What does it mean to be a radical flank?
Practitioner perspectives from within Just Stop Oil

“The great human error is to reason in place of finding out.” – Simone Weil

Abstract

While radical flank theory comes from Herbert Haines’ historical account of the civil rights movement, much of the recent literature uses quantitative surveys and controlled experiments to try and measure radical flank effects. This focus on measuring impact means there is little consensus around how the concept should be defined. This study adopts a more subjective, qualitative methodology, seeking to understand how practitioners inspired by radical flank theory understand their role. Drawing on interviews with activists in Just Stop Oil – a group who have explicitly engaged with radical flank literature – it is argued that two distinct understandings of the radical flank effect exist. The first informed Just Stop Oil’s initial infrastructure-focused strategy, while the second informed a subsequent shift towards public disruption. The way these two strategies related to broader internal debates about what it means to be engaged in radical activism are brought together using the Gramscian concepts of autonomous self-activity and the struggle for consent. These two historical phases in Gramsci’s theory are used to describe both Just Stop Oil’s strategic transition, as well as the way attitudes to movement culture, hierarchy, alliance building, and knowledge production have changed over the same period. For the existing positivist literature on radical flank theory, it is argued that this shows more work needs to be done on defining the radical flank before its effects can be measured.

Introduction

In early 2022, while attending meetings at my local Extinction Rebellion (XR) chapter, I noticed younger members leaving to join a group called Just Stop Oil (JSO). The group’s demand, that the British government stop new licenses for oil and gas projects, seemed moderate as it had already been voiced by some opposition parties. However, I was intrigued, both by the sense of energy that emanated from this new group, as well as by the fact that discussions of their tactics often included reference to the controversial book: How to Blow-up a Pipeline by Andreas Malm. While Malm’s moral argument in favour of property damage is relatively popular among climate activists, what was unique about JSO,

1 Weil. 1987 p63
2 Hume & Thomas, Financial Times. 2021
was their endorsement of his strategic argument. Malm argues that, while the success of the 20th century’s most notable social movements is often attributed to the power of non-violence, this interpretation of history erases the role of more radical groups. However, despite growing evidence that ‘radical flank effects’ are impactful, there is a lack of definitional consensus around what makes a group ‘radical’. This project argues that two different understandings of “radical flank theory” exist within JSO, which influence two distinct visions of what it means to be a radical flank. While the radical flank effect is a causal mechanism and most closely relates to ideas about strategy, I argue that this debate has ramifications for the group’s attitude to culture, hierarchy, alliance building and even knowledge production.

Malm’s revisionist historical argument takes inspiration from social movement theorists such as Herbert Haines and Devashree Gupta, who argue in favour of radical flank theory. At the core of this literature is the idea that the presence of more radical groups on the fringe of a movement can make moderate groups or demands appear more reasonable. Haines argues that, in the civil rights movement, the militancy of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers was a crucial factor in pushing the Kenedy and Johnson administrations to negotiate with more moderate civil rights leaders and make concessions on their long-standing demands. While different theorists have identified different causal mechanisms to explain radical flank effects, it is generally acknowledged that the groups which academics categorise amongst the radical fringe rarely understand their own actions in these terms. The idea that the actions of the Black Panthers were useful to the SCLC is a position that was never endorsed by either group and more often than not, the militancy associated with the radical fringe was denounced by moderates as counter-productive. A similarly critical relationship existed between the suffragist movement and the more militant suffragettes, despite scholars like Malm describing how their divergent tactics inadvertently contributed to an effective strategy. This gap between the way activists understand their social role, and the way theorists analyse the actions of those activists, is not just a feature of radical flank theory, but of social movement theory more broadly. Lawrence Cox has criticised social movement scholars for being overly insular and failing to “talk between” the often-separated worlds of academia and activism – a trend which, he claims, makes many of the debates within social movement theory irrelevant to the activity of activists themselves.
JSO appeared to be a unique case because it bucked this trend. The more involved I became, the more it became clear that JSO supporters did largely understand their actions as the actions of a radical flank, and often explained their strategy in terms of the various causal mechanisms outlined by scholars like Haines, Gupta and Malm.11 What made the case of JSO more intriguing was the level of tactical experimentation the group practiced. In the spring of 2022, actions focused largely on blockading oil terminals and supply depots in the South of England.12 Yet even at this time, some supporters were also engaging in more radical acts of sabotage, by taking hammers to petrol pumps around London, as well as invading the pitch of Premier League football games.13 As 2022 came to a close JSO began to embrace a new tactical repertoire which focused on disrupting traffic in London through ‘slow marching’ rather than targeting fossil fuel infrastructure itself.14 The group also doubled-down on what they called ‘cultural actions’, which focus on attracting media attention; winning global coverage in October when they threw tomato soup over van Gogh’s Sunflowers.15 The change in JSO’s tactical repertoire, combined with the impression that many supporters of the group had actively engaged with literature on radical flank theory posed questions about why this shift had taken place, and whether supporters of the group continued to understand their role in terms of a radical fringe. While most literature on radical flank theory focuses on the effects of fringe groups, the uniqueness of JSO’s case presented an opportunity to interrogate the nature of the radical flank itself – helping to bridge the gap between activism and academia in the process.

In May and June of 2023, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven supporters of JSO, as well as a long-form questionnaire with one supporter who was serving a prison sentence due to actions they had taken with the group. These interviews attempted to capture how JSO supporters understood their role as members of a radical flank. I found that, while supporters almost always used radical flank theory to explain aspects of JSO’s strategy, two distinct understandings of how the mechanism works, existed within the group. One way of understanding the group’s role emphasised their ability to gain leverage over the government directly and was associated with the group’s early actions targeting infrastructure. This leverage-based strategy was often contrasted with the group’s relatively moderate demands, as it was thought that it would be easier for the government to make concessions than to continue to put up with disruption. The second understanding tended to draw on concepts like the Overton window, to argue that JSO’s radical actions played a role in changing social norms around climate.16 This understanding emphasised the way the spectacle of radical activism prompted media debate about climate policy and was associated with the group’s tactical shift towards public disruption.

