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Activism without hope? Four varieties of postapocalyptic environmentalism

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ABSTRACT

Hope has long been seen as essential to motivate social movement activism. However, as seen in the transition movement and collapsology networks, a ‘postapocalyptic’ environmentalism that views catastrophe as ongoing or unavoidable is gaining ground, reflecting an increasing awareness that environmental catastrophes are already here or have become inevitable. If hope can no longer mean hope in averting catastrophe, what role does hope play and what form does it take? Can there be activism without hope? Based on interviews with participants in the transition movement and collapsology networks in Sweden, I propose a typology of forms of postapocalyptic activism. In the first (‘campaigning’), hope is accompanied by confrontational action. In the second (‘mourning’), loss of hope brings about a withdrawal from such action. A third form (‘building’) shows how new hope is generated through non-confrontational action, while a fourth form (‘doing the right thing’) is represented by confrontational action resting on other motivations than hope

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In *Silent Spring*, a classic of modern environmentalism, Rachel Carson (1962, p. 277) argued that we were at a crossroads – one road leading to disaster but the other offering a chance of preserving life on earth. This focus on a *future* apocalypse that we must *avert* has been a defining trait of modern environmentalist apocalypticism (Thörn 1997). Today, however, environmentalists appear less confident that disaster can be averted at all. In tandem, we are seeing the growth of what has been referred to as ‘postapocalyptic’ environmentalism – postapocalyptic in the sense that it takes its point of departure in catastrophes that are either already here or perceived to be inevitable (Cassegård and Thörn 2018, 2022, de Moor 2021, Friberg 2022, de Moor and Marquardt 2023).

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Research into the emotions that motivate people to engage in social movements often stresses the central role of hope, in the sense that action must be felt to have a possibility of contributing to meaningful change. Hope has, together with anger, been described as a ‘necessary affective bedrock’ for the emergence of movements (Aminzade and McAdam 2001, p. 31). While a range of emotions such as anger (Jasper 1998, Gould 2001, Cherry 2021), guilt (Jacobsson and Lindblom 2017), fear (Kleres and Wettergren 2017) or despair (Terpe 2016, Huber 2023) have also been highlighted as motivating or energizing activism, hope is often portrayed as necessary for channelling these emotions into action and keeping a sense of possibility open (Aminzade and McAdam 2001: 31f., Cook 2018, Flam 2005, Jasper 2011, Kleres and Wettergren 2017, Włodarczyk *et al.* 2017).

Hope has been central also to the apocalyptic environmentalism that rose to prominence in the post-war era, which presupposes not just fear but also hope that doom can be averted (Cassegård and Thörn 2022). In line with this, several studies (Lueck 2007, Ojala 2011, Kretz 2013, Smith and Leiserowitz 2014, Bushell *et al.* 2017) have stressed that climate activism needs hope and images of a positive future to motivate action. However, in postapocalyptic environmentalism the role of hope is hard to discern. Such environmentalism may appear to invite hopelessness and fatalism, and has frequently been criticized as passivizing, defeatist and apolitical (e.g. Charbonnier 2019, Malm 2021, pp. 133–152). At the same time, it has been argued that a postapocalyptic stance does not necessarily imply resignation or passivity; on the contrary, accepting catastrophes as ongoing or inevitable can form the premise of a ‘postapocalyptic politics’ revolving around the processing of loss (Cassegård and Thörn 2018). It is not yet sufficiently clear, however, what forms such politics can take or what role hope plays in it. If hope can no longer mean hope in averting catastrophe, what role does it play? Can there be activism without hope? Might other things be more important in motivating activism than hope, and, if so, what things?

In this article, I approach these questions with the help of qualitative interviews conducted during a project on postapocalyptic environmentalism in Sweden, represented by participants in the transition movement and collapsologists. The transition movement harkens back to the first ‘transition town’ in the UK in 2006 and has since spread around the world. Its chief aim is to increase resilience on a local level by preparing practically for a future of global warming and resource scarcity. It was introduced in Sweden in 2008 and today comprises over fifty local transition initiatives. Although stressing that the present system is unsustainable, transitioners generally avoid protests and overt criticism, preferring ‘positive’ and ‘constructive’ work to build a better alternative (Hopkins 2008). The collapsology network originated in France in 2013 and stresses the need to prepare for societal collapse mentally and practically (Chamel 2019, Tasset 2019). Collapsology is not only the

study of collapse but also a way to emotionally process it, search for new relationships to nature, and act to minimize suffering and injustice (Servigne and Stevens 2020, Servigne *et al.* 2021). In Sweden, collapsology was introduced in 2019 and is today loosely organized around three Facebook groups. Although devoted mainly to raising awareness and sharing information, many participants individually engage in local practical work along the lines of the transition movement, with which there is some overlap in membership.

