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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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'That is the bet': theories of change in the strategies of the Italian climate movement

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ABSTRACT

Research on differences within the climate movement has been focusing for a long time on the emergence of the 'climate justice' frame within this trajectory as a way out of a post-political understanding of climate action, as well as on tensions on the 'radical' vs. 'reformist' axis. Still, recent cases of climate action seem to call for a deeper analysis: while the climate justice framework is ubiquitous, internal differences within the movement are far from over. This article aims to address this issue, focusing on the strategic choices of movement actors. We aim to contribute to the literature on social movement strategies by pointing out the role of theories of change, i.e. the meta-strategic logics on how actors plan to achieve their goals and from which they derive their choice of targets, means, audience, and so on. Drawing on qualitative interivews to activists, our exploratory article proposes a framework to analyse theories of change and applies it to the three main actors of the Italian climate movement: Fridays For Future (FFF), Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Ultima Generazione (UG, part of the A22 network). Furthermore, the analysis points out how theories of change contribute to shaping how actors address strategic dilemmas.

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Introduction

The climate movement has gained an indubitable prominence within the European public sphere, over the last few years. The seminal speech given by Greta Thunberg on the occasion of the COP in Katowice in 2018 can be interpreted in hindsight as a turning point that helped bring a new generation of young people into climate activism (Fisher 2019) and contributed to reshaping the broader narrative on climate change in the direction of a sense of urgency and emergency (Almeida 2019), demanding immediate governmental action (de Moor et al. 2021). Such actors as Fridays For Future (de Moor et al. 2020; Wahlström et al. 2019), Extinction Rebellion (Doherty, Saunders, and Hayes 2020; Pickard 2022; Williams and Rudd 2024) and the A22 network (Kinyon, Dolšak, and Prakash 2023), though different in many aspects, including generational composition (Gardner, Williams, and Macdonald 2024), seem to share specific characteristics: the

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politicization of emergency and an orientation towards the state as the main target of movement claims have emerged as the central tenets of this latest wave of climate mobilization, transversally to actors and countries. Furthermore, there seems to be an increasing consensus within the movement around the 'climate justice' framework (Cugnata et al. 2024; Ogunbode et al. 2024; von Mering et al. 2024), once more controversial among different political strands of the climate movement (Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge 2012; Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Wahlström, Wennerhag, and Rootes 2013). Still, internal differences within the movement, in particular vis-à-vis the relationship with political institutions, are far from having disappeared. On the contrary, during the same time span in which we have witnessed the 'climate justice' framework's prominence, we have also seen the proliferation of a wide range of actions to tackle climate change, including the climate strikes organized by Fridays For Future to push governments, the street blockades, and acts of civil disobedience led by Extinction Rebellion and its offshoots of the A22 network, like Just Stop Oil in the UK and Ultima Generazione in Italy, or the youth involvement in environmental representative politics or environmentally oriented grassroots initiatives. Making sense of this vast array of pathways to political influence implies going beyond the debate on 'climate justice', the framing perspective and the traditional reformist-versus-radical dichotomy, and addressing the strategy collective actors put in place to achieve their goals.

This article aims to contribute to the literature on social movement strategies by pointing out the role of theories of change, i.e. the meta-strategic logics on how actors plan to achieve their goals and from which they derive their choice of targets, means, audience, and so on. We argue that the literature on framing and strategy tends to overlook the ideational component that keeps together the elements informing strategic choices, the imagination that makes actors connect a certain goal to certain means, a certain understanding of how change is expected to take place. Our article proposes a framework to analyse theories of change and applies it to the three main actors of the Italian climate movement: Fridays For Future (FFF), Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Ultima Generazione (UG).[1] Furthermore, relying on qualitative interviews with representatives of the three actors, we analyse the relationship between theories of change and the most common strategic dilemmas that movement activists face, i.e. the extension dilemma, pointing out how theories of change contribute to shaping how actors address strategic choices. We expect the approach we propose to contribute to developing a better understanding of the chosen strategies of climate actors.

All in all, the article combines an empirical goal, situated in the discussion on the recent wave of climate mobilization, with a theoretical goal, related to the social movement literature on framing and strategy. On the one hand, we seek to make sense of the differences that persist among various strands of the movement, even when they adopt a similar framing of climate change, by tracing these differences back to their distinct strategic orientations. On the other hand, we propose a framework that sheds light on an often overlooked component of strategy: the understanding of social and political change shared within a collective actor. We argue that, in order to understand the strategic choices of movement actors, it is necessary to consider their expectations regarding the consequences of those choices and their theorization of how social and political change works. As we show, such elaborations tend to shape the trajectory and even

the identity of collective actors, and they rarely map neatly onto the radicalvs. moderate dichotomy.

Theoretical background: understanding strategic logics, beyond framing

The 'climate justice' framework emerged prominently during the mobilizations surrounding COP15 of the UNFCCC in Copenhagen in 2009 (Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Wahlström, Wennerhag, and Rootes 2013). This period saw a convergence between the climatization of the remnants of the global justice movement and the perspectives of indigenous peoples' movements and grassroots campaigns against environmental racism (Agyeman et al. 2016; della Porta and Parks 2013). Following Copenhagen, the previously conciliatory approaches to political pressure in environmental activism increasingly gave way to more radical actions and large-scale protests at summits, such as COP21 of the UNFCCC in Paris (de Moor 2018; Hadden 2015). Between 2009 and 2018, climate marches – organized by coalitions of NGOs and activist networks – centred on major transnational events and called for systemic change aligned with climate justice principles, becoming a core feature of environmental mobilization across Europe (de Moor et al. 2021; Wahlström, Wennerhag, and Rootes 2013). Some recent pieces of research (Cugnata et al. 2024; Ogunbode et al. 2024; von Mering et al. 2024) have pointed out how this framework has been appropriated and reproduced, although not seamlessly (Kenis 2021), by the wave of youth mobilization on climate that started in 2018. However, the predominance of the 'climate justice' framework does not imply the exhaustion of internal debates within the movement and of different positions on how to address the issue of climate change. In particular, we are witnessing a variety of forms of action put in place with the declared goal of addressing climate change: from the massive climate strikes organised by Fridays For Future (FFF) in order to pressure governments to the street blockades and civil disobedience proposed by Extinction Rebellion (XR) and its spinoffs (like Insulate Britain in the UK or Ultima Generazione in Italy), from the renewed youth participation in Green parties to the increasing popularity of individual and collective forms of alternative action sustainable materialism (de Moor, Catney, and Doherty 2019; Schlosberg 2019). What is behind the choice of one of these pathways to addressing the climate crisis?