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11 Activists in JSO refer to themselves as supporters rather than members: appendix two.
12 Gayle, The Guardian. 2022a; BBC News. 2022
13 Pandey, BBC. 2022
14 Just Stop Oil press release. 2023
15 Gayle, The Guardian. 2022b
16 Jachowski et al. 2023
While these different interpretations of how radical flank effects worked were not always seen as contradictory by participants, a thematic analysis of the interviews showed that these distinct understandings were reflective of broader questions about what it means to be engaged in radical activism. This suggests that attempts to define radical flanks may need to draw on other theoretical ideas to categorise groups and measure the relative success of their different strategic approaches. Antonio Gramsci’s discussions of the differences between movements defined by popular self-activity, versus movements engaged in a struggle for consent, are used to illustrate this possibility. While other conceptual frameworks could be applied just as easily, Gramsci was chosen as his theory derives from the subjective experience of engaging in the practice of activism, which is a methodological perspective shared by this study.

**Literature review**

Haines’ argument that radical flanks create room for moderates to succeed is not the only way the concept has been defined. Even within Haines’ account of the civil rights movement, it is acknowledged that groups like the SCLC and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) had a “radicalising” effect on other groups in the movement. This is to say that the perceived radicality of these groups encouraged more moderate groups to adopt new tactics and engage in direct action campaigns alongside traditional legal strategies. It is only later in Haines’ historical account when militant groups like RAM (Revolutionary Action Movement), and the Black Panthers emerged further along the spectrum of radicality, does the causal mechanism underpinning the theory change. At this stage, the radical flank is said to function in the way Haines initially laid out, by scaring big business and politicians into engaging with more moderate groups. Crucially, Haines does not distinguish between the use of radical tactics and the voicing of radical demands when attempting to define the radical flank. It is often assumed that a radical platform, calling for things like independence and separatism, will go hand in hand with militancy or the use of disruptive tactics.

The discrepancy between JSO’s radical actions and moderate demand shows that this is not always true, and accounts of other environmentalist and animal rights groups show a similar trend. For instance, Rune Ellefsen shows how militant factions within SHAC (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty) used sabotage to achieve the limited objective of shutting down a single private laboratory. More recent attempts to measure the impacts of radical flanks, therefore opt to define radicality through the tactical

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17 Chalcraft. 2023 Ch6.1
18 Gramsci. 1957 p154
19 Haines. 1989 pp41-55
20 Haines. 1989 pp5-8
21 Haines. 1989 pp71-76
22 Haines. 1989; Gupta 2013
23 Ellefse. 2018 p112-118
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toire a group uses. Ellefsen uses SHAC as a case study to show how the contrast between the group’s limited demand and radical tactics facilitated short-term success, as investors and policy makers were eager to resolve the conflict. However, by measuring the impact of radical factions within SHAC across different ‘arenas of contention’, Ellefsen argues that the use of radical tactics discredited the group and the broader animal rights movement in the long-term, as the strategy failed to build a base of public support. 24 Recent studies by Brent Simpson et al, as well as Jordi Munoz and Eva Anduiza also define the radical flank through its tactics. Simpson using a controlled experimental method to gauge reactions to different forms of violent activism, while Munoz and Anduiza interviewed residents after rioting in their area.25 Similarly, James Ozden adopts a tactically focused definition in his studies of the public reaction to JSO actions such as the blocking of the M25.26 Nonetheless, despite some consensus that the radical flank should be defined through its tactical repertoire, there is still disagreement on which tactics make a group radical. Ozden for instance, focuses on JSO actions which gained large amounts of media attention, rather than understanding radicality through violence like Simpson and Munoz.27 Nonetheless, despite starting with differing definitions, both Ozden and Simpson provide evidence for a positive radical flank effect – providing justification for JSO’s approach, but little definitional clarity which activists could learn from when planning future actions.

Todd Schifeling and Andrew Hoffman offer yet another definition, ignoring the tactics entirely, and using opinion polls to argue that radical discourses reframe and expand the scope of political debate.28 The climate advocacy group 350.org and prominent environmentalist Bill Mckibben are identified as members of the radical flank because of their willingness to endorse radical positions such as the closure of active coal and gas power plants.29 This discursive definition mirrors discussions of the Overton window within JSO, implying that the radical flank is not fixed, but constructed relative to an existing discourse; drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of a “field of struggles” to argue that asserting new positions entails the displacement of the whole field of debate.30 This idea that the radical flank is constructed, and therefore relative to its social context, is relevant to tactical definitions as well as discursive definitions like this one. Haines for instance, explicitly acknowledges that civil rights groups which were perceived as radical in the 1950s came to be seen as moderate in the 1960s.31 Similarly, Simpson acknowledges that treating moderate groups as unchanging independent variables is problematic because such groups often change and respond to the radical flank.32

24 Ellefsen. 2018 p124; Polletta & Kretschmer. 2015 pp35-41
25 Simpson et al. 2022; Munoz & Anduiza. 2019
26 Ostarek. 2022 pp1-3
27 Simpson et al. 2022 p3; Munoz & Anduiza. 2019; Ozden & Ostarek. 2022
28 Schifeling & Hoffman. 2019 pp213-216
29 ibid
30 Bourdieu & Wacquant. 1992
31 Haines, 1989 pp42-71
32 Simpson et al. 2022 p2
If, as this suggests, the radical flank is a relative concept, its definition will depend on how specific movements are constructed. Alain Touraine argues that developing such an understanding requires an analysis of the concrete social relations which exist within a movement.\textsuperscript{33} Understanding what makes a group radical, therefore, requires more than an analysis of that group’s position or effect on society. For Touraine, understanding social movements means interrogating the decisions, relationships and histories of people in the movement itself.\textsuperscript{34} This contrasts with the positivist approaches of Schifeling, Simpson and Ozden, which all seek to measure the effects of a movement, rather than understand the movement itself.\textsuperscript{35} This search for “scientific certainty”, Touraine says, leaves little space for analysing what is contingent, meaning the role of human agency is often ignored as it is considered too idiosyncratic to be incorporated into serious theory.\textsuperscript{36} This does not mean I adopt a pluralist perspective in which strategy is chosen freely as Gene Sharp and JSO co-founder Roger Hallam have implied.\textsuperscript{37} As Frances Piven and Richard Cloward point out, people experience oppression in a concrete setting, meaning that their response will be partially determined by that setting.\textsuperscript{38} By interviewing activists within JSO, I attempt to understand the radical flank, not as a set of abstract tactical choices which are unconstrained by societal context, and equally, not as a fixed entity to be understood through the way it affects the rest of society. With Touraine, I seek to understand the ontology of the radical flank by capturing the experiences and choices of activists from the bottom-up.