Below, I start with a methods section followed by a theoretical section on hope and activism in which I discern four varieties of postapocalyptic environmentalism: ‘campaigning’, ‘mourning’, ‘building’, and ‘doing the right thing’. I then illuminate each of the varieties with the help of the empirical material, directing attention in particular to two varieties. Firstly, I show that much activism (conspicuous in what I call ‘building’) *is* accompanied by hope, although this hope is frequently expressed in activities unconnected to public conflict. Secondly, I highlight a quite different form of activism (expressed in what I call ‘doing the right thing’) that *does* engage in public conflict, but where hope is much less pronounced as a motivating factor. Together these varieties of postapocalyptic environmentalism helpfully illuminate how hope and activism can be justified in times when future prospects are bleak.

Research design and methods

To illustrate how hope and activism are interrelated in postapocalyptic environmentalism, I draw on 28 qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in 2020–2021 (see the Appendix for a list of quoted interviews).¹ I deemed interviewing to be a suitable method due to the light it can cast on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of movement participation (della Porta 2014, p. 231). In selecting interviewees my primary concern was that they should *represent postapocalyptic environmentalism*, i.e. that their activism should be oriented towards collapse or large-scale catastrophe viewed as ongoing or unavoidable. To ensure this, I and two other project participants approached two communities – the collapsology network and the transition movement in Sweden – where we expected such orientations to be common, based on movement programs and what we had learned through a previous research project on environmental movements. Contacts were made by postings on the groups’ Facebook pages, where we described our project and asked for interviewees. Several who volunteered for interviewing in turn recommended additional people to interview, meaning that we used a mix of purposive and snowball sampling. Of the interviewees, I left aside two since they did not express a postapocalyptic outlook. The rest were selected for further analysis, yielding the above-mentioned sample of 28 interviewees. In

the analysis, I will treat these as one unit exemplifying postapocalyptic environmentalism.²

The Interviews were semi-structured, with questions focused on the role of hope in motivating activists and in relation to what activities they experienced hope. They were conducted on Zoom and lasted between 55 and 120 minutes. Afterwards they were transcribed and anonymized. Of the interviewees, 16 were transitioners and 17 collapsologists (5 interviewees participated in both groups). Interviewees were diverse in age (ranging from twenties to sixties); a majority were men (20, compared to 8 women). They all tended to be highly educated and many were or had been engaged in professions related to research, education, care or engineering. Some were city dwellers but a majority lived in the countryside, where they had chosen to live purposely to engage at least part-time in ecological farming.

Analysing the interviews began soon after conducting them as we summarized key findings and tried to discern important themes. I was soon struck by the close affinity between hope and practical activities among some interviewees and by the existence among others of a stance of engaging in public conflict that appeared to have little to do with hope. At this stage I started visualizing the material in terms of the model described in the next section. I then returned to the material for a renewed analysis, this time proceeding deductively by searching for data that would allow me to illuminate positions in the model. The model is thus *no priori* construction but emerged and proved its usefulness in the course of analysing the empirical findings. I coded the material manually according to the role played by hope in motivating action and the degree to which activists described their action as confrontational. My aim was not to quantify the occurrence of themes but to facilitate an in-depth understanding of these positions and highlight their significant traits. Rather than statistical generalization, I thus aimed for analytical generalization (Kvale 1996, p. 233) by bringing clarity into the specific ways in which hope and forms of activism interrelate.

Hope and activism: a rough mapping

In sections 1 and 2 below, I clarify what I mean by the terms activism and hope, which are central to this study. In section 3, I bring them together in a model and explain how I will use it to map the field of postapocalyptic environmentalism.

(1) I use the term *activism* for all activities engaged in for the sake of a social movement. A social movement is a public and collective struggle to bring about social change. It cannot exist without staging a public conflict, as highlighted in several influential definitions of social movements (e.g. Diani 1992, Melucci 1989, p. 29). It is, however, important to remember that not *all*

activities within a movement need to be confrontational in character – often they include a range of activities rooted in the everyday life of activists that are less visible in public, such as developing and experimenting with alternative practices and lifestyles (Melucci 1989).