Making sense of political differences within the movement has long been done based on cleavages about claim-making and direct action, reform and radicalism, politicization and post-politics (Kenis 2019; Saunders 2012). More recently, studies on the German context have pointed out the movements' effect on the party system (Berker and Pollex 2021; Fabel et al. 2025). Explaining such a rich repertoire of action requires more than the traditional distinction between reformism and radicalism (Saunders 2012). Is XR more or less radical than FFF? On the one hand, street blockades and civil disobedience are generally considered more disruptive than student marches; on the other hand, at least in the Italian case, ideologically radical activists and groups have found themselves more at ease, at least for a time, under the broad umbrella of FFF than in XR (Zamponi, Ferro, and Cugnata 2023). When discussing 'reformism vs. radicalism' there is often confusion on the level of analysis: are we assessing the goals an actor pursues or the means chosen to achieve them? Organizing disruptive and confrontational protest events in order to push for the government to implement a Green New Deal could

be considered radical if we focus on means, and reformist if we focus on ends. This confusion is particularly problematic in the case of the climate movement, in which the temporality of emergency affects the choice of means and ends in rather ambiguous ways: the fact that 'we have no time' can push people towards more radical solutions, since 'there is no time for gradual incremental change', but it can just as easily push them towards more pragmatic solutions, since 'there is no time to wait for the perfect revolution'. The choice to join a mainstream political party or to engage in illegal acts of sabotage (Malm 2021) can be rooted in the same emergency temporality.

Attempts to go beyond traditional dichotomies and better grasp the nuances of pathways to address climate change have been made mainly through the lens of framing. Both Svensson and Wahlström (2023) and Buzogány and Scherhaufer (2022) propose models to understand the different changes envisioned by climate activists, taking into account the depth of such change, its direction concerning public institutions, and the role of the economy and technology. Such works, which go in the right direction, focus on the level of prognostic framing, i.e. the proposals put in place by activists. This is a significant part of the problem we are discussing, but it does not exhaust it: what about the explanation and justification of the forms of action put in place to make such proposals effective? The framing perspective on social movements (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988), although seminal in its capacity to put cognition at the core of the study of collective action, addressing movement actors as 'signifying agents' (Benford and Snow 2000) and thus taking seriously their interpretation of the world and the meaning they produced, has long shown its limits for what regards broader theorization of the world that movement actors share and reproduce (Oliver and Johnston 2006).

In order to make sense of what makes movement actors, even sharing a similar framing of the climate issue, who use different forms of action, we have to move from frames to strategies. The choice of form of action, though strongly routinized (Flesher Fominaya 2014; Tilly 1978), is commonly understood as at least partially strategic, i.e. connected to an understanding of 'overall goals, while tactics are the particular means chosen to advance them' (Doherty and Hayes 2018, 280). The literature on social movement strategy (see, among others: Duyvendak and Jasper 2015; Jasper 2004; Jasper 2006; Jasper, Moran, and Tramontano 2015; Meyer and Staggenborg 2012) focuses on several dimensions of strategic choices: goals (demands), means (tactics, repertoires), opposition, audiences, arenas, resources and skills. These dimensions are firmly rooted in the literature on social movements, which has long focused on context and resources as fundamental elements in the choice of forms of action. A significant strand of the literature has focused on the contextual factors shaping tactical choices, mainly through the concept of political opportunity structure (Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995; Meyer 2004), while resource mobilization theorists have primarily addressed the role of the characteristics of the actors and their relational networks in influencing strategies (Jenkins 1983; Mccarthy and Zald 1977; Zald and McCarthy 2002). Dynamic approaches to strategic changes across time, vis-à-vis changes in context and resources, include studies on tactical innovation (Wang and Soule 2016), cycles of protest (Tarrow 1989; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004), radicalization (Bosi, della Porta, and Malthaner 2019), and more recent attempts to analyse repertoire changes, and the impact that the dynamics of a protest cycle and the perceived closure of political opportunities have on them (Bosi 2006; de

Moor and Wahlström 2019; Portos 2019; Zamponi, Ferro, and Cugnata 2023). The choice of forms of action is not understood by the literature as entirely strategic: it cannot be interpreted without referring to movement ideas, cultures, and traditions (Doherty and Hayes 2012; Doherty and Hayes 2014). Often, they are expressive of identity claims (Smithey 2009; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004), and their choice becomes a metonymy for the actors' identities (Polletta 2006; Zamponi 2018). The literature on strategy has long recognized the existence of cultural and ideational components of strategy, but it has rarely explored them. In his seminal theorization of the repertoire of collective action, Tilly referred to 'the relative appropriateness and efficiency of the means the group actually uses' (Tilly 1978, 153) as a factor fostering the flexibility of the repertoire in a context in which he was arguing for continuity. Later, he pointed out how 'repertoires incorporate collectively learned shared understandings concerning what forms of claim-making are possible, desirable, risky, expensive, or probable, as well as what consequences different possible forms of claim-making are likely to produce' (Tilly 1999, 419). The references to appropriateness, efficiency and consequences point towards the idea that movement actors elaborate on strategy based on scenarios they imagine. Similar hints came from those who have approached strategy from the cultural point of view, pointing out how strategy are made using 'culture as a 'tool kit' of rituals, symbols, stories, and world-views' (Swindler 1986) and that the combination of cultural elements in a strategy allows goals to 'be achieved in appropriate ways' (Johnston and Klandermaans 1995). A very similar language has been used by Francesca Polletta in proposing a cultural approach to movement strategies: 'collective action repertoires are understandings shared by activists and authorities in a particular historical period about what strategies, tactics, and organizational forms are appropriate and effective' (Polletta 2012).

This article subscribes to the strategic approach and aims to build on it, focusing, in particular, on the ideational component that keeps together these elements: the imagination that makes actors connect a certain goal to certain means. What both analyses, focusing on prognostic framing and on strategic choices, tend to partially overlook is the fact that means and ends are connected by (often, but not always, implicit) understandings of what change is supposed to look like and how change is expected to take place. This article focuses on *theories of change*: meta-strategic logics regarding how actors plan to achieve their goals and from which they derive their choice of targets, means, audience, and so on.

