countries around the world, where they build verbal and physical walls, pursue their policies with metaphors of hunting and dominance and shift public debate towards intolerance and exclusion, the wish for an “alliance” with an undifferentiated “right-wing” appears naive or even dangerous.

With an eye to Extinction Rebellion’s principles and values, these would have to be right-wingers who want to break down hierarchies and welcome everyone (principles 6 and 7). This points to a structural conflict between a language which is meant to appeal to a certain political sphere, and values which are in opposition to that sphere in several aspects and therefore would need to be conveyed to members of that sphere first.

After all, it would not only be a coalition for performing mass civil disobedience – it would be a call to collaboratively create structures, set priorities and create spaces for organising it. As a result it could lead to accepting an increase of marginalising and hurtful comments and gestures towards people who are already facing discrimination in our society. Furthermore, certain principles would likely be questioned, or exceptions would be made when putting them to practice.

Hallam appears to hope for a conversion of political positions to happen incidentally. This might in practice work if we are able to offer regular educational events in our local and working groups and considered political learning on topics such as climate justice, tolerance, intersectionality and post-colonialism a natural part of our activism, in order to make the [background](#)<sup>1</sup> to our principles and values understandable. Interested and newly-joining Rebels would also need to bring a strong willingness to learn. Otherwise there would be a risk that the principles and values would not be fully internalised and would lose relevance to our work. There might also not be a common understanding of why it serves our common goal to break down hierarchies and create a safe environment for everyone.

Besides the hidden structural consequences that result from this strategic proposal, the priorities behind it should also be considered. Of course it would be nice if “right-wingers” would become tolerant through Extinction Rebellion. Of course it would be nice if we could include everybody. And of course we want to grow. However, this leaves undiscussed whom we want to have with us and whose contributions we tend to forego.

In Common Sense, Hallam explicitly promotes inclusion of right-wingers, but leaves out actively addressing migrants or other discriminated and marginalised groups. Other options for supporting those groups, such as protected spaces within the movement, are not discussed either. If those are not available or not known, affected people are left alone with the burden and pain which is caused (sometimes unconsciously) by discrimination. The event remains the burden of the affected person, while those unaffected by discrimination are left with the erroneous assumption that “there is no such thing here”.

If experiences of discrimination are left unseen and are not structurally reflected upon in day-to-day activism, if we don't establish a point of contact to provide help in such cases, we risk that those who are affected by discrimination are not comfortable within Extinction Rebellion. Unfortunately, they often leave quietly. That is why it is sensible, within our – without a doubt important – universalism, to make sure that we don't pay more attention to the loud voices than to the quieter ones. We are not only responsible for allowing the loud voices to learn politically, but also to mitigate the damage that this learning process can cause to others.

## **HOLOCAUST RELATIVIZATION / GENOCIDE COMPARISONS**

On several occasions, Hallam's drastic choice of words crosses the "boundaries of the sayable" – at least in the German language area. And when the unspeakable is said again and again, it will eventually become sayable and normal - this is a strategy that we have been observing for some years with the (far-right populist) AfD and other right-wing associations.

This also applies to Holocaust relativization, which Roger Hallam does in Common Sense, writing about how much worse the effects of the ecological crisis will be on humanity than the Shoah:

*“This is 12 times worse than the death toll (civilians and soldiers) of World War Two and many times the death toll of every genocide known to history. It is 12 times worse than the horror of Nazism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century. This is what our genocidal governments around the world are willingly allowing to happen.” (p. 14)*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-01-16/extinction-rebellion-isnt-about-the-climate/>

When a person embeds the Holocaust in a comparison, they put themselves in the position of talking 'about' what happened. Here it is useful to ask: who is talking about the events? With what intention? With what reference does he or she make the Holocaust 'comparable'?

In the present case, all victims of the Second World War - military, civilians and those murdered in the death camps - are subsumed under one number. The death toll becomes the criterion by which Hallam classifies what happened. In fact, scientists are currently juggling unprecedented numbers when they say how many people could be affected by the effects of the climate catastrophe. But can what has happened, or what might happen, be meaningfully captured by a number of lost lives, even objectified? Can the real fates of each and every one who were murdered be compared at all by us who were not affected? And on what basis is the suffering they experienced first-hand 'subordinated' to what is possibly still to come, i.e. relativized?