One dimension on which I will focus in the analysis to follow will be to which degree postapocalyptic environmentalists regard their activities as confrontational, i.e. to what extent they see those activities as part of a *publicly waged struggle* that is deemed necessary in the pursuit of the movement's ideals. Considering that both the transition movement and collapsology have been described as relatively apolitical (e.g. Kenis 2018, Charbonnier 2019), i.e. as turning away from overt protest in order to focus on constructing alternatives to the established order or on the mental/cultural processing of changes believed to be inevitable, this part of my argument engages with the ongoing debate about to what extent environmentalist groups that eschew open protest can nevertheless be seen as political. Here, positions have ranged from celebrating their political potential (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, Schlosberg 2020) to denouncing them for collaborating in 'simulative' governance (Blühdorn 2017, Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021), while others point to how they combine political and non-political aspects (de Moor *et al.* 2021) or argue that conventional conceptions of politics are not readily applicable to them (MacGregor 2021). My aim, however, is not to intervene directly in this debate. As argued by Kenis and Lievens, the political primarily refers to how a discourse represents society – whether or not it 'recognises and makes visible the reality of conflict, power, and the contingency of society' (Kenis and Lievens 2014, p. 537).³ I would argue that all social movements worthy of the name *to some extent* rely on such a discourse since movements cannot exist without publicly articulating and acting on conflicts, i.e. without politicizing (Thörn *et al.* 2017, p. 8). More relevant for my purposes than to study such representations is to distinguish between forms of activism *within a movement* that are more or less confrontational. Non-confrontational activities do not necessarily imply a rejection of 'political' representations of society: activists can portray society as marked by conflict and contingency even as they withdraw from overt struggle in order to work through losses or explore alternatives to the prevailing order.⁴ What I contribute to the debate on the political is therefore modest: not a blunt verdict on whether postapocalyptic environmentalism is political or not, but rather a reminder that accepting catastrophe as ongoing or inevitable does not necessarily imply a rejection of the political per se and that it can give rise to different forms of activism, some more confrontational than others. Differentiating between forms of activism will help us understand the role of hope in postapocalyptic environmentalism better, since, as I will show, the choice of more or less confrontational forms of action to a considerable extent goes hand in hand with different orientations to hope.

(2) A second dimension central to my analysis is the degree to which activism is accompanied by *hope*. Here I will not give an overview of the large number of studies to which hope has been subjected from the perspective of a sociology of emotions (for such an overview, see Cook and Cuervo 2019). Instead, my purpose is to specify in what sense hope will be used in the present investigation.

Firstly, this concept should be specific enough to allow us to distinguish hope from other emotions. Central to my understanding of hope is its disappointability. As the philosopher Ernst Bloch points out, an element of uncertainty must exist for hope to arise: in principle, hope is always without guarantees and therefore ‘unconditionally disappointable’ (Bloch 1998, p. 341; also see *ibid.*, Bloch 1995b: 1371f). Hope is therefore different from fixed outlooks like optimism (Head 2016, p. 11, 75, Cook 2018, p. 114). This points to the sensitivity of hope to objective factors outside the subject. To use Bloch’s formulation, hope is not merely subjective but relates to a ‘Not-Yet-Become’ in the world; it is thus ‘not taken *only as emotion* [...] but *more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind*’ (Bloch 1995a, p. 127). Hope can certainly arise even when prospects are sensed to be bleak (making it distinct from conviction and expectation; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2010, Kleres and Wettergren 2017, p. 509), but even in bleak situations possibilities of change must be sensed to exist for hope to be possible. However, favourable conditions for hope are limited and unevenly distributed (Hage 2003). Kleres and Wettergren (2017) point out that this uneven distribution also marks the environmental movement, since environmental activists in the Global North have access to hope in ways that activists in the Global South do not. While the former have often emphasized hope as central to their activism, the latter have instead often relied on other emotions such as anger, pain and grief. At the same time, the growth of postapocalyptic environmentalism in the Global North seems to indicate that environmentalists there are also to some extent turning away from hope.

To see how postapocalyptic environmentalism can articulate forms of hope despite the perception of ongoing or inevitable catastrophe, we should recall that activism itself can bring about a change in what appears possible. Rather than figuring simply as a prior condition for action, hope can also be a fruit of action. Hope is not a mere reflexion of a perceived objective situation, but arises through an interaction with it, including how we intervene in it. It is well known that successful contentious episodes, such as mass protests, can have an empowering effect that fuels hope (Aminzade and McAdam 2001, p. 33). Yet hope can also be generated in other ways than through public conflict, e.g. through solidarity-strengthening interactions among activists (Summers Effler 2010) or through an organizational ‘affective infrastructure’ that underpins a ‘practical optimism’ (Dean 2016: 131ff). I will argue that in the case of postapocalyptic environmentalism, hope is

often generated in less public forms of activism, through interaction with other human beings as well as with non-human nature. To gain a full view of how hope relates to activism, we therefore need to look not only at how hope figures in the manifest (and often confrontational) side of movements, but also at how it operates in latent (and often less confrontational) forms of activism.