We know that movement actors strategize, and we also know that they produce knowledge and theory (Cox and Fominaya 2009; della Porta and Pavan 2017; Eyerman and Jamison 1989): why should they not theorize, at least implicitly, over strategy? The concept of theories of change is relatively common in the field of evaluation of social and political programs (Dhillon and Vaca 2018; Rogers 2008; Weiss 1995) and in the bordering field of development studies (Eyben et al. 2008; Gready and Vandenhole 2014a; Jones 2011), defined as the hypothesis about the way that a program brings about its effects (Scriven 1991), able to link 'a goal or concept (the theory) and the mechanisms or methodologies that are designed to deliver on the promise of the goal or concept (the change)' (Gready and Vandenhole 2014b, 16). Similar concepts, although with different labels, have also been used in reference to collective action. Erik Olin Wright's last book (2019) is partially based on the analysis of what he calls the different 'strategic logics' of anti-capitalism: the Marxist sociologist pointed out how most anti-capitalist

action could be reduced to attempts to 'smash capitalism' (as in a revolutionary rupture), 'dismantle capitalism' (through incremental reforms that would seamlessly lead to a transition to socialism), 'tame capitalism' (as in *trente-glorieuses* social democracy), 'resist capitalism' (as done by unions and social movement organizations) or 'escape capitalism' (creating grassroots alternatives, cooperative, prefigurative experiences or lifestyle-oriented initiatives), categorizing them based on the 'objective of the struggle' and the 'level of the system', and calling for combining the four latter categories into an attempt to 'erode capitalism'. Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (2006), when discussing forms of action, claimed that they can 'be distinguished according to the 'logic', or *modus operandi*, which the activists assign them', proposing a categorization between the 'logic of numbers' (in which movements 'seek to mobilize the greatest number of demonstrators possible […] drawing the attention of elected representatives to the fact that, at least on certain issues, the majority in the country is not the same as the majority in parliament', as in marches or petitions), the 'logic of damage' (in which movements cause 'material disruption' obstruction 'the normal course of events by threatening disorder' as in the case of political violence, strikes or boycotts), and the 'logic of bearing witness' (in which actors seek 'to demonstrate a strong commitment to an objective deemed vital for humanity's future' through personal risk, as in the case of nonviolent actions such as hunger strikes) (della Porta and Diani 2006, 171–178). In the debate on framing and ideologies (Oliver and Johnston 2006), theories of change are closer to the latter than to the former, although it would be a mistake to conflate them with ideologies, since we are only focusing on specific ideas on how social change regarding an issue is supposed to take place, and not on general worldviews, and since we are dealing with movement actors who lack the historical depth to have developed comprehensive ideologies. Still, we are addressing theories, ideational concepts, whose kinship and deep entrenchment with ideology cannot be denied. In our theorization, theories of change are situated between a purely ideological vision of change and the action plan needed to achieve it, i.e. a strategy, and they facilitate the passage from the former to the latter.

Building on this literature, this article focuses on three actors that share the same 'climate justice' framework and a visible state-addressing orientation (FFF, XR and UG in Italy), but use different tactics and are somewhat difficult to place on the 'radical vs. reformist' axis. The goal is to answer two questions: on which theories of change do actors base their strategic choices vis-à-vis the climate emergency? And how do these theories of change affect the ways in which movement actors address strategic dilemmas?

Theories of change

What does a theory of change consist of? We propose a series of factors that constitute it, to be used as an analytical framework to analyse the theories of change proposed by movement actors. These items have been primarily selected through an iterative process of inductive analysis of empirical data from the fieldwork material, although they are also rooted in existing conceptual categories developed by the social movement literature. In this section, we will quickly present them while referencing their theoretical foundation. Their empirical articulation will be illustrated later within the case of the Italian climate justice movement.

First of all, there is the *role of power holders*: who has the power to intervene on the issues raised by the movement, and what is expected from them?[2] A very traditional claim-based movement might put forward proposals expecting the government to act and implement them, addressing the related issues. Another theory of change would not expect a hostile government to act, waiting for a change in its composition. A revolutionary theory of change does not expect state authorities to address the issue either, at least to a satisfactory extent, proposing instead to remove the government and take its place. Actors who use forms of action that aim at directly impacting society tend to have theories of change in which the role of power holders is minimal.

Secondly, theories of change include an understanding of the *role of the people*: what are those who care about a certain issue expected to do?[3] The options in this case include pressuring politicians, raising public awareness, taking things into their own hands, establishing alliances, and so on. We are not talking about specific forms of action, which are obviously related to theories of change but are not constitutively part of them: what we are describing are the logics that stand beyond the choice of forms of action and the meanings that are attributed to them.

Movement actors also theorize about the *role of public opinion*, which can be conceptualized as a role of passive bystander, as a broker between the people and power holders, as potential recruits, and so on.[4]

Theories of change often include an idea of *who needs to act, among the people* and *what leverage they have on power holders*.[5] This is the element of our analytical grid that is closer to the repertoire of action. For example, as we will see, FFF tends to expect potentially everyone to mobilize, and the effect on power holders is to be based on the number of potential voters that are acting, while UG focuses on small-N actions aimed at disrupting daily life and, in the last instance, the stability of the state. Is the movement organized as a vanguard, or does it need to involve a wider section of the people? Besides, does the movement aim to mobilize the whole of society, or a representative sample of it, or does it wish to represent a specific social sector based on class, gender, race or other categories?

Furthermore, activists often theorize on the *endgame scenario* of their action.[6] Even actors who use very down-to-earth and pragmatic strategies might see them as part of a long path that will ultimately lead to a utopian future. Others might not expect the far future, even in their utopian desires, to be very different from the present.

Related to this, theories of change also differ based on the *extent of change for the existing order* they propose.[7] This is where the radical vs. moderate dichotomy acquires a substantial meaning: do the actors' goals include a significant change of the existing societal order, or is the movement specifically limited to address a precise issue, with the whole of society remaining more or less as it is? And how deep is this change?

In the same vein, movement strategies also tend to include an idea of the *rhythm of the expected change*: do actors expect change to come suddenly and drastically, or do they plan for a gradual transformation that would take years or decades?[8] This element is particularly crucial for the climate movement, given the known role of urgency and the emergency temporality in its theory and practice.

Finally, theories of change might or might not involve *intermediate goals* that act as stepping stones in the movement's path.[9] Is there a cumulative logic in the actors'

expectations, based on the idea that achieving partial goals will strengthen the movement's capacity to achieve its final goals, or do actors focus only on the final goals?

Case, data and methods

The history of Italy's environmental movement has its roots in the 1970s and 1980s (Diani 1988). Around the turn of the century, traditional environmental organizations such as Legambiente and WWF gave way to informal groups, citizen committees, and self-managed social centres (Andretta and Imperatore 2023) as the main actors spearheading local campaigns opposing large infrastructure projects (della Porta and Piazza 2007). From 2004 to 2017, environmental conflicts rose dramatically, reflecting a shift toward more local, disruptive protests, often met with higher repression (Imperatore 2018). The emergence of the climate movement in 2019 marked a pivotal moment for Italian environmental activism. Fridays for Future Italia (FFF) led the charge, organizing the country's first climate strike in March 2019. FFF adopted a horizontal structure and a universalist framework, enabling broad participation from individuals and organizations alike. Mass strikes in March and September 2019 brought widespread attention, complemented by civil disobedience campaigns by Extinction Rebellion Italia (XR). However, the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily subdued visible protests (Priano 2021). Momentum returned in October 2021 with the pre-COP counter-summit in Milan (Cugnata et al. 2024). FFF began forging alliances with other movements, including feminist groups and labour collectives such as the GKN factory collective (Andretta and Imperatore 2024). This convergence led to joint actions, such as in 2023, the climate-feminist strikes and a series of demonstrations in Florence, Bologna, and Rome (Zamponi, Ferro, and Cugnata 2023). Meanwhile, XR activists launched the Ultima Generazione (UG) campaign in December 2021, focusing on continuous civil disobedience. UG later separated from XR and became Italy's chapter of the A22 network, gaining notoriety through high-profile actions like street blockades and symbolic 'pseudo vandalism' using washable paint. These developments occurred amid political instability, characterized by frequent government changes between 2018 and 2022. Despite its initial environmentalist agenda, the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) moderated its stance while in power, particularly during its participation in Mario Draghi's technocratic government (Biancalana 2020). Although the establishment of a Ministry of Ecological Transition was seen as a positive step, activists criticized the government for its ties to fossil fuel interests, as reflected in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Lizzi and Prontera 2024). The perceived lack of government responsiveness to climate concerns intensified with the victory of Giorgia Meloni's right-wing coalition in the 2022 elections, signalling diminishing political opportunities for climate activism. Research has highlighted the strain between climate activism and institutional party politics (Sesti Osséo 2024), reconstructing a cycle characterized by tendencies to pseudo-radicalization and pseudo-institutionalization vis-à-vis the lack of policy responses by public institutions (Zamponi, Ferro, and Cugnata 2023).