Like Touraine, Gramsci argues that it is dishonest to treat society as if it were a scientifically observable natural object, as this perspective cannot acknowledge the role of the active, enquiring subject who is changed by the research process.\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, to properly engage with questions about what it means to be a radical flank, it is necessary to speak \textit{with}, rather than \textit{for} JSO, as understanding the passion which underpins their choices requires a shared interest in bringing about change. As Gramsci writes “All science is tied to the needs, the life, the activity of man.”\textsuperscript{40} David Graeber’s ethnographic account of global justice movements in the 1990s and 2000s speaks from a similarly engaged perspective.\textsuperscript{41} The use of participant observation both gives insight into the practices and decisions activists engage with, as well as an understanding of what it means to be invested in a movement. Kathleen Blee also uses a mixture of participant observation and semi-structured interviews to analyse the emergence of new norms within movements, and in both Graeber and Blee’s work, understandings of tactical decisions are deeply informed by the experience of being involved in transformative activity.\textsuperscript{42} This is because,
as John Chalcraft points out, activists are constantly running real-world experiments.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, from a Gramscian perspective, social movements should not be seen as objects to be analysed, but knowledge-producers in their own right.\textsuperscript{44} For Gramsci, the coherence of theory does not come from objective “principled deduction”, but from contextually specific observations about the experiments of concrete movements.\textsuperscript{45} The different ways JSO members understand what it means to be a radical flank should therefore be seen as emerging from this process of dialectical experimentation.

**Methodology**

Before data collection began the aim of this study was to discover whether JSO members continued to understand themselves as part of a radical flank, and if so, what this meant given recent changes to their approach. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they are not only able to collect and report facts, but also access subjective understandings of institutions, practices, and identities.\textsuperscript{46} Embracing this subjectivity was crucial to go beyond positivist approaches to movement research which provide little consensus on the radical flank’s definition. Qualitative interviews were also deemed to be preferable to surveys as they are exploratory in nature and allow for the introduction of new ideas during the research process.\textsuperscript{47} This was important as there was little existing literature exploring radical flank theory from this methodological perspective. In particular, the idea that different interpretations of radical flank theory were reflective of a deeper cultural debate spurred on by concerns about mental health, was discussed more as the study progressed. Interviews were also deemed to be preferable to a focus group format, both to preserve the anonymity of participants and to create an environment where they felt comfortable criticising aspects of the movement.\textsuperscript{48} The negative media portrayal of the group made this especially important as interviewees were guarded initially, only straying away from what was referred to as the “party line” once trust was established.\textsuperscript{49} The selection criteria required all interviewees to have participated in JSO. This generally meant participants had engaged in direct action with the group, although a couple of interviewees participated through support or organisational roles.

The majority of the 12 participants were recruited via the snowball method, which is to say they were recommended by previous interviewees. To avoid being recommended participants who shared the same views, I started three separate ‘snowballs’ using supporters of the group I was acquainted with as entry points.\textsuperscript{50} Not all recommended participants were approached either as I chose participants

\textsuperscript{43} Chalcraft. 2017
\textsuperscript{44} Cox & Nilsen. 2014 p3
\textsuperscript{45} Buci-Glucksman. 1978 p8
\textsuperscript{46} Lamont & Swidler. 2014 p159
\textsuperscript{47} Blee & Taylor, 2002 pp97-109
\textsuperscript{48} Crossley. 2002 pp1478-1480; Knott et al. 2022 p4
\textsuperscript{49} Appendix two
\textsuperscript{50} Fuji. 2017 p40
deliberately for their specific experiences participating in JSO, rather than to build a random sample that was representative of any larger population.\textsuperscript{51} The study, therefore, includes interviews with supporters with varying levels of involvement and commitment, with some participants being involved in high-profile actions and the initial founding of the group, while others occupied a more peripheral role and had even left JSO in some cases. The decision to include the participant in prison for their actions with JSO was motivated by this desire to hear a range of perspectives. While I initially attempted to set up an interview, the conditions of the sentence meant the interview was replaced with an equivalent long-form questionnaire.

The anonymity of participants was my foremost ethical concern during data collection. I knew I wanted to ask activists, who were potentially midway through legal proceedings, about the actions they were being prosecuted for, meaning it was likely participants would incriminate themselves. Discussions of more radical tactics and the possibility that interviewees would endorse more extreme positions than JSO’s current strategy made this especially important, as such information could affect their sentences or damage the reputation of participants among their peers. It was made clear that participants would be protected through blanket anonymity and that no personal information would be collected. If specific information about participation in a unique public protest or highly specific organisational role was disclosed, this information was generalised to describe broader genres of action or role. These precautions were important also for putting participant’s minds at ease, as JSO were operating under the knowledge that they were being surveilled, and in some cases infiltrated, by the British Police.\textsuperscript{52}

When asking questions about people’s experiences with arrest, or other emotionally charged topics, I tried to always maintain a reflexive interview style which was attentive to the participant’s well-being.\textsuperscript{53} The interviews therefore began with a more general discussion of the participants past relationships with activism and eventual journey into JSO, which was a useful way to build trust, and a way to ease into emotive topics more naturally. I also made it clear that I was personally supportive of JSO’s mission, and that I was attempting to write something which could be useful for their cause. Presenting myself as a supporter was partially inspired by Lee Anne Fuji’s relational approach to interviewing, which argues that adopting an insider status makes interviewees more likely to talk in greater detail as they can assume a base-level of knowledge.\textsuperscript{54} My positionality as white, university educated, and in my twenties also made it easier to be perceived as an insider because this matches the background of many members of JSO.\textsuperscript{55} Aside from being practically helpful, the decision to frame the research as supportive of the climate movement was epistemologically important. Embracing the subjectivity and passion of