Secondly, the conceptualization of hope should be broad enough to encompass the variety of hope existing among postapocalyptic environmentalists. Of relevance to the analysis of the empirical material is, firstly, that my conceptualization of hope includes both *representational* and *non-representational* forms of hope (Cook and Cuervo 2019). Representational hope has a specific, explicit referent while non-representational hope primarily consists in a *feeling* of hopefulness and lacks an explicit referent. The concept of non-representational hope usefully sharpens our eye to how hope can exist even in the seemingly hopeless situations.⁵ Secondly, my conceptualization of hope includes both *active* and *passive* hope (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2010: 266ff). While hope can induce passivity and become an excuse for inactivity (McGeer 2004, Braithwaite 2004, Terpe 2016), active hope is accompanied by action. Solnit (2016: xiv) describes this form of hope well when she writes that hope, unlike set views of the future like optimism and pessimism, sees the future as open and calling for action.

(3) Having clarified the notions of hope and activism I can now lay the groundwork for mapping the field of postapocalyptic environmentalism. Figure 1 aims at a rough visualization of this field.

Just as activism can be more or less confrontational in the sense of publicly articulating and acting on a conflict (the vertical axis), it can be more or less

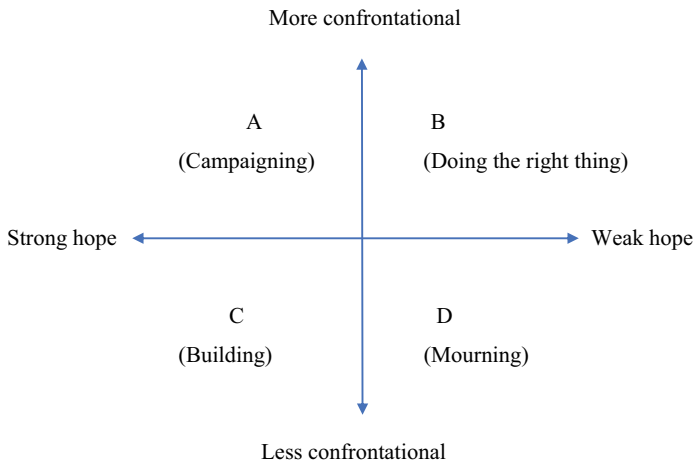


Figure 1. The field of post-apocalyptic environmentalism.

linked to hope in the sense of foregrounding hope as a mobilizing emotion (the horizontal axis). As shown in the figure, loss of hope and withdrawal from confrontation do not necessarily go together. Instead, they point to separate dimensions.

While the two dimensions can be used to pinpoint four idealtypical positions (A-D), I want to stress, firstly, that the degree to which these positions are represented among activists is of course an empirical question. Secondly, we should be aware that activists do not always adhere to a single attitude to hope and confrontation, and that their attitudes may shift over time. The purpose of the typology is therefore not so much to classify, in the sense of sorting activists into fixed positions, as to trace these shifts and discern variety. In the following sections, I look closer at the four positions A to D in the figure, beginning with position A ('campaigning'), which conforms to the familiar portrayal of movements as hopeful and confrontational. I then move on to position D ('mourning'), which represents the mostly non-confrontational activism that can follow on the loss of hope. Both A and D are relatively straightforward and unproblematic positions since they dovetail with the common notion that confrontational engagement requires hope. But this notion is problematized by the attitudes represented by fields C and B, to which I next turn. The activism represented by position C ('building') highlights the hope that can arise from relatively non-confrontational activities and provides us with clues to *how* hope can be maintained despite the recognition of a dark future. By contrast, the activism represented by position B ('doing the right thing') shows how confrontational activism can arise in relative disconnection from hope; it thus helps us see whether activism needs hope and, if not, what motivates people to act despite their lack of hope.

Campaigning

Position A combines hope and confrontational activism. It is well exemplified by transition activists and collapsologists who, in addition to transition work or other practical activities to increase resilience, also engage in climate protest – e.g. in groups such as Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion (XR), in climate justice-related activism, or in conventional politics. Typically, they view these activities as complementary, since constructive work *for* better alternatives can easily be combined with protests or other forms of overt struggle *against* the existing system. Sven – a middle-aged transitioner who is also active in local politics and XR – thus describes the transition movement as a 'pro-movement' rather than a 'counter-movement' and adds: 'I believe that both movements are needed, and within myself there are, so to speak, feelings that affirm both sides'.