The study is based on fourteen semi-structured in-depth interviews (Blee and Taylor 2002) with representatives of the three organizations that appeared most in the protest events related to climate in Italy between 2018 and 2023: Fridays for Future Italia, Extinction Rebellion Italia and Ultima Generazione (Zamponi, Ferro, and Cugnata 2023). The interviews lasted, on average, one hour. Interviewees were selected as

representatives of their own organization: the interviewees belonging to FFF hold, or have held the office of national spokesperson, or, before the creation of that office, were among the core activists as testified by others, while the interviewees participating in XR and UG take part in the national bodies of the organizations and were indicated by the respective organizations as representative for the purposes of the interview. In fact, in the case of FFF, we individually contacted through personal connections the people who were identified as national spokespersons on the organization's website and, before the appointment of spokespersons, the people that several gatekeepers identified as core activists; in the case of XR and UG, we contacted the organization through their official channels (e-mail and social media accounts) and were directed to potential interviewees by the people in charge of public communication within the organizations. Sampling took place at the national level, interviewing activists who were identified by the organization itself as representatives. The sampling strategy reflects the characteristics of the organizations: the less formalized and hierarchical and inherently pluralistic structure of FFF, especially in its early stages of development, required a larger number of interviewees in order to grasp the actor's theory of change, while XR and UG are much more structured and cohesive, facilitating representation. The different number of interviewees per actor does not affect the analysis, which is conducted at the meso level, comparing collective actors. Further analysis, taking into account internal variation within actors, based on the different characteristics of the activists at the micro level, goes beyond the scope of this article. No activist was excluded from the sample.

Interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2025. At the outset of each interview, the nature and purpose of the study were explained, and respondents were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research. We then asked a series of broad and open questions aimed at reconstructing the dynamics of the cycle of protest through their own experience. In particular, interviewees were asked to elaborate on the following: the initial decision to join the movement; different phases of mobilization; forms of protest used at different stages; the strategic logic behind the choice of forms of action; the relationship with institutional politics; and the organizational structure of the actor. All the transcripts and notes were stored in password-secured devices. Anonymity was granted to individual activists, while acknowledging the role of collective actors. Interviews were inductively coded in successive iterations, leading to the elaboration of the analytical framework illustrated in the previous section, of the comparison presented in the following section and of the analysis of the role of theories of change in extension dilemmas. The timeframe of processes discussed in the interviews was from the beginning of the cycle of protest (late 2018/early 2019) to the date of the interview. Furthermore, the interviews were supplemented with documentary sources (print and digital material produced by the actors), providing background material that informed the analysis, with the goal of reducing the risk of a lack of representativeness of the sample.

Theories of change in the Italian climate movement

Based on the analytical framework proposed in the previous section, we will analyse the theories of change of three collective actors within the Italian climate movement. In some cases, as for XR, the actor s' theory of change is explicit and publicly discussed:

> Why do we think civil disobedience works? First of all, in order to work, it must really be a mass thing. […] Mass means hundreds of thousands of people who sit in the middle of a street. At that point, clearly you have won. When you have on your side a huge mass of people across age groups or social groups, because the problem that unites you is felt by everyone. So that would be the goal. It certainly works as it has worked in so many other contexts, as it has worked in the sixties in the United States, in the suffragette movement, in the Indian independence movement and so on. It works when you get, if you get there with time, to have very large numbers. That's the bet. (XR1)

This activist refers to XR's well-known theory of change, based on the capacity of massive grassroots civil disobedience to disrupt public life in such a way that it is impossible for state institutions not to address the issue of climate change, as it (supposedly) happened in historical cases of nonviolent resistance and revolution. If we analyse this theory of change from the point of view of the three logics proposed by della Porta and Diani, we see a peculiar combination of them: the logic of bearing witness, typical of civil disobedience, is subordinated to the logic of damage, and numbers are mostly instrumental to it. 'That's the bet', that is the theory of change on which activists are gambling their time and energy.

The *role of the people* that XR imagines is to engage in mass civil disobedience. Those *who need to act* are ordinary people, based on the *leverage* provided by both their numbers and their commitment to civil disobedience:

> What always comes out [in the media] is only violent bullshit. Violent in a manner of speaking, I mean the not-exactly-non-violent stuff that social centres do, so people read that and stay away from everything and if there isn't a moment in which even people, who are not those who have done activism due to personal history, realize that the situation is truly tragic and that we need everyone, it's unlikely that XR in Italy or other movements in Italy will become what they are in England, France or Germany. (XR1)

The *role of power holders* is minimal: although it is not clear if there is the expectation to topple the extant system of government, what is clear is that there are no expectations of desirable policy being introduced. Citizens' assemblies are proposed as 'a transcendence of politics as we conceive it now' (XR1). The *endgame scenario* seems to be one of direct democracy, overcoming the limits of a representative system that is 'not willing to take radical measures that somehow displease people', because 'drastic solutions can only be taken with the consent of the people and by building things together with the people' (XR1). The *extent of change of the existing order* is difficult to determine. However, it seems rather radical in terms of climate policy and of the institutional setting necessary to adopt it, while limited in terms of the production system and socio-economic order at large, notwithstanding the adherence to the climate justice framework:

> The peculiarity of XR – as well as FFF – is that they are not only environmental movements as one imagines the environmental movement, I don't know, like the environmental associations of the 80s. So surely the social component is present and foundational because the fact that there is a very close interrelation between environmental issues, climate injustices and social injustice is clear to everyone. (XR1)

The *rhythm of the expected change* is peculiar: much of the work seems to be focused on presenting XR to potential recruits, on training these recruits and on the internal horizontal dynamic of groups, while mass civil disobedience is placed in a quasi-messianic future.