\textsuperscript{51} Blee & Taylor. 2002 p94
\textsuperscript{52} Blee & Vining. 2010 pp43-50
\textsuperscript{53} Guillemin & Gillam. 2004 pp264-266
\textsuperscript{54} Fuji. 2017 pp3-7
\textsuperscript{55} Appendix two.
JSO members was crucial for developing an understanding of what it means to be a radical flank which went beyond conventional positivist definitions. It would therefore have been a mistake to write from a disinterested perspective, which sees the success of a movement as largely irrelevant to intellectual progress.\textsuperscript{56} This is reflective of a broader methodological focus which, in seeking to “speak between” the worlds of academia and activism, attempts to formalise the practical knowledge which is generated by engaging in activism.\textsuperscript{57}

Once all interviews were complete, I began coding the transcripts according to the method of Jennifer Attride-Sterling.\textsuperscript{58} Codes are conceptual labels that closely mirror the content of the text they emerge from. These are then organised and reorganised until a coherent structure of themes and organising themes emerges to answer the research question. This was a useful method as it embraces the idea that multiple understandings of an experience or practice can exist simultaneously without being reconciled or even identified as directly contradictory.\textsuperscript{59} Eventually, two main organising themes were identified which describe the two ways participants understood what it means to be a radical flank. These emerged from the observation that as JSO’s strategy changed, the way radical flank theory was understood changed with it. While participants never used Gramscian language to describe their experiences, I found that many differences in understanding mirrored differences between the two Gramscian concepts of popular self-activity, and the struggle for consent.\textsuperscript{60} Branching off from these organising themes are subthemes which reflect the way the two understandings of radical flank theory inform other debates around culture, hierarchy, alliance building, and knowledge production. This structure emerged after numerous attempts to organise the codes in different ways and is visualised as a concept map in appendix one. While different theoretical frameworks could be used to describe the debates within JSO, Gramsci’s ideas were not imposed from the top down but emerged from an engaged, subjective analysis of the transcripts themselves. A perspective that, as Cox argues, generates theory which is useful to activists as well as academics.\textsuperscript{61}

**Findings**

For Gramsci popular self-activity and the struggle for consent are both historical stages which social movements go through as they grow and develop.\textsuperscript{62} Movements defined by popular self-activity are primarily concerned with establishing their independence from conventional politics, growing quickly

\textsuperscript{56} Buci-Glucksman. 1978 pp8-10
\textsuperscript{57} Cox. 2014 p957
\textsuperscript{58} Attride-Sterling, 2001
\textsuperscript{59} Attride-Sterling, 2001 p387
\textsuperscript{60} Chalcraft. 2023 ch5-6
\textsuperscript{61} Cox & Nilsen. 2014 pp6-9
\textsuperscript{62} Gramsci. 1978 p264
in multiple directions at once, and wielding disruptive capacity as leverage.\textsuperscript{63} In this stage, Gramsci says, movements establish or re-establish a counter-hegemonic subaltern identity.\textsuperscript{64} For this reason, such movements are often associated with young people; adopting a confrontational, countercultural, and sometimes militant identity to distance themselves from existing politics.\textsuperscript{65} However, once an authentic subaltern political identity has been established Gramsci argues that social movements must go on to engage in a struggle for consent if they are to achieve anything more than small incremental concessions from the state.\textsuperscript{66} This is to say that movements must seek public support for their ideas, begin to engage with established groups, form alliances, and even engage in formal political negotiations.\textsuperscript{67} As Gramsci is a dialectical thinker, the search for consent should be seen as a response to popular self-activity; containing many ideas which are antithetical to the spirit of self-activity, but which are, as a result, deeply informed by the experiences of engaging in that kind of activism.\textsuperscript{68} By framing the two understandings JSO activists have of radical flank theory in this way, I present the group as existing between the two historical phases. The tension between these two approaches is first described via the different ideas about strategy, tactics, and the generation of spectacle which emerged from the interviews.

**Tactics, strategy, and spectacle**

Understanding why JSO’s tactical repertoire changed between the summer and the autumn of 2022 partially motivated this research. While the group began with a campaign of road blocking, trespass, and sabotage to disrupt fossil fuel infrastructure, it soon shifted to a strategy of more public disruption.\textsuperscript{69} In the interviews, participants were asked to explain how they understood this tactical shift and the reasoning behind it. The initial infrastructure-based approach was sometimes explained in terms of the strategic logic of radical flank theory but was often supplemented by more impassioned discussions of the moral and emotional necessity of taking action. For instance, when discussing the recent cinematic adaptation of *How to Blow-up a Pipeline*, one participant spoke about the desire to engage in more ambitious acts of sabotage in psychological, and even existential terms.\textsuperscript{70}

“you know that bit where she's like on her laptop and he's on his laptop and they're like making the decision to act. I've been really feeling like that. I've been feeling really hopeless, and I don't think I'll get to like a mental state of wellness in the last how many years I have on this earth unless I do something like that.”\textsuperscript{71}

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\textsuperscript{63} Sanbonmatsu. 2004 pp21-23; Fonseca, 2016 p179  
\textsuperscript{64} Chalcraft. 2023 Ch5.9  
\textsuperscript{65} Sanbonmatsu, 2004 pp23-27; Graeber, 2009 p259  
\textsuperscript{66} ibid  
\textsuperscript{67} Chalcraft. 2023 Ch6.1  
\textsuperscript{68} Boothman. 2017 p149  
\textsuperscript{69} Appendix two.  
\textsuperscript{70} *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (movie) 2022  
\textsuperscript{71} All indented quotes are from anonymised interviews (06/05/23 - 26/06/23) and are evidenced in appendix two.
The urgency of the climate crisis and the sense of moral obligation that accompanied this anxiety often translated into a rejection of less direct strategies.\(^{72}\) This was partly because participants who supported attacks on infrastructure felt that there was no time left to engage with public opinion. The perception that other groups had failed to have a significant impact was often used to support this claim and justify a strategy which bypasses the need for approval. While XR were seen as uninspiring because they lacked momentum, JSO was described as embodying the “radicalism that XR had lost” through its uncompromising ambition, willingness to take risks and younger demographic.\(^{73}\)

“You’d expect there to be some direct action going on but there was nothing... Oxford XR was like 5 old women. No offense they were doing their best, but just like leafletting or running community stuff.”