Activists can also view transition work itself as confrontational, as a campaign message that is directed at a broader public and meant to further social change in opposition to prevailing interests. Max is a young collapsologist with a background in XR and a policy-oriented climate organization who has recently started a small-scale ecological farm in the Swedish countryside with his girlfriend. He presents his farm as a public message: ‘we want to be able to show a clear example of the alternative that we are propagating for’. Similarly, Fredrik – a transitioner in his sixties who lives in the countryside and devotes his time to furthering sustainable food production – claims that transition work is needed precisely as a means to create pressure for social change. ‘Counter-movements’, he argues, are insufficient on their own to create pressure on politicians since they do not display hope as well as constructive work does. Building local food villages is important ‘because then you show that there is hope’.

Many activists reason that public campaigning is meaningful even if it cannot fully avert coming catastrophe. Alf – a collapsologist and ‘survivalist’ teacher in his forties who has often appeared on radio and written several books on the collapse – states that ‘we must learn how to cope with the situation as it is and simultaneously fight to prevent it from becoming as bad as it might become otherwise’. Similarly, Bo – a retired environmental expert in his sixties who propagates ecological farming and heads a collective ecological farm in southern Sweden, participating in the transition movement as well as in the collapsology network – stresses that the mere possibility that one’s action may make a difference makes it worthwhile. ‘Regardless of whether you believe things will go to hell or not, you can always make an effort. [. . .] And if you’re lucky, you achieve something at the same time. You shouldn’t discount luck!’. While reliance on luck is sometimes seen as a sign of passivity, in his case it accompanies action. Such an ‘active’ reliance on luck is also evident when Alf hopes for the birth of a new society in coming catastrophes, referring to the transformative possibilities that might open up in moments of crisis when society is destabilized and new norms can be formed. Yet he adds that relying on luck is not enough; preparatory work is also needed. How we organize now, he explains, will matter for what norms will gain the upper hand in such a situation, not least to prevent a regression of society into xenophobia and intolerance.

Mourning

Environmentalists who combine withdrawal from confrontation with a loss of hope (position D) are the ‘mourners’ – people who focus on working through losses, prepare for inevitable hardships, search for activities that remain meaningful despite the inevitability of collapse, or grope for new languages to guide them when ideologies of progress and other

established idioms are no longer useful. Outwardly, their activism usually centres on spreading awareness, creating forums for discussion and sharing thoughts, and inwardly on practices such as rituals and meditation related to mourning, with the aim of allowing participants to let things die in peace.

The loss of hope and resulting non-confrontational stance are sometimes part of a process whereby new hopes are generated. In interviews, activists often talked of how the shock, anxiety, grief or depression felt when realizing that saving the world was no longer possible was followed by a period in which they actively sought to 'know the worst'. Rather than avoiding pessimistic thoughts, they actively desired them as an antidote to 'surface happiness', 'fake happiness' or what they derogatorily called 'hopium'. Björn, an activist in his forties with a prominent position in the Swedish transition movement, thus states that he 'indulged in misery' for a long period after realizing that the collapse was already ongoing. Several interviewees compared their emotional processes to how people can react to a death notice. In such situations, superficial talk of hope can worsen the despair. Sara – a veteran transitioner in her forties who gives courses on how to manage climate emotions – compares her feelings for the earth and the coming collapse to what you feel when you learn that a loved one will die. But, she stresses, accepting grief brings with it something positive. You gain access to your own emotional life in a truer way, and when you do that, you *live* more. By accepting grief, you expand your entire 'span' of emotions, and that also opens up for positive emotions such as happiness and gratitude. 'Putting the lid on emotions isn't a solution', she says.

These quotes suggest that at least to some activists negative emotions can have a positive function. While false hopes *strengthen* sorrow and grief, rejecting such hopes can produce emotional relief. Facilitating such a process is an explicit goal of what transitioners call 'inner transition', a mental process of learning to accept loss and thereby lessening the grip of feelings of anxiety, sadness and powerlessness. Such a transition is not confined to a mere mental reappraisal of the world but can go hand in hand with exploring possibilities for acting meaningfully in it. Thus Christer – a young collapsologist with an interest in art and rituals who sympathizes with the British Dark Mountain network – explains that when your unconscious is projected on objects of nature, such as a tree that you decide to visit every day, then the objects start to speak. You become more intimate with both them and yourself since part of you is reflected back from the object. He stresses that these processes redraw the boundaries and categorizations that govern mainstream life; the capacity to feel intimacy with objects such as trees or human beings in need of help, such as refugees, enables us to act in solidarity with them. This example shows how practitioners can view

seemingly introvert practices as transformative and as crucial to their ability to act in the external world.