The feeling of urgency that is typical of this wave of climate mobilization seems to need to be balanced with the long and meticulous work of preparing increasingly large rebellions, until there is a tipping point generated by mass participation. *Intermediate goals* in this theory seem not to play a significant role.

UG was born in 2021 as a campaign within XR, and later developed in its own organization, part of an international split led by XR founder Roger Hallam. Thus, its theory of change is an amended version of the one guiding XR. As an activist told us:

> UG actually doesn't deviate that much from the initial XR theory, but applies it more faithfully in Italy. (UG2)

The starting point for the initial campaign was, in the activist's own words, 'the frustration of many people in XR who really felt the need to return to the original idea with which XR was born in England' (UG2). These activists felt that waiting for massive numbers before really engaging in disruptive civil disobedience had transformed XR into yet another awareness-raising actor.

> Ultima Generazione, starting from smaller numbers, said: 'Well, we are few, we start by doing actions of a certain type, they also bring us a certain visibility and instead of aiming to be many and then doing one thing, we do many smaller actions, but daily'. (UG1)

UG proposes two main amendments to XR's theory of change. The first is placed on *who needs to act/what is their leverage*, with a lower stress on numbers and the idea that the commitment to frequency of well-trained activists can compensate for their scarce numbers in terms of disruptiveness. The second has to do with *intermediate goals*, which are much more important for UG activists than for XR:

> The strategy is to create enough disruption […] which, either because the police can no longer manage the situation, or because the situation becomes embarrassing for the government, you are called to negotiate. This is the first step, because […] you achieve a partial victory, and this, in theory, galvanizes the movement and increases its numbers. And then you have the numbers to produce systemic changes of a broader scope. So, having a concrete request that you can win, trying to demonstrate that civil disobedience works, having step-by-step an increase in people and then arriving at a moment in which you have two, three, I don't know, five hundred thousand people in front of Parliament. And then you have won. In the sense that you propose a dismissal of the government. This is where Ultima Generazione wants to get to. (UG2)

This theory of change explicitly links *intermediate goals* and *endgame scenario*: partial demands are utterly tactical, geared towards the propaganda of civil disobedience as an effective form of action, in order to get to the mass civil disobedience that XR longed for and to the same endgame scenario of transcending representative democracy that XR pursues. Once again, the multidimensional analysis of the actors' theories of change gives a much more nuanced picture than the one provided by the radical/revolutionary vs. moderate/reformist dichotomy: in this example, very moderate demands, such as those proposed by UG, as in the case of a governmental fund to reimburse damages suffered by citizens as a consequence of extreme weather events caused by climate change, can be put in place to serve rather radical long-term goals, and vice versa.

FFF did not have, at the time of our interviews, the clear and explicit theory of change that XR (and consequently UG) was built on. This is probably due to its organizational

history, i.e. having developed, in the Italian case, as a network of grassroots local initiatives, first into a 'big tent' for different collective actors and only later as an organization, while XR and UG were born as organizations, with a clear strategic logic inscribed in their founding documents. This does not mean that a meta-strategic logic of action cannot be identified in FFF. The *role of the people* is to pressure politicians, and the *role of power holders* is to implement the desired policies.

> Then there must be people to whom we demand to do all this, and it must be political institutions. We must direct our energies towards demanding change from politicians. That is, that political institutions impose themselves in a determined manner to resolve the crisis. We saw it with the pandemic: when governments started to act, companies also had to adapt to the laws […]. It is governments that bear the greatest responsibility and also have the greatest potential to create change. […] The movement up to now has had one main role: acting as an intermediary between the scientific community and society, and also to some extent the political class. In the sense that our putting pressure [on the government] has made a slogan, that is, 'giving voice to science', concrete […]. When this battle started to be prioritized in 2019, the media also started talking about it more; there were so many changes. Now I don't know if we are still acting as an intermediary or if we are putting more pressure on the political class […]. The existence of a movement like Fridays is necessary so that politics never feels at peace with itself. They always have to feel like they're being pushed around, they always have to feel like we're breathing down their necks, until they address things, until they do everything they can and more to address this crisis. (FFF3)

This theory of change is clearly based on Greta Thunberg's model. As noted by Imperatore and Leonardi (2023), Greta Thunberg's speech at the COP in Katowice in 2018 represents a significant turning point from this perspective, rejecting any faith in governmental negotiations and positioning the movement as an instrument of unrelenting pressure on governments, with demands and claims framed as direct extensions of climate science, that politicians are expected to implement without debate. The role of the movement is to make sure that politicians 'never feel at peace with themselves, […] always feel like we're breathing down their necks'. Thunberg in Katowice had said:

> We have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You have ignored us in the past and you will ignore us again. We have run out of excuses and we are running out of time. We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people. (Thunberg 2018)

In terms of *who needs to act* and on the *leverage* they have on power holders, FFF activists consider 'very important that everyone feels this desire […] to revolutionize the world and change things' (FFF3) and identify in the numbers, as a measure of consent and, thus, of electoral power, the lever that people can pull to exert influence over power holders:

> What's the real problem? It's just that the state actually finances companies that don't see this whole ecological transition situation well. There are always things under the counter; that's always the problem. How do you neutralize these things? Simply by showing that the gap of votes, of consents, of approval between doing this thing and not doing this thing is so large that you are really forced to do it. (FFF9)

This is not new. Almost fifty years ago, Charles Tilly stressed the corresponding logic between mass demonstrations and elections, pointing out that 'the growth of elections promotes the crystallization and spread of the demonstration as a form of collective action', because the basic forms of the demonstration 'resembles that of the electoral assembly,

and because it provides an effective means of displaying the strength of a contestant, sometimes of influencing the outcomes of an election' (Tilly 1978, 167–168). Regarding the endgame scenario, FFF in itself demands that the government take climate action:

> We need to get to the point where we change course, and in more practical terms, it is literally trying to prevent the temperature from rising above two degrees centigrade. […] And this obviously requires a real change at a systemic level, we need to undertake this damned ecological transition, we talk about it so much, but we never do anything. […] Mechanisms that are based on the choice of the individual are mechanisms that take too long, and we don't have all that time; we have a little less than 7 years. This means that we need to push to the point where we can tell politicians 'you have to do this, we have to hurry. because otherwise we will all find ourselves swimming'. (FFF9)

Interestingly enough, the theory of change based on pressuring politicians through mass demonstrations aiming at potentially influencing elections is justified by FFF activists on the same bases, rooted in the temporality of urgency and emergency, that in XR or UG justify rather different choices. Politicization of emergency and centrality of state policy, as we said in the introduction. A state-planned ecological transition is the endgame scenario. Differently from XR and UG, FFF sees no need for institutional change: its diagnosis on why climate policy was not implemented before does not focus on the intrinsic limits of representative democracy but on the idea of power relations: people need to mobilize in vaster and vaster numbers in order to exert more power over politicians and force them to implement progressive policies. The *extent of change of the existing order*, thus, is limited on the institutional level, while it is rather radical in terms of the socio-economic model.

