

OpenLearn Mini-documentary

The language of protest

Clive Russell, Feyzi Ismail, Gary Younge, Laura Frandsen, Clare Farrell, Philip Sargeant, Miles Glyn, Mariam Aboelezz:

CLIVE RUSSELL: I've always been interested in changing the world effectively. And also I have two young children. You know, when I look at them, I think, well, [BLEEP] If I don't do something, then I'm massively letting you down.

GARY YOUNGE: Unless there is some break on neoliberal globalization, which is making the poor poorer and the wealthy wealthier, we'll see increasingly clashes.

FEYZI ISMAIL: People are seeing that these are global problems, and so they want to be part of something that is an alternative.

[CHANTING "POWER"]

LAURA FRANDSEN: I recently graduated my master's in womenswear fashion from Royal College of Art. Through those studies I kind of started to become more aware of the climate emergency and it became quite clear to me that changing the fashion industry is-- essentially is a waste of time when the fashion industry is within a system that is broken.

And it became more clear that system change is what we need. And then I heard about Extinction Rebellion, the Fashion Week protest they did. These guys are incredible. And I'm studying fashion, but right now I'm absolutely certain that I'd rather be in on that side of the building.

CLARE FARRELL: For me, it's a real moment of reckoning for an industry which fears cultural irrelevance because if we went and did a mock funeral outside a fossil fuel conference, they'd go, ha ha, go home now. We don't care about you. We're much bigger and stronger than you. But the fashion industry are fearful of the changing culture in a way which I think presents a unique opportunity to deal with a very, very polluting and toxic industry.

SPEAKER 1: (SINGING) This is an emergency.

LAURA FRANDSEN: And then we have the Cancel London Fashion Week campaign to get the British Fashion Council to cancel London Fashion Week in its current system and instead use that platform of influential power they have to educate people about the crisis to tell the truth.

[CHANTING]

[SINGING]

FEYZI ISMAIL: I think people are turning more to protest because of, on the one hand, the unbearable living conditions despite the fact that people are in work in many cases not able to make ends meet. The other, I think, is a combination of fear and anxiety about the future over climate change, war, economic crisis.

GARY YOUNGE: What this spike in social protest shows us, electoral politics is failing to cohere some of the kind of bigger cries for help, change, reform that the old parties aren't cutting it.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: One of the most fundamental things about protests and demonstrations is that people are trying to find ways of getting their voice heard. Being able to put forward a political message without the backing of other political institutional forms.

MARIAM ABOELEZZ: Language can be a very effective way. Can be used to communicate the messages of the protesters but can also provide a very valuable window on the value systems, the cultural settings, the wider context in which the protest movement is taking place.

GARY YOUNGE: When it comes to using the language, I think social protest is becoming increasingly blunt, which I think is different to being crude.

SPEAKER 2: Furthermore, we call on all rebels to come out and continue the rebellion.

GARY YOUNGE: In most of these cases, you get something simple, repeatable, memetic that can be taken and used and applied sometimes across oceans. Me Too pretty much works anywhere. Black Lives Matter works in most places where there Black people. But even where there aren't Black people, there are people who are stigmatized and brutalized.

[CHANTING]

SPEAKER 3: When do we want it?

CROWD: Now!

SPEAKER 3: What do we want?

CLARE FARRELL: So Extinction Rebellion was born out of a group of activists called Rising Up, which was a decentralized kind of network across the UK of people interested in testing out tactics of civil disobedience and non-violent direct action. The arts factory, I guess it was born out of the idea that you need to produce stuff to serve the movement.

MILES GLYN: She doesn't wear anything. She needs a bit of help on there.

CLIVE RUSSELL: So at the heart of the design that we created was this idea that it could be expanded by other people.

MILES GLYN: And then they'll get used and we'll get feedback on what makes people happier. But the big ones are really good for tying to trees. But--

SPEAKER 4: Yes.

MILES GLYN: And like, I mean, the idea was that one person could like unfold it. We're printing these for the-- Fashion Action are going into action on Saturday. I mean, everything

we do has a certain look and a feel at the moment. I mean, it just started by me making these things.

Like the advantage is I make a thing and I can print with it on banners and-- or flags or on people's clothing. Fantastic. That's the best one yet. And then from the same object we get like a very simple black and white image which then goes to the graphic designers. And they work really well on the web as well.

SPEAKER 5: We're printing symbol flags for an action on Saturday. They have a specific color palette. And then we do a little shuffle. And we have very strict consent rules when we're on the block.

MILES GLYN: It's about mass producing but it is still handmade and it's-- and it's about working collectively together. I think that's--

SPEAKER 5: Yeah, that's the most important thing is that we do it together, a community of artists, so that we have lots of different skills when we're in the factory we just hone down into sewing and printing.