The existential anxiety associated with the decision to take direct action was not only explained by the “time-critical” nature of climate change, but also as a response to the moral obligation that climate change places on individuals.\(^{74}\) Participants did not want to be complicit, but more than that, some felt a sense of righteous indignation at the objects that were responsible for the destruction of the planet. As Malm argues, the existential dilemma imposed by climate change was seen as placing a moral obligation on individuals as well as justifying attacks on infrastructure.\(^{75}\) This was how one participant expressed their feelings about sabotaging petrol pumps:

“It was kind of nice to let your anger out on something physical; like an actual external thing of the climate crisis you know? These are the bombs, these are the things that are killing our earth, so I have a right to dismantle it if it’s in my home.”

The blurring of the distinction between JSO as a group engaged in civil disobedience, and the fight against climate change as a war with legitimate military targets, was also a feature of statements in support of an infrastructure-focused strategy.\(^{76}\) As is the case in Gramsci’s description of groups engaged in popular self-activity, justifications of this approach were impassioned, militaristic, and reflective of a desire to enact change without engaging with mainstream politics.\(^{77}\)

This autonomist spirit which underpinned justifications for JSO’s initial strategy was not just an expression of the passions and anxieties of movement members - it had its own strategic logic.\(^{78}\) While these justifications were often discussed in terms of radical flank theory, they rejected the idea that such an approach relied on the attitudes of the public. Instead, it was imagined that change could be made by pressuring the state directly and forcing concessions by using the group’s disruptive capacity as leverage. Radical flank effects were imagined as working through the contrast between JSO’s

\(^{72}\) Schwartz et al. 2022
\(^{73}\) Appendix two.
\(^{74}\) Appendix two.
\(^{75}\) Malm. 2021 pp65-90
\(^{76}\) Scheuerman. 2021 p7
\(^{77}\) Sanbonmatsu. 2004 pp21-23
\(^{78}\) Piven. 2006 pp26-33
provocative tactics and relatively moderate demand. This echoes Ellefsen’s discussion of rogue SHAC members who acted as a radical flank by using violent tactics to force relatively limited concessions from the animal testing industry.79

“It’s the idea of what is called radical flank theory. The idea is that they’ll hate the messenger, but they’ll get the message. So, while people say: ‘oh I don't like this group of people because they take it too far’, they have to acknowledge that the demand is feasible.”

Through this contrast JSO members described a strategy which imagined the group as a kind of vanguard which was able to force concessions from the government and from industry without using public opinion to apply pressure. While the idea of a vanguard is used in Gramscian and Leninist literature to describe an advanced revolutionary guard aiming to seize state apparatus by force, I argue that JSO’s infrastructure-based actions employed a similarly pragmatic strategic logic.80 Civil disobedience was seen as a tool for gaining control over the apparatus of the fossil fuel industry which would give the group enough leverage to force through its demands. In multiple interviews, this strategy was associated with Roger Hallam, who founded JSO and advocates for a leverage-based strategy in his book.81

“Yes [Strategy] has massively changed, it was originally a classic like Roger Hallam idea. Like almost too simplistic, like too good to be true, which was that 12 oil terminals were responsible for 80% of the petroleum supply within the UK. Something like that. So, if we get 3,000 people who are willing to take action, we'll be able to hold those for like three weeks and massively affect the petroleum supply in the UK. So, it's very simple. You put on X number of talks that get X number of people, and that shuts off the fuel supply. I remember even when we were leading up to the action, we got this speech for morale. It was like: alright we can cut off the fuel supply or whatever. Within four hours, the top police commander takes notice. Within 8 hours, it lands on the minister of energy’s desk. Within 12 hours this happens. You know, within 24 hours, there’s a meeting of UK ministers to discuss how to deal with it. And then that basically forces a response from the government.”

This quote describes the initial strategic approach as akin to a kind of non-violent ‘war of manoeuvre’ or frontal assault on the capacities of the state, which, as the tone of scepticism suggests, was eventually seen as naïve.82

The shift towards public-facing disruption was primarily a response to the lack of impact of infrastructure-focused actions. Participants often expressed that, while they did not like

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79 Ellefsen. 2018 p124
80 Chalcraft. 2023 ch6.10
81 Hallam. 2019 p2
82 Salamini. 1981 p128
inconveniencing the public, and preferred targets that were more obviously connected to climate change, the previous approach was ignored by both the media and the government.

“Well with the infrastructure it was brilliant because we shut that shit down. Problem was nobody reported it. Nobody heard about it. It didn't get out there because the media won't cover you if they can't vilify you. We hate having to rely on the media, but right now we need our messages in the heads of as many people as possible and that doesn't happen without the media being used as an amplifier.”

Despite being less popular with the public, ‘cultural actions’ like the soup throwing made JSO visible in a way disrupting infrastructure did not.\textsuperscript{83} The global visibility the group achieved in October 2022 was almost always seen as evidence of the superiority of public-facing actions over the group’s original infrastructure-based approach.\textsuperscript{84} The success of this period was described as the start of a shift from a strategy aimed at overwhelming the state’s capacity to process arrests and cripple the economy, to one which was “media driven”.\textsuperscript{85} This new approach was also described using the language of radical flank theory but, rather than contrasting radical tactics with the group’s moderate demand as Ellefsen does, JSO was contrasted with other, moderate climate groups. This strategy was therefore justified by a Hainesian understanding which argues that radical groups are effective where they create space for moderate groups to operate.\textsuperscript{86}

“I read this study about radical flank theory which found that there was a correlation between JSO actions like blocking the M25, and people going into groups like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. So that kind of shows that this is potentially working.”