Building

One way in which activists can move on after losing hope is by finding new hope in practical activities of the sort promoted by the transition movement and many individual collapsologists as part of building an alternative world centred on local, resilient communities. Like mourners, these ‘builders’ downplay public conflict, but unlike the former they experience themselves as having found hope and embrace it (position C). What enables this hope to exist, despite bleak assessments of the future? Looking at the material, a first answer is that accepting collapse can provide a clearer sense of what is important and thereby, paradoxically, make people feel more in control over their lives. Max states that accepting collapse gave him ‘peace of mind’, enabled him to ‘focus energy on what I found to be important’, and therefore made him ‘a more active activist’. Similar statements are offered by several other interviewees.

A second answer is that hope sometimes springs from activity itself, particularly when the activity involves nature or other people. This nature is not an abstract object of contemplation, but nature as encountered in practical work – in being surrounded by nature, sensorily interacting with living things or different materials. Interviewees mention preparing food, working in potato fields or simply being surrounded by trees and water as experiences that bring joy, inner peace and hope. An example is Ann, a veteran transitioner who holds courses in inner transition and Zen meditation. ‘To simply lie down and remove weeds is recovery for me’, she says. ‘It is rest and being left in peace, just with myself.’ Mattias, a former biologist and collapsologist who left his academic career to pursue ‘off-grid living’ with his family in a remote rural area, stresses the refreshing materiality of working with clay, which he uses to build his house. Engaging somatically with nature or natural materials appears to give these interviewees access to experiences that are rewarding since they seem unsullied by and provide relief from the order that governs everyday life in mainstream society.

Next to interacting with nature, togetherness is another source of hope. Mutual support mediated by activities such as working together or sharing food or other items are often mentioned as sources of trust and feelings of gratitude. Thanks to such activities, activists can keep up hope in other people even if they lose hope in saving the world. Sandra – a journalist in her thirties who took the initiative to a collaborative network among transitioners – says that ‘the most important thing [. . .] is the togetherness – that we meet, that we support each other emotionally, so to speak. That is the great reward’. Apart from being ‘fun’ and energizing, being part of a group is

also important as a rational reason for hope. Fredrik, a transitioner who works with recreating ‘villages’ (which to him is a mode of managing things in common rather than a physical place), stresses that social ties will be essential for survival in the event of a crisis. ‘It is not the one with most tin cans in the basement who will manage the crisis, but the ones who can cooperate’.

Common to these processes of generating hope is that hope is created practically rather than intellectually and that it is active rather than passive. The senses are central – working with physical objects, being with others and so on – while intellectual reasons for hope are often secondary. ‘I think it’s immensely important to shift focus from intellectualizing to practicing’, says Helena, a transitioner and collapsologist in her thirties who gives courses in permaculture. ‘It’s through practical work that we get to understand complexity.’ The hope generated here is to a large extent a *feeling* of hopefulness that can coexist with a strong intellectual pessimism regarding the earth. This is starkly evident in Mattias, who beamingly describes how he enjoys the ‘off-grid’ life he has chosen although admitting that he sees no solution to the suffering that is sure to befall the world. To the extent that this hope takes representational form, it is primarily tied to local and specific targets (such as finding solutions to practical tasks at hand or helping concrete others) rather than global ones. As a feeling, however, it also transcends particular targets, lending a hopeful colouring to activism as such, even though the larger object of that hopefulness is inarticulate. Among many activists this hopefulness goes hand in hand with relinquishing overt confrontation. Yet as we shall see in the next section, another route open to activists who have lost hope is to reaffirm confrontation, finding ways to engage in it that do not rest on hope.

Doing the right thing

The activists in the upper righthand part of [Figure 1](#) (position B) *do* engage in confrontation but primarily based on other motivations than hope. What motivates them to act, and what emotions are connected to those motives?

Here two points deserve attention: the first is the mobilizing role of other emotions than hope, and the second is the prominence of ethical reasons for acting. First, many interviewees highlight motivating emotions such as anger, sorrow, love, worry, and compassion. Anger appears especially important. Richard – a collapsologist in his early fifties who helped found the collapsology network in Sweden and who runs a permaculture farm – states that ‘being pissed off too can be energizing’. Max too is explicit that hope is less important to him than anger. Per – a transitioner in his thirties who devotes much time to propagating for transition activism – emphasizes that other emotions can develop out of anger. He states that ‘boiling anger at how society was constituted’ was a strong initial emotion when he got engaged in

the transition movement, but this anger subsided as he learnt to accept his emotions. He now sees gratitude and love as more important sources for his activities, his goal being ‘to support others by guiding them with love and without fear through a collapsing world’. None of this is to say that hope plays no role at all to these activists.⁶ The point, however, is that it is not the primary or most foregrounded emotion.