When survivors speak of the Holocaust, they usually do not (at first) describe it as special or "terrible" because of its sheer numbers - it is, to get just a small start, the dehumanization they experienced in the harassment, the mechanical coldness and the standardized and routine brutality (see, for example, descriptions by Primo Levi<sup>2</sup>). It is the personal stories of desire, hope, despair, fear and emptiness. Instead, it was the perpetrators of this catastrophe who tried to reduce the murdered to mere numbers and sums (Eichmann said, for example, that the murdered were not the same as the murdered: "A hundred dead Jews is a catastrophe, a million is a statistic"<sup>3</sup>). Whoever does the same thing today repeats this gesture, whether consciously or not.

The concept of genocide also seems inappropriate and unfitting in this context, because what is commonly referred to as genocide is based on an ideological, often nationalist conception, followed by a call to action and then a deliberate act of destruction. In the case of our governments, however, there is no such call for the killing of specific groups of people, but it is rather the inaction, the omission, which endangers the well-being of all the people of the world.

In the context of the discourse on climate justice, we repeatedly highlight the fundamental injustice associated with this inaction. Not all people are equally involved in or affected by the effects of the climate catastrophe. From this injustice in causation and vulnerability derives a responsibility of the early-industrialized societies. But it is our task to look closely at this and to find ways of identifying this injustice and the many and varied humanitarian catastrophes that are occurring and intensifying, and to combat their causes without constructing over-simplified and exaggerated perpetratorships and without drawing hurtful, provocative and in any case inappropriate parallels to historical acts of violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Levi, P.: *Ist das ein Mensch? Erinnerungen an Auschwitz*, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Knopp, G.: *Hitlers Helfer*, 2014.

## ELITES AND FRIEND/FOE SCHEMAS

At some points it becomes clear that Roger Hallam argues using images of friends and enemies, as is often the case in populist attitudes of all kinds. Society is portrayed in a simplified and pointed way between two opposing poles: 'We', the people (the good guys) and 'They' up there, the elites (who want to do us harm). Thus he speaks of 'elite and their corrupt politicians' (p. 27), 'gatekeeper elites' (p. 8), 'elites/management' (p. 15) in business, government and the media. Generalising, he denounces their decline in values: "They believe in ethical values, but they end up only believing in two things – money and power. This process of degeneration is now well advanced." (p. 23). The untouchable, the powerful, the rich, the immoral, and those who sit closely together. All these are well-known populist concepts of enemies. They are based on blanket attributions of (negative) characteristics and thus make it possible to present the efforts of actually different groups and value systems as like-minded because they are united in resistance. In the above-mentioned examples, we can also understand these enemy concepts as anti-Semitic motives. For the linguistic sketch of this image of the enemy "works" in just a few words, because it has already been used by many others before and we therefore know it. It is historically linked to anti-Semitic talk about "the Jews" and therefore - consciously or not - promotes anti-Semitic resentment and polarization in society.

Such an oversimplified argumentation does not do justice to the complexity of the problem or the social heterogeneity of free societies. In fact, we already know this, because if it were possible to identify a causal (enemy) group in the context of climate and ecological crises, which in turn is confronted by a passive, powerless or uninvolved (friend) group, we would not have committed ourselves to the principle of "no blaming" (principle 8). Instead, we acknowledge that in our society (toxic) structures reward certain harmful behaviour and thus make it more likely (principle 4). As a movement that values diversity and seeks to promote inclusion (principle 6), we also know that the uniformity of (friend and foe) groups suggested by Hallam does not do justice to the complexity of free societies, nor is a supposedly closed "us" desirable.

## NATION

What is striking when reading Common Sense is the frequent use of the word "nation" or "national". For Roger Hallam it is a central and consciously used term. He writes:

*"Words like honour, duty, tradition, nation, and legacy should be used at every opportunity. Not only is this language new and therefore attracts attention but it can be connected to a profoundly egalitarian ideal."* (p. 60).

For us, this language is not new - on the contrary, it is from the past: all five words had a boom in this country under National Socialism - especially the concept of nation is loaded and controversial; this may be different in Great Britain - in any case, there is no transferability of its assumptions in this case. Similarly, he also speaks of "national pride":

*"We should be speaking a new universalist language, using Martin Luther King's speeches as a prime example of how to reclaim the framings of national pride to build a broad mass civil disobedience coalition."* (p. 61).