This, more conventional understanding of the radical flank effect, reflected a more democratic approach to transformative activity which embraced the role of public opinion rather than direct leverage. In doing so this strategy acknowledges JSOs position in the broader climate movement. Rather than acting autonomously as a kind of vanguard, the radical flank is understood as relying on collaboration with other activists, campaigns, and even political parties.\textsuperscript{87} Interviewees also often drew on the idea of the Overton window to express how radical actions can shift the parameters of debate.

“Because if you've heard about the Overton window like shifting what's publicly possible. JSO are the radical flank and they’ve pissed everyone off. Well not everyone, but they've made the public quite angry. There's been a lot of conversation about them, but it means that local councils can talk about climate policy, the amount of climate denial in the press might go down, and acceptance of activism might go up. So by shifting the Overton window, it looks good for the movement in general.”

\textsuperscript{83} Ozden & Ostarek. 2022
\textsuperscript{84} Appendix two.
\textsuperscript{85} ibid
\textsuperscript{86} Haines. 2013
\textsuperscript{87} Appendix two.
This more discursive understanding of the radical flank echoes Schifeling and Hoffman’s relativistic definition and imagines JSO to be deeply engaged with public opinion. While JSO does not try to win debates on climate policy themselves, it is imagined that by instigating those debates other groups are better positioned to do so. This strategic change echoes Gramsci’s description of the shift from the autonomism of popular self-activity to the more engaged organising associated with movements engaged in struggles for consent.

JSO’s media-driven strategy should not be understood as rejecting all aspects of the initial leveraged-based approach. Many traits associated with the stage of self-activity have been retained as participants still viewed the group as retaining an outsider status, and rejected the idea that success depended on their popularity.

“We don’t need mass support behind our tactics to win. In 1960 Martin Luther King was literally the least popular man in America by votes. Less popular than the biggest criminals of the time. The suffragettes were massively unpopular. And yet it worked because despite the fact they disagreed with the tactics – when people start talking about your tactics, they can’t help but consider the issue too.”

The provocative nature of JSO’s cultural actions and the level of confrontation that is inherent to blockading traffic appears to be antithetical to a strategy which aims to use the media and public opinion to change policy. However, partly inspired by historical movements, the idea that such actions should be polarising or make people “pick a side”, appeared in most interviews. This was both a strategic justification of JSO’s tactics and a normative justification for actions like the soup-throwing which mimicked Mary Richardson’s vandalism of a Valazquez masterpiece at the same gallery in 1914.

Nonetheless, pursuing a strategy aimed at polarising the climate debate was informed by the experiences of JSO supporters and other climate activists as much as it was by historical movements. Confrontation is incorporated into the design of JSO actions because their experience shows that the creation of spectacle is the most effective way of instigating debate and gaining visibility. So, even though public polls suggest people would be more supportive if they did not disrupt ordinary people, interviewees described how such protests fail to spark debate.

“I’ve been told so many fucking times, go to Parliament Square, go to an oil refinery or whatever. I’ve locked myself to an oil tanker for 36 hours. Nothing. I was just at Parliament Square for three days with 60,000 people, nothing happened. But my best friend throws soup on a fucking van Gogh and we're in the news for months.”

88 Schifeling & Hoffman. 2019 pp213-216
89 Chalcraft. 2023 ch6.1
90 Sanbonmatsu. 2004 pp20-23
91 Appendix two.
92 Brooker. 2022
93 Jennings & Saunders. 2019 p2285
JSO’s initial infrastructure-focused strategy, and the more consensual approach of XR, who organised the mass demonstration in Parliament Square, were seen as failing in opposite ways. While a purely infrastructure-focused strategy involves a level of confrontation and spectacle it will not be picked up by the media as protesters are not engaging with the public, yet most strategies focused on public approval tend to lack the necessary drama and confrontation to be seen as newsworthy. As dialectical theory would predict, JSO supporters can be seen as learning from the process of engaging in these antithetical approaches and forming a new strategic synthesis as a result.

“So 50 young people sat on oil tankers for two days, is to me, really exciting. It’s like what we need to be doing basically, but then in the right-wing media, they don’t find that very exciting because there’s no one getting annoyed and no one getting angry. I mean maybe there’s a few drivers, but there’s not this kind of confrontation between public and protesters, and that’s what makes the news.”

If they are to have a voice in the public debate, JSO has learnt that civil disobedience needs to be designed to suit the requirements of the media which seeks to demonise them. As social theorists Stephan Hilgartner and Charles Bosk point out, media organisations write stories with all the structural elements of a good plot, and through experimentation and practice JSO have learnt to incorporate these elements into the design of their actions. Such a focus on visibility rather than leverage also has its own president in the history of revolutionary struggle, with early anarchist movements interpreting the ‘propaganda of the deed’ as a kind of performance, and subsequent anti-colonial movements taking a similar approach. JSO’s latest interpretation of the radical flank, as a group which generates spectacle through confrontation, is derived from a process of learning from both consent-focused and autonomist approaches.

**Culture and hierarchy**

The debates which have driven the evolution of JSO’s strategy are also reflected in the different attitudes to culture and hierarchy which emerged from the interviews. Just as participants spoke about the initial attraction of the early infrastructure-focused actions, many of the interviewees spoke about how the sense of youthful energy, momentum, and militaristic fervour drew them to the group.

“It was a feeling of camaraderie, maybe that’s the word for it. Whereas with XR, you don’t kind of feel like foot soldiers in the same squadron, but you did in Just Stop Oil.”

Among interviewees who mentioned that they lived with other JSO members, the sense of camaraderie was said to be especially important to the group’s resilience and was often associated with the idea that prison and arrest created a “trauma bond” between people. This echoes the research of Gemma

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94 Hilgartner & Bosk. 1988 p65
95 Trotsky. 1911; Porat. 2022 p1087
96 Appendix two.
Edwards, who argues that support for militancy within the suffragist movement depended on how deeply members were embedded in social networks comprising other people in the movement.97 However, a significant number of participants also spoke about the downsides of this uncompromising culture, outlining how the sense that members were morally obligated to participate in arrestable actions was damaging to people’s well-being.