Intermediate goals are not as central to FFF's theory of change as they are to the one proposed by UG, even if a similar logic tends to emerge in the case of claims and demands that are not directly related to climate change but are considered relevant for their capacity to mobilize also people and collective actors that are locally important, such as student organizations and collectives:

> You have to be able to mobilize the city, you have to take the sensitivity of each person and make them feel involved. So 'No more false promises' was a perfect hashtag for any type of claim. In fact, in Milan we sat down and put together a program that was inclusive of different realities, of different visions, so we included, for example, the student movements. 'No more false promises' about school. School is fundamental for building a future; school should not always take a back seat when it comes to openings. This type of thing here, obviously without leaving aside the aspect of the climate, allowing the individual to bring a pinch of his claim, apart from that of the climate. (FFF4)

What emerges clearly from this analysis is the fact that, even sharing the same 'climate justice' framework, different collective actors have different theories of change. In the next section, we will analyse how these theories of change affect the ways in which actors address strategic dilemmas.

Theories of change and the extension dilemma

In this section, we will try to grasp the relevance of the different theories of change proposed by actors through the lens of one of the strategic dilemmas described by Jasper: the extension dilemma.

> The further you expand your group (or alliance), the less coherent your goals and actions can be. Normally, fewer people will be willing to bear high risks and costs, so expansion limits your range of activities. Furthermore, as potential power or reach increases, so do coordination problems. To some extent, this is a problem of sheer size. But it also has to do with the diversity of people involved. […] Part of the extension dilemma arises from the benefits of maintaining a sharp collective identity: the broader the definition of that identity, the less specific it can be. […] You may wish to restrict your mobilisation to those with special resources, skills, or reputations, to increase your effectiveness. […] On the other hand, sheer numbers may be the source of a movement's power, for instance when its objective is disruption or voting influence. (Jasper 2004, 7–8)

The extension dilemma, though not always under this label, has been vastly addressed by the literature on social movements. Marwell and Oliver wrote about reaching a balance between reach and selectivity (1993, 157–179) while Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani discussed 'how to define identity to include as many people as possible in a movement's potential constituency, while continuing to provide strong incentives to the movement's core supporters' (della Porta and Diani 2006, 102–103). The analysis of theories of change that was conducted in the previous section allows us to better grasp how actors place themselves along the reach-selectivity continuum. The meta-strategic logics of movement actors, their ideas of how change is expected to take place, contribute to shaping how actors answer strategic dilemmas.

A polarization between reach (needed for mass demonstrations, as FFF's climate strikes) and selectivity (needed for the costly civil disobedience that XR and UG promote) hits closer to the mark than the 'radical vs. reformist' dichotomy, in understanding the differences between the two actors. This does not mean that civil disobedience actors are not interested in reach, as a core Italian XR activist told us:

> Despite being a very radical movement in requests, at the same time it is quite different in language from those that in Italy are usually poorly defined as 'antagonistic movements', in the sense that language is never claim-based: 'we want, you are the ones who have done this', but we tend to say the same things in a less oppositional way, that is a little more effective. (XR1)

A core element of XR's strategy, at least in Italy, has been to try and build a space for a new radicalism, somewhat different from that characterizing traditional movement milieus. Language work and identity work aiming at broadening the constituency that movement actors address are relatively common in mobilization processes. In this case, though, reach is instrumental to selectivity, because XR's theory of change expects response to climate change to emerge from a governmental reaction to massive civil disobedience, which requires strong and costly commitment, typical of militant minorities. Effectively combining reach and selectivity is far from easy, as the same activist explained:

> What we did at the beginning was to apply a little of what we saw the Brits do, and then little by little, clashing with the Italian reality, we realized that that strategy obviously does not work in Italy for a number of reasons and that there is a need to develop our own. It is difficult to have so many people who are willing to get involved in civil disobedience for real. The thousands of arrests they have had in London – not only have we not had them, but we cannot even imagine having them – because there is a lot of fear and because the situation is very different anyway. (XR1)

Observing that 'it is difficult to have so many people who are willing to get involved in civil disobedience for real' is one of the most transparent and straightforward illustrations of the extension dilemma a social movement researcher can find in the field. Both reach and selectivity are fundamental to XR's theory of change, and the difficulties in putting it into practice force activists to revise their own theory of change. Furthermore, even among movement actors that have a clear and explicit theory of change since the beginning, as in the case of XR, this does not mean that individual activists do not have their own, more complex and nuanced understandings of how change is supposed to take place.

> I am very pessimistic. Personally, I think that we will not solve it and that it will be a tragedy. The solution would still be a mixture of things. Technology should certainly help us a little. A change of economic paradigm – consumerism and endless exploitation of resources are unsustainable – and necessarily a reduction in consumption, which would obviously have negative repercussions on the lives of at least of us who are well off and on the world economy. […] There is the awareness that the problem is so huge that to solve it, all the actors would have to contribute. And it is clearly a very ambitious project. […] This kind of drastic solutions can only be taken with the consent of the people and building things together with the people. Our proposal is that. (XR1)

Is this statement radical or reformist? In terms of prognostic framing, there is a reference to 'drastic solutions', but in terms of theory of change, there is the idea of 'consent of the people', of 'building things together',' and of changing individual consumption behaviour, far from revolutionary antagonism. Moreover, behind every attempt to find a favourable theory of change, there is the dark cloud of pessimism. Shades of radicalism and reformism, to be analysed against the grain of the actor's theory of change, are also present in FFF. The need to reach as many people as possible is justified by FFF's core activists in Italy on the same consent-oriented ground we have just seen:

> It will work if the new narrative suits most people. Polarizing right now is the last thing we need. It is such a big thing, so complex, with people who have such big interests at stake, I mean, the 1% … Polarizing would be an incredible waste of energy. […] My answer is not nice: it is not 'let's overthrow capitalism that has done reprehensible damage', but it is necessarily 'we must find something new in which – not everyone, because there will never be everyone – but many can identify'. […] They are already winning. If you crash very badly, it ends up even worse. (FFF7)

The movement needs to include as many people as possible, abandoning stances that are too radical and antagonistic for many, because the enemy is too strong and only a vast and united front will be big enough to face it. Pressuring the government is still a clear step in the pathway to addressing climate change activists have in mind, but in the case of FFF the logic of numbers is much stronger than that of damage and bearing witness. Reach, in this case, is not only much more important than selectivity, but also it is understood as instrumental for the movement's efficacy in pressuring the government:

> These solutions are co-beneficial for almost everyone. Almost everyone, but if I and you and 50 other assholes put ourselves into it, it's not enough. So either we are 50 million to ask and to expect these things here, then maybe, maybe, maybe, because in any case it is not said, politics will have the strength to do it. Otherwise, I see it very hard. (FFF7)

The centrality of numbers in FFF's theory of change pushes the activists to choose a very clear response to the identity dilemma: downplaying selectivity and pursuing reach.