Or of a "national duty": *"They (journalists and newspaper editors) should be asked to cross the line and go into existential conflict with the genocidal governing regime as a matter of national duty."* (p. 52)

Or - and this is not at all acceptable for us in this country! - of the "destruction of nations" (including another implicit Holocaust relativization):

*"With many governments knowing the impact of climate change but continuing to support the fossil fuel industry, the result will be the destruction of many nations, species and cultures. There is no greater crime."* (p. 15)

Because he uses the term nation remarkably often, we wondered what the word meant. Only since the emergence of modern states has the term been used in a political context. The term nation is used to express a sense of belonging. This can be, for example, through a common culture, language, constitution or traditions. The scholar Benedict Anderson sees the nation as "imagined communities"<sup>4</sup>: We do not know each other, but in the mind of each individual there is the idea of a community with which we can identify. But this sense of solidarity within the community is always accompanied by a sense of separation. Who belongs to it and who does not? The concept of the nation carries within itself the distinction between the own and the foreign. Via the "foreign" the "own" is defined at the same time and so it is no coincidence that nation-state building and colonialism or imperialism go hand in hand. Thus, the concept of nation is historically connected with war, ethnic violence and the creation of concepts of enemies.

Even in the places where he thinks about "diversity", it takes place within the framework of a nation and not across countries:

*"There is a great opportunity to create real diversity in Rebellion mobilisations – kids from inner cities schools mixing with middle class campaigners from the suburbs. Serious resources then should be devoted to creating city youth mobilisation."* (p. 53).

He also mentions the topic of climate migration only in the context of *"Researching humane responses to the inevitability of the growing climate refugee crisis"* (p. 73) - a problem that only becomes a problem on your own doorstep.

## **OTHER MOVEMENTS**

Reading the book, it becomes very clear that Hallam's attention is not necessarily focused on global climate justice. The word "climate justice" occurs only once in Common Sense, namely when he speaks of "climate justice' movements", which he criticises for not having practical action plans (p. 60). This shows a contradiction in Hallam's approach to other environmental movements and leftist groups. On the one hand he sees them as partners in actions and networks, on the other hand he accuses them of inability to tackle the ecological crisis:

*"The tension here is that for the past thirty years left-wing and environmental movements have had neither the structural opportunity nor the creative innovation to radically challenge the fundamentalist neoliberal regime."* (p. 60)

He also thinks *"There is often an implicit elitism in the direct-action environmental movements - an unwillingness to engage with the public directly and organise them to break the law on a large scale."* (p. 30) Or: "Activist

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson, B.: Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 1983.

*routines can be off-putting; for instance, the hand signal conventions of Nonviolent Communication and new age or academic (radical left) language.*" (p. 58) Or: *"To put it bluntly, NGOs, political parties and movements which have brought us through the last thirty years of abject failure – a 60% rise in global CO2 emissions since 1990 – are now the biggest block to transformation."* (p. 6) Roger Hallam would like to get everyone on board and "win 'hearts and minds'" (p. 38), but such forms of criticism make it difficult or impossible to form alliances within the climate and democracy movements.

## **WAR**

Hallam repeatedly speaks of the Second World War in *Common Sense* (pp. 14, 56). He quotes climate studies with the titles: "The one degree war plan" and "The Victory Plan" (p. 67). He sketches a drastic, apocalyptic vision of ecological collapse, in which the next generation dies in the streets as if killed by marauding war gangs:

*"Our absolute power over nature has so thoroughly corrupted us that we are now intent on destroying that part of nature which is our children. Their blood on the pavements - their body parts in the streets. Let us be clear that this is what is coming down the tracks if we fail in our duty."* (p. 77)

"We are at war", the climate war - this is how his message is probably to be understood. This justifies the means - "Whatever it takes". And polarizes. It raises the question: Why do we, as a "nonviolent network" (principle 9), repeatedly use war metaphors? We see a contradiction there. And a danger: If we proclaim a climate emergency and at the same time refer to war situations, especially to the Second World War, we are on the one hand playing directly into the hands of the enemies of democracy and on the other hand we are creating the basis for critics who accuse us (and who are not interested in dealing with our third demand for more democracy) of wanting to undermine democracy with an "emergency law".



## **EXTINCTION REBELLION GERMANY AND “COMMON SENSE FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY”**

In this essay, we identify some of the tensions and dangers that we believe are hidden in the language and strategy of Common Sense. To a certain extent, the irritation caused by some of the passages in the German-speaking world is probably due to the different ways of speaking and different historical backgrounds in Britain and Germany. However, this should not distract us from the question of where we see contradictions to our principles and values in the context of Extinction Rebellion Germany. In attempting a thorough review of these points and their implications for our strategy, our interaction and our speaking, this contribution can only be a small piece of the mosaic. What remains exciting and unsolved is the question of how we will deal with this work within our working structures. Our experiences in our respective contexts show us, in any case, that the passages of Common Sense that are discussed here have at no time been taken as canon within XR Germany or uncritically transferred into the local working structures.

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