A second significant point is the prominence of *ethical* reasoning among activists who see little hope that their action will bring about desired objectives. Even in seemingly hopeless situations, people can try to change the system if they believe that is the right thing to do. Björn describes how he fell into a depression after realizing ‘how bad everything was’ but, feeling guilty about his children, he decided that he had to ‘do something’ in order not to make their future even worse. Despite lingering sorrow, he tries to be ‘the person the planet needs’, which in his case mean holding a post that involves a lot of public campaigning for the transition movement. ‘The relevant question now is how to face the collapse: How do we want to be when we know this about the world? How do we want to be? How do we want to face it? How do we want to encounter our future?’. Fredrik, who is similarly involved in public campaigning for the transition movement, bluntly admits that he doesn’t necessarily fight to win. More important is the self-respect and ‘dignity’ that fighting alone can guarantee:

We are saying that we struggle for two reasons. In part it is to win in the matter at hand. But it is also to keep our dignity. [...] And that struggle we always win – the struggle for dignity, for human worth, for one’s own worth.

The confidence and fortitude expressed in this statement appears to rest on the certainty that morally right action is possible, regardless of success or failure.⁷ A similar sentiment is expressed by Max, who explains that his primary motive for activism was moral reasoning combined with collapse awareness:

I am one of those who believe that we won’t solve this, and that insight, as I want to call it, that attitude made me pose many questions to myself like ‘What do I want to do, and how should I [...] live in the best, most moral and ethical manner possible?’

This moral self-questioning first made him join XR – ‘I saw it as a duty actually, to do as much as one can’ – and later led him to begin a new life as a small-scale farmer.

The efforts of these activists are confrontational since they publicly voice their opposition to the present system, but rather than by hope they primarily appear motivated by the ethical wish to do the right thing – to try their best, even when success seems unlikely. To see how hope can still have a role even when there is little hope of averting the worst, it seems necessary to

distinguish between the ‘big’ hope of fully averting collapse and the ‘small’ hope of lessening harm. ‘small’ hopes have not disappeared but still contribute to motivating action even among people who see a collapse as unavoidable. These ‘small’ hopes, however, are subdued and often overshadowed by other emotions such as anger and by ethical motivations.

Many interviewees appear to believe that trying to be good here and now is what is required in a catastrophic world. Even if the struggle to avoid the collapse is futile, it is still morally meaningful, or a duty, to do what one can to lessen suffering, injustices and harm to nature. Magnus, a veteran transitioner in his fifties who spent much time campaigning and lecturing for the transition movement, stresses that he is driven by the desire to struggle and work practically for others – ‘sacrificing time for the good of others’ – because ‘we have a hard time in front of us during the coming decades’. Alf similarly stresses the importance of ‘being able to be the person I want to be in a crisis, and that is not a person who sits at home waiting for everything to blow over and eating canned food while his neighbours perish’.

Concluding reflections

Above, I have highlighted the variety of orientations within postapocalyptic environmentalism and suggested that these are often best understood through their interrelationship with hope. Despite the criticism of some postapocalyptic groups as defeatist or apolitical, this mapping shows that postapocalyptic environmentalism *is* compatible with confrontational action. It also shows that hope is not necessarily extinguished despite the acceptance of collapse. Not only is it present in variants of confrontational activism (‘campaigning’) and in the constructive activism of practical work (‘building’). Traces of it can also be discerned as a hope that recovery will be possible (‘mourning’) or that dignity or moral integrity will be possible even if all else fails (‘doing the right thing’). Significantly, however, hope and confrontation do not always accompany each other in postapocalyptic environmentalism but are sometimes dissociated.

Rather than extinguishing hope, the acceptance of collapse or catastrophe appears to affect what *shapes* of hope are viable in postapocalyptic environmentalism. This can be seen, firstly, in the aversion of many activists against ‘false hope’ or ‘hopium’ which usually denotes a *passive* hope resting on a naïve trust in the present system, especially in markets and technology. While postapocalyptic environmentalism rejects such hope, *active* hope still has a role, as can be seen in ‘campaigning’ and ‘building’. Secondly, postapocalyptic environmentalism is often also accompanied by a rejection of representational forms of hope, especially what I have called ‘big hopes’, pushing hope to become more non-representational and/or local. The hopefulness generated by practical activities does not necessarily crystallize

around any explicit cognitive content. This helps explain why it can coexist unproblematically with intellectual pessimism regarding the fate of the planet. The rejection of representational hope is not complete, however, since such hope reappears on a local level, in the form of ‘small hopes’, e.g. in the possibility of helping concrete others or that practical projects will turn out well.