> Many of us […] who did not come from other organized groups preferred to keep a certain transversality in the language, the communication style, and the streets. People who came from organized groups are more used to certain languages, issues, and practices which are a bit more aggressive, and so on. […] I think we managed to radicalize without losing appeal. On September 27, we were one million. When you radicalize, you risk not bringing anybody to the streets any more. […] Our nice-guy face [innocent appearance] opens doors and ears [gives us easier access to people], that would not listen to us if we presented ourselves as 'independent autonomous collective for climate', even if any autonomous collective would have liked our conference. (FFF1)

As we have seen in the previous section, the theory of change proposed by UG is an amendment to the one characterizing XR, moving towards lower reliance on big numbers. In the eyes of UG activists, XR's theory of change, with its centrality on the idea of mass civil disobedience, is ineffective because it brings about waiting forever for the mass to show up, while civil disobedience conducted by a limited number of activists, if successful in achieving moderate intermediate goals, can create a sense of efficacy that will, in turn, gradually bring more and more people to join:

> It's good that there are actions done by a few people because another narrative that I and the movement would like to dismantle a little is 'We have to be many to (do something)'. No, if you wait until you are many, in the end we never start. We are three, let's do something that we can do in three, fine, let's go. There are three of you, maybe tomorrow there will be five of you. So the idea of 'I don't have to feel like there are a lot of people around me to be able to act […]'. This is an important thing, so I think that an element to take into consideration is to try to do actions with more people, but at the same time, also maintain those with few people. (UG1)

This pushes activists towards an answer to the extension dilemma that clearly values selectivity over reach, not only more than FFF but also more than XR. The logic is to go beyond the idea of consensus, of convincing everyone, because an emergency cannot wait. There is an idea of attracting people's attention through tactics that antagonize them:

> I think that many of us grew up with the idea that doing politics is seeking consensus. I mean, I also initially had a bit of difficulty in this sense, in getting out of the mindset that you have to please people to be able to propose issues to them. And instead, very often people can maybe hate you, but thanks to your action that brought out an issue, go and support the requests you make or whatever it is. And in any case, we are in such an emergency situation that we really don't have to worry about disturbing people for half an hour. (UG2)

The tendency to selectivity is stressed by the common references activists make to training for high-risk action (that is in itself a selection process) as one of the main activities of their collective action (UG1, UG2). Still, if the extension dilemma is not only about size but also about diversity, then UG pursues something very similar to what we have already seen in FFF and XR, i.e. the involvement of people who are outside activist milieus:

> [We try] to reach a target that is a little different, because what I notice, the problem of many realities that do activism in a more radical way, and I think about the social centres, the occupations that also cause clashes [with the police] maybe, you can more or less agree with

> them, but they reach a [limited] spectrum of people. Normally, the average citizen sees them and identifies them as people who still want to make a bit of a mess. (UG1)

Even the group that uses the most 'radical' tactics does not want to be perceived as 'radical'. Interestingly enough, the analysis of how Italian climate activists face the extension dilemma through the lens of the collective actors' theories of change brings us to two different conclusions: on the one hand, theories of change contribute to shaping how collective actors address strategic dilemmas, stressing some factors over others and, in our case, pushing actors more towards reach or more towards selectivity; on the other hand, collective actors that differ based on their theories of change but not on some general ideology and that share the political core of their action (the 'climate justice' framework) and its context (twenty-first century Italy), will also show commonalities in how they face strategic dilemmas. The preference for smaller numbers and higher selectivity that characterizes UG, in fact, does not translate into a more defined or narrower political identity, at least not in the activists' strategic reasoning.

Discussion and conclusions

The goal of this article is to show the potential of going beyond reflections on the 'climate justice' framework, on the 'radical vs. reformist' cleavage and on framing, choosing to focus on movement strategies and, in particular, on the meta-strategic logics of collective action. Analysing theories of change can help disentangle the confusion between goals, tactics and strategies that often characterizes discussion on radicalism and reformism, and contribute to understanding the often implicit ideational background of strategic choices, shedding light on elements that frame analysis tends to overlook.

Our analysis shows that movement actors, in particular when strategic choices are concerned, are more than the signifying agents portrayed by frame analysis: they are theorizing agents. Their choices are informed by deeply rooted ideas on how the change they pursue is expected to take place. Movement theories of change tend to be complex and multidimensional, often escaping the dichotomy between radical/revolutionary and moderate/reformist, or at least articulating it on different levels. The ideational component of strategy may even contribute to the split of a collective actor, as in the case of XR and the A22 network. We provide a tentative grid to analyse and compare theories of change in social movement actors. Was the A22 split from XR on the radical or the moderate side? UG uses more disruptive tactics than XR, with a more vanguard-like logic (suggesting radicalism), while attaching to them minimal goals (suggesting moderatism). The difference between the two actors is placed in the way they articulate strategy, and analysing the way they theorize about the change they pursue is much more interesting and fruitful than putting them on a one-dimensional scale. FFF is often considered the typical case of moderate reformism among protest-oriented climate actors: still, at least in Italy, it was discussing its self-definition as 'anti-capitalist' in its very first national assembly, in April 2019, with many radical movement actors (social centres, student groups, etc.) entering the network and playing a very significant role within it. The choice to use tactics characterized by a low level of disruption and, in general, to take on a 'nice guy face', as an interviewee aptly summarized, was eminently strategic. Again, understanding the way actors articulate means, goals and expectations of change in their theorizing seems to

be a significant step forward in the comprehension of movement actors' strategies. We are not arguing that the debates between revolution and reform, or radicality and moderation, are meaningless in climate politics. What our analysis shows is that the concrete strategic elaboration of movement actors is complex and multidimensional, and that making sense of intra-movement strategic differences requires a more nuanced analytical framework.

Thus, returning to the two goals set out in the introduction, our analysis clearly underscores the role of strategic orientations in shaping the differences between collective actors who share a similar framing of climate issues. It also shows that, through the framework we propose, such orientations offer a significant explanatory power in accounting for divergent tactical choices. Furthermore, we have shown how significantly these theories influence the way in which collective actors navigate strategic dilemmas, prioritizing certain factors over others. In our case, FFF's theory of change brings activists to prioritize reach over selectivity when addressing the extension dilemma, with UG taking the opposite position and XR positioning itself somewhere in the middle. Still, theories of change do not solve strategic dilemmas once and for all or determine how actors address them: we showed that, while collective actors may differ in their theories of change, if, as in our case, they share a common political foundation – the 'climate justice' framework – and operate within the same context, they will also share the focus on some aspects in addressing strategic dilemmas, as, in our case, the preference for low-intensity political identities in the attempt to recruit people beyond activist milieus.