“When you’re always thinking I’m doing this to not be complicit in genocide, even taking one healthy step for yourself, like not doing your fifth action in a row, is like ‘is this my complicity? Is this me being a bystander?’ Because obviously, people in the movement have that kind of mindset where they’ll nag themselves about it, which is usually good. But yeah, it can really drive people a bit too far.”

We see here how the sense of momentum and commitment which attracted many of the participants to JSO sometimes led to feelings of guilt and anxiety. While activism has been described as a “buffer” between mental health problems associated with climate anxiety, some interviewees described how the culture within JSO had an opposite effect.98 One interviewee spoke at length about how the overwhelming scale of the climate crisis led people to take unnecessary personal risks and created a culture of “doom-ism” within the group.99 Others spoke more about how their well-being became subordinated to the sense of moral responsibility which motivated JSO’s early strategy.

“Like I was starting to see friends go to prison, and then I would say my very valid concerns that I thought that’s where we were all heading. But we used to joke in the office that the career trajectory was just prison. Like in another job your career trajectory would be promotion, and in this job, it was prison. I do think that was downplayed a lot and there were a lot of narratives around like, you have to accept that, and you have to be okay with it, and it’s not okay to say I don’t want to go to prison.”

When speaking about how JSO has evolved more recently, participants described the steps being taken to address these problems. The group’s lack of diversity was attributed to the pressure on members to be arrested and has resulted in attempts to make messaging and strategy more intersectional. For instance, multiple participants spoke about early blunders in JSO’s messaging that would no longer be allowed to happen. A spoof video which connected Rishi Sunak’s immigrant heritage to the failures of the government often came up as an example of a cynical attitude to recruitment that was becoming more intersectional.100 However, the broader cultural problem of members feeling pressure to be arrested has been harder to solve and arguably stems from JSO’s strategy.

97 Edwards. 2014 pp65-66
98 Schwartz et al, 2022
99 Appendix two.
100 ibid
“I think the people who are turned off, and this includes white people as well, are turned off because JSO is not intersectional in their messaging yet. They’re still coming off as people who can quit their jobs to protest, which is what they are a lot of the time.”

Even for highly committed supporters of JSO, the prospect of being arrested an unspecified number of times prompted questions about the sustainability of tactics which inevitably resulted in arrest, especially given recent anti-protest legislation. The mounting pressure to address criticisms around the group’s lack of intersectionality, and increasingly long prison sentences given to repeat offenders, were often seen as playing a part in the strategic changes which occurred over the course of 2022.

“Well first of all, I think we've diverted away from this whole thing of just getting arrested, not for the sake of it, not that we ever did that, but I think we need to be more strategic about how we're using our arrests, and how we're using people's physical and mental capacity.”

The idea that members need to be better protected can be seen as contributing to the development of the ‘slow marching’ tactic, as activists are far less likely to be arrested by blocking traffic in this way than if they refuse to move or glue themselves to the road. Moreover, the move away from actions targeting infrastructure can be seen as partially resulting from these concerns. With injunctions placed on many UK oil depots after they were occupied in the summer, protesters could be arrested and given much longer prison sentences than before. JSO were therefore forced to experiment with different targets. While it was acknowledged that different infrastructure could have been targeted in response, the changing legal position of activists in the UK and the desire to protect members should be seen as part of the reason the strategy changed. This push-back against the high-pressure culture and arrest-driven strategy led some members to worry that the group was losing its radical edge. In multiple interviews, the changes in JSO’s strategy and culture were compared with the trajectory of groups like XR and Greenpeace which were seen as slowly becoming more moderate by appealing to more people. Meanwhile, others pointed out that JSO were still engaged in high-risk arrestable direct action through its cultural actions and shorter public disruption campaigns. From this perspective the group has not become less radical but more inclusive and sustainable as the most impactful actions have been retained and supplemented with a broader repertoire.

“I don't think I would say they've become less radical. I would say they've become potentially less militant in some ways.”

The framing of the debate around culture within JSO can be seen as expressing two different understandings about what it means to be a radical flank. The first sees radicality as an expression of the commitment of a movement’s members, using militaristic analogies to describe the culture and leverage-based strategy that emerges from this. Meanwhile the second understands radicality as a
commitment to intersectionality, seeking to emphasise a culture of care, and promote a strategy which engages more deeply with public opinion and other movements. These differing interpretations can be seen as reflecting JSO’s status as a movement which exists between popular self-activity and the struggle for consent, and closely mirrored debates about hierarchy.¹⁰⁵

Just as many participants talked about how they were initially attracted to JSO’s militant energy, some also expressed positive attitudes about the group’s more vertical structure. In contrast to other environmental movements JSO was seen as taking a top-down approach which was often praised for making organising more efficient and maintaining the group’s strategic focus. The horizontal structure of XR was contrasted with JSO’s model, as it was argued that clarity of a chain of command gave the group a stronger strategic identity and meant that they were less likely to renege on decisions.¹⁰⁶

“*This is a very personal criticism, but I think it is shared by some other people as well. There’s just so many people in the organization who lean more towards the side of anti-authoritarian, you know, maybe communism or anarchism, or just not liking corporate style leadership, that kind of thing… Even though in principle, the design of the Just Stop Oil campaign, unlike XR, which is completely anarchist in the way it makes decisions, was supposed to have a more top-down military-style structure.*”

We see here how more democratic organisational structures are associated with ideology and are contrasted with the more pragmatic chain of command which was seen as originally defining JSO. The fact that many supporters of JSO are unofficially employed and have their living expenses paid for, was an important part of this top-down structure, giving the group a sense of professionalism which others lacked. Interviewees were almost always proud to say they were able to work for the group, often seeing this as a sign that JSO was serious, well-organised, and ready to mobilise quickly.¹⁰⁷ In Gramscian terms, this professionalised hierarchical approach to organising can be seen as vanguardist and is described as being a feature of the stage of popular self-activity when movements are still attempting to act autonomously.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, other interviewees saw the top-down hierarchy as symptomatic of previously mentioned cultural problems, often drawing connections between professionalism and the undue pressure placed on activists.