By way of ending, I want to highlight two theoretical implications for our understanding of hope and activism. Firstly, hope can arise from seemingly non-confrontational activities, such as local, practical work. This dovetails with Dean’s (2016) observation that hope and ‘practical optimism’ are sustained practically, through an ‘affective infrastructure’ sustained by everyday interactions with comrades. To this, however, I want to add that the interactions that generate or maintain hope are not only social but also include interacting with nature and natural objects. To interviewees, this can provide emotional relief, stimulating a process of healing or recovery from the anxiety and despair generated by mainstream life.

Secondly, people can engage in confrontation without being motivated by much hope. Ethical motivations, such as the desire to maintain dignity and self-respect in the face of catastrophe, as well as emotions such as anger, guilt or love can propel activism even when hope is in so short supply that it cannot function as a primary motivating emotion. We have thus seen how interviewees have been motivated to struggle out of a desire to rectify some wrong (in the case of anger), to alleviate suffering (in the case of love and grief) or to face up to reality in a ‘good’ way (in the case of guilt and other forms of ethical motivations). The answer to what makes a struggle meaningful if there is no hope for the intended outcome is that even fighting a lost cause can be worthwhile if it helps maintain a cherished value – such as loyalty, dignity, duty, doing the ‘right’ thing, or being able to look one’s children in the face. Activism is here motivated by a minimal hope that these values can be upheld, even if the action fails to achieve its stated aims.

Notes

1. The interviews were conducted by me and two colleagues, Åsa Wettergren and Karl Malmqvist, as part of the project ‘Adapting to the climate: Emotions and narratives in the environmental movement’ (Formas grant number 251,052,702). The project has the institutional approval of the Department of Sociology and Work Science at the University of Gothenburg and all data gathering is done in accordance with the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines concerning collection and treatment of data, which stress informed consent, confidentiality and use. All interviewees were thus informed about the research project, including its aims and the form of their participation, and about their right to withdraw their participation at any time without stating any reason. To ensure confidentiality, all interview transcripts were

anonymized and all information about organization and geographical location that might enable interviewees to be identified was removed. In the manuscript, all interviewees have been given fictitious names. They were also offered the opportunity to check the quotes if they were to be quoted in any publication. Data collected for the project will not be used for any other purposes than scientific publication.

2. The purpose of this article is thus not to compare collapsologists and transitioners. The sampling method, I judged, justifies treating them all as examples of postapocalyptic environmentalism. Furthermore, since the sample is limited to the postapocalyptic segment of each group, a comparison would be misleading since it would leave out other forms of environmentalism within the groups.
3. As is evident from the quote, this usage of the ‘political’ rests on a specific ontology stressing conflict and contingency as constitutive of society (Mouffe 2005, p. 9, Machin 2012, Wilson *et al.* 2014, p. 10, Pepermans and Maesele 2016, p. 480). My argument in this article, however, does not concern ontology but the way conflict can be more or less foregrounded in the way activists endow their activities with meaning.
4. Using the terminology of de Moor *et al.* (2021), there can be a disconnect between the first dimension of the political that relate to ideas and the other two that relate to strategy and action.
5. An example is what the philosopher Jonathan Lear (2006) calls ‘radical hope’, a form of hope that is inarticulate since the cultural resources for endowing it with meaning have been shattered.
6. Hope may well play a supporting role in sustaining action in these examples, as what Barbalet (2011) calls a ‘backgrounded emotion’ that supports other more visible emotions.
7. A parallel can be drawn to what Diana Stuart describes as the ‘virtue ethics’ driving activists in Extinction Rebellion, whose activism rests less on optimism regarding the outcome than on the desire to act morally and do ‘the right thing [...] regardless of the outcome’ (Stuart 2020, p. 498).

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Appendix: List of quoted interviews

Name (fictive)	Date for interview	Duration (minutes)	Participates in:	Age (approximate, to prevent identification)	Sex
Alf	2021-08-09	64	Collapsology	40s	M
Ann	2021-02-09	57	Transition	60s	F
Björn	2021-02-09	120	Transition	40s	M
Bo	2021-02-26	80	Collapsology & Transition	60s	M
Christer	2021-01-15	92	Collapsology	20s	M
Fredrik	2021-02-01	101	Transition	60s	M
Helena	2020-11-22	110	Collapsology & Transition	40s	F
Magnus	2021-02-02	109	Transition	50s	M
Mattias	2021-02-18	92	Collapsology	50s	M
Max	2021-02-23	77	Collapsology & Transition	30s	M
Per	2021-01-12	108	Transition	30s	M
Richard	2020-12-01	120	Collapsology	50s	M
Sandra	2021-02-05	62	Transition	30s	F
Sara	2021-02-17	55	Transition	40s	F
Sven	2021-01-20	96	Collapsology & Transition	50s	M