All in all, the analysis of theories of change in social movement actors, and in general of the ideational component of strategic choices, can contribute to showing how strategic choices are culturally, politically, and ideologically constructed. Our goal is to stress the role of knowledge in the process of strategizing. As previously noted, a strategic approach to social movement studies – introduced as a way to address the structural bias prevalent in much of the literature and highlight the role of agency in collective action – may risk devolving into a reversion to rational-choice models if it neglects the role of culture, politics and ideology. Such an oversight can reduce social actors to mere 'strategic dupes' (Polletta 2006, 27) and ultimately obscure or even undermine the agency of social movements and activists. If we view culture as 'the symbolic dimension of all structures, institutions, and practices (political, economic, educational, etc.)' (Polletta 2004, 100), then a focus on all the cultural factors influencing strategic choices, including the actors' own imagination, is necessary. Integrating the analysis of strategic dilemmas with an examination of the ideational component of strategy, as we have done in this article, is part of a broader agenda to expand the strategic approach to collective action. Analysing movement actors in their capacity to produce knowledge, taking that knowledge seriously and assessing its influence on the actor's own strategic choices is, from our point of view, a step forward in enriching the strategic approach to collective action with a crucial component of movement actors' agency.

What has also emerged clearly from the analysis, although it needs further reflection, is the ambiguous role of the emergency temporality that characterizes climate justice actors. Far from determining some strategic choices or from fostering some over others, the same rhetoric of emergency is called upon to justify very different strategic pathways to political influence, pushing actors to walk on the narrow path between radicalism and pragmatism.

Further research is needed on the dynamics of theories of change. On the one hand, we have used an analytical framework that, while being firmly rooted in social movement theory, was primarily developed inductively, through the analysis of our case. The extent to which it applies to other cases and to the transnational level of climate mobilization needs to be tested elsewhere. Furthermore, we have not delved into the internal structure of theories of change: do some factors within them tend to be generally less relevant, in shaping the way actors address strategic dilemmas, than others, or is this process always contextual? Finally, we are aware of the character of 'snapshot' that defines the analysis conducted in this article, analysing theories of change in the *hic et nunc* in which they are described to us by activists. Additional investigation should address where theories of change come from, their relationship with ideology and how they change in time. Our analysis has already pointed out how some collective actors have clearly codified and explicit theories of change, while other actors' theorizations tend to be more implicit and informal, based on different organizational histories of the collective actors. More work may show us the ways in which theories of change are produced within collective actors, the eventual reliance on external literature, the processes through which activists are socialized to theories and through which theories are amended or completely discarded, based on empirical assessment of their lack of efficacy or theoretical innovation. This is particularly important given the fact that the climate movement has been profoundly shaped by youth participation, especially within the actors we have analysed in this work. Early political socialization implies quick learning processes: does this translate into a rapid turnover of theories of change? Research has pointed out the role of youth participation as a politicising agent (Paschou 2022), the socializing effect of youth political participation (Passy and Monsch 2018), and the biographical consequences of early engagement in protest (Giugni 2004; Giugni and Grasso 2016): further research is needed to make sense of the extent to which generational factors also shape the development of theories of change.

Notes

1. These actors have been chosen, as the methods section will illustrate, because of their empirically measured relevance in Italian climate protest. Nevertheless, as we have stated above, the fact that they are part of the same wave of mobilisation, which has already been recognised by the literature as characterised by the tendency to mainly address the state through protest action, makes the analysis particularly interesting, allowing us to investigate the nuances within the shared climate justice framework. This, of course, does not imply that the possible theories of change within the climate movement are those examined in the article, nor that our framework applies also within the limited protest-oriented and state-addressing sample we analyse.
2. Social movement theories have long focused on movements proposing claims to the state (Tilly 1978; Johnston 2013), developing strategies based on the state's perceived responsiveness (Kriesi et al. 1995; Kitschelt 1986; Meyer 2004) and making strategic choices based on the state's responses (della Porta 1995; della Porta and Tarrow 1986). Research on prefigurative politics (Yates 2015; Yates and de Moor 2022; Yumukov 2025) and direct social action (Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Bosi and Zamponi 2020) has broadened the view to include strategies that are not based on demanding something from the state. .
3. The literature on strategies and tactics (Doherty and Hayes 2018; Jasper, Moran, and Tramontano 2015; Smithey 2009) comes to mind when discussing 'what is to done', together with the

rare examples of studies examining repertoire change (Bosi 2006; Portos 2019; Zamponi, Ferro, and Cugnata 2023). .

4. The role of bystanders and public opinion in mobilisation processes (Gamson 2004; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Valentim 2021) is a crucial component of the social movement literature.
5. Recruitment strategies have been studied both in their micro component (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Fernandez and McAdam 1988) and within the study of strategic dilemmas (Jasper 2006).
6. The role of utopias in shaping collective action processes has been rarely addressed in the literature, with a few exceptions (Bossy 2011; Crossley 1999). Recent discussion on the climate movement (Friberg 2022; Cassegård and Thörn 2018) has sparked more interest towards contributions coming from social science at large on the topic (Jameson 2007; Eskelinen, Lakkala, and Laasko 2021).
7. Studies of revolution have often reflected on the definition of radical transformative change (Skocpol 1994; Goldstone 2001; 2023; Sewell 1990; Tilly 1994), though this topic has not been systematically explored regarding collective action at large.
8. Notions of mobilisation rhythm have been increasingly used in the study of social movements (Tarrow 1996; Merrill and Lindgren 2020; della Porta 2018) as part of a broader interest towards events (Sewell 1996; della Porta 2008; Bosi and Davis 2017) and temporalities (McAdam and Sewell 2001; Gillan and Edwards 2020).
9. This relates to what we know about the relevance of collective efficacy (Klandermans 1984; 2022; Snow and Oliver 1995; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; Landmann and Rohmann 2020), i.e. the need for a reasonable expectation of success based on previous experience in order to motivate someone to action.

Disclosure statement

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Interviews

FFF1. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on June 6th, 2020.
FFF2. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on March 22nd, 2021.
FFF3. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on March 23rd, 2021.
FFF4. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on March 25th, 2021.
FFF5. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on March 26th, 2021.
FFF6. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on April 10th, 2021.
FFF7. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on April 12th, 2021.
FFF8. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on April 13th, 2021.
FFF9. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on April 15th, 2021.
FFFI10. Interview with Fridays for Future Italia activist, conducted online on May 8th, 2021.
XR1. Interview with Extinction Rebellion Italia activist, conducted online on April 8th, 2021.
XR2. Interview with Extinction Rebellion Italia activist, conducted in person in Turin on February 2nd, 2025.
UG1. Interview with Ultima Generazione activists, conducted in person in Florence on December 2nd, 2023.
UG2. Interview with Ultima Generazione activists, conducted in person in Rome on December 11th, 2023.