“I think just because so much of the narrative and strategy had been like, you need to get this many people – and that had been drilled down into us from above. We were told that for every person working they need to put on X number of talks per week, which meant that we were putting on loads of talks, but people weren’t coming because they weren’t properly advertised.”

¹⁰⁵ Sanbonmatsu. 2004 p27
¹⁰⁶ Extinction Rebellion press release. 2022
¹⁰⁷ Appendix two.
¹⁰⁸ Mayer. 1996 p317
Then it was like, why aren’t you mobilizing enough people? So, just the environment to work in was really stressful.”

Since JSO switched from disrupting infrastructure to its strategy of slow-marching, well-being workshops and “all bee” meetings have been introduced to address criticisms around the group’s lack of intersectional awareness and need to care for members. “All bee” meetings, in particular, were described as aimed at giving JSO supporters more opportunity to speak with leaders and democratise decision-making. The same interviewee later said:

“Yeah, it was all too much at the time. And obviously, I'm anonymized, but from friends that are still at JSO, they said it got better when Roger [Hallam] went to prison because he stopped demanding ridiculous demands, and it became more of a two-way street.”

Echoing the cultural debates which exist within the group, this evolution can be seen as an expression of a more consent-based understandings of what it means to be a radical flank. Roger Hallam, who is most strongly associated with the strategy of putting direct leverage on the government through arrests and infrastructure disruption, was seen as driving JSO’s vanguardist organisational approach and militant identity.109 On the other hand, many participants who were more critical of the group’s militant culture expressed a desire to democratise the hierarchy. Often these participants saw themselves as engaged in a broader intersectional struggle for climate justice, rejecting Hallam’s narrower, more pragmatic vision of a Manichaean fight to bring down the fossil fuel industry. Instead of seeing radicality as an expression of commitment and militancy, those seeking to democratise were more ideological, suggesting that figuring out how to “live through climate collapse” was as important as fighting climate change.110 This is a praxis-oriented understanding of what it means to be a radical flank, where radicality is understood as the embodiment of ideological principles through practice. Criticism of the top-down “corporate” approach to hierarchy was not a sign that interviewees were less committed, but an expression of the idea that it was more radical for JSO to embody the change they were aiming to enact, rather than attempt to ‘dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools.”111

Alliance building and knowledge production

It would be wrong to present the differing attitudes towards alliance building that appeared in the interviews as reflecting a significant disagreement between JSO members. Nonetheless, participants did describe how the group has become more engaged in alliance building since embarking on a strategy of slow marching and public disruption. While this was unilaterally considered to be positive, participants who were sympathetic towards the group’s militant cultural tendencies and top-down
hierarchy generally valued connections with other groups engaged in direct action within the climate movement. Alliance building was not seen as a way to build a broader base of support, but to learn from other groups using similar tactics and slowly increase the number of activists practising civil disobedience. This often echoed the strategic ideas which justified infrastructure-focused actions, as rather than seeing alliances as an opportunity to engage with new groups and change people’s values, other groups were valued for their ability to disrupt and apply leverage to the government. The A22 network, which is an international coalition of groups which are similar to, and in some cases inspired by JSO, was often brought up in this context as a community which could learn from each other’s tactical ideas and coordinate actions to maximise their impact.112 This attitude to alliance building reflects the idea the radical flank effect depends on disruptive capacity and leverage. Meanwhile, others saw alliance building as more of an opportunity to build consent. This group were supportive of cultural reforms towards inclusivity and democratic organising, viewing alliances as crucial for encouraging different types of people to become involved in the movement.

“I think about what's happening now with the unions and striking workers a lot, because it seems like there should be a lot in common between them and climate movements. There are people bridging that gap, that are attending union meetings and showing up to picket lines and having these conversations, but I think it's quite a small amount of people. I know last year there was that big cost of living march. It was October first or something, and it had all these different movements – all the climate movements and all the cost-of-living organizations as well. And with the Don't Pay campaign, at one point I really felt like, wow things are coming together. But then I think that's really drifted since then.”

The idea that JSO had failed to capitalise on potential common interests between the climate movement and the cost-of-living movement was present in numerous interviews. Alliances and collaborations with other groups were not primarily seen as ways of increasing the disruptive capacity of JSO, although new members were always welcomed. Rather, these new interactions aimed at raising environmental consciousness by connecting environmentalist causes with class, race, sexuality, and gender to form a broader social bloc, an idea which is central to the struggle for consent.113

“They've switched to focus more recently on relational organizing and solidarity because, you know, last October, they came to visit us in Scotland and ask how we'd been so good at relational organizing. Because they wanted to borrow it, and they wanted to work with like refugee groups and trade union groups. They saw this as a way to build a lasting community because they'd had a lot of drop off from the April actions to the October actions.”

This interview, with a member of the Scottish branch of JSO, shows how the move towards a more expansive approach to alliance building was related to the group’s initial change from an infrastructure-

112 Appendix two.
113 Roberts 2015 pp1673-1675
focused to a media-oriented strategy. As the Scottish branch operates relatively autonomously from the rest of JSO, the debates and discourses within the group are likely to be different. Nonetheless, the idea that the group should engage in “relational organising” with groups outside the climate movement was clearly taken more seriously by organisers in London in the weeks which followed the initial shift in strategic focus. The way radical flank theory is understood therefore has implications for the way activists relate to other groups and movements, with concepts like the Overton window giving more reason to engage in bloc building than leverage-based theories.

In some cases, the different approaches to being a radical flank that have been discussed so far were also described as flowing from JSO’s funding model. The group were able to pay the living expenses of its supporters and take on staff because of the investment of wealthy philanthropists connected to the Climate Emergency Fund. However, during a couple of interviews, it was described how this funding model required JSO to “prove its value” by quantifying its impact and success.

“So, maybe you've already got a question on this, but the first wave of actions, they got a lot more funding because they kind of showed a proof of concept to the Climate Emergency fund. Which is this pool of money that if you submit statistics, good statistics, that show the movement can produce a certain amount of media or impact with the money they give you, then they'll basically give you more. And so we were able to show that we did a certain number of talks and they managed to get close to 500 people to take action, so then they gave us a lot more money and then they hired 50 people full-time and that made the organization what it is