LAURA FRANDSEN: I think in a time of crisis and a time of emergency, and we've kind of seen that throughout history as well, is that creativity is more important than ever. We have really clear set of colors that we use. We're always using the same type font. We're always using the same symbols. But I also think there is something to the language that we're using that is quite clear and quite bold but also quite honest. So if the situation is [BLEEP] we say it's [BLEEP] because that's the way it is.

CLARE FARRELL: When we set out, there was like no one else talking like that. You know when we made that banner that said "Climate Change, We're [BLEEP]" and hung it over the side of the Westminster Bridge, it was really like an experiment with language for us because nobody would say it.

It's Like, OK, well everyone says it in the boardroom at Greenpeace but they don't [BLEEP] write it in their newsletter do they? ~ going on, you know? And i had meetings with environmentalists who were like, we know that our organization is engaged in a strategy of managed defeat. Well, I'm sure their membership don't know that they say that, right, over lunch.

LAURA FRANDSEN: Idea with the placards is to have coherent visual of the protest but also to make them in a very DIY approach so people can actually just replicate it and do it at home but still contribute to that coherent visual aspect.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHILIP SEARGEANT: The idea of intertextuality is often used very creatively. You appropriate the language of someone else and put it to new use for yourself. Extinction Rebellion's Fashion Action group took some very almost cliched slogans from the fashion world and then put a spin on them for their own purposes.

LAURA FRANDSEN: The Green is the New Black is a classic example that people are bringing their own contribution, and that is something we see quite often because it's such a fashion language.

CLARE FARRELL: So a lot of the messaging I think at the beginning was focused on being this very big container. And what's important about doing it that way is that then people can put their smaller messages inside and people can bring more nuanced points of view.

CLIVE RUSSELL: So take something like rebel and make it a positive thing. Then that actually has a massive psychological impact on people because, you know, you're saying it's good to rebel. And in fact, you can rebel for life. Rebelling for life is a really, really good thing because actually we all need life. And so you're taking something that's considered negative by the mainstream culture and making it a positive.

CLARE FARRELL: And again, that's why I think people try to make things very visual, very real, and keep the words fairly concise and fairly simple.

[DRUMMING]

MARIAM ABOELEZZ: Very difficult to define what a successful protest placard would look like. I would say, well, it has to be one that draws your attention. And it has to be one that brings the message across effectively. It has to be striking. Remember that in any protest landscape there will be myriads of people carrying protest signs, all of them competing for attention. All of them want to be captured by, well, people's eyes and camera lenses.

GARY YOUNGE: I think protest has changed a lot over the last decade or so. And the primary thing that has changed it-- not the only thing-- is new technology. That new technology has kind of caffeinated the nature of protest and kind of a virtual presence which can be both huge and elusive. They exist as hashtags. They key into something real. They mobilize sometimes millions of people. But they can disappear as quickly as they appear.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Social media has changed the sort of participatory aspect of demonstration. And that's definitely had an impact on the type of placards people are making. Almost a celebration of this homegrown creativity expressed through placards. The fact that people will take photograph of it, the photograph then will spread online, might get picked up by a newspaper.

FEYZI ISMAIL: In some ways, I think, with the internationalization of protest and the globalization of protest, I think English is increasingly being used. But if you look at, for example, the Arab world, I think most slogans are still in local languages. Most slogans are appealing to governments. Most slogans are appealing to other citizens. But of course, you are seeing through social media the increasing use of English.

GARY YOUNGE: I don't think the English can be considered an international language of protest. I mean, I do think that it is a global language so lots of people use it. I doubt the gilets jaunes are demonstrating in English.

CLIVE RUSSELL: And there's a great example in Holland. They realize that's a massive mistake because when they did their first action in Holland, which was something to do with

the Dutch royal family-- they have some sort of festival in Amsterdam at certain point. And a load of them jumped in the canal basically to disrupt this ceremony. And they got accused by the local press of being foreign students because all of the messaging was in English. So they quickly realized that mistake, and obviously everything they've done since has been in Dutch.

CLARE FARRELL: So I think when we set out, you might know that we used to say we shift the Overton window firstly on the language that we use to describe the situation that we're in but also on the impression of what a responsible response looks like. What's an appropriate thing to do in a moment like this? And arguably, I think we've done that quite well. The emergency bells are ringing through the mainstream media now and they didn't really seem like they were before.

CLIVE RUSSELL: Hopefully we've changed people-- the way people refer to climate change to something where we begin to refer to it as climate crisis rather than climate change.

[CHANTING "I, EXTINCTION REBELLION"]

LAURA FRANSEN: But I think by keep repeating our name, by keep repeating who Extinction Rebellion is and keep repeating that we are in a mass extinction event, it's going to start to resonate with people. Maybe not now. Maybe not in the moment. But it's going to start to-- you know, it's planting seeds in a way and make sure that we keep watering them.

SPEAKER 5: (SINGING) And we are singing. Singing for our lives.

GARY YOUNGE: And the reality is that to fight gives no guarantee of success. But not to fight is guaranteed failure.

SPEAKER 5: (SINGING) And we are singing. Singing for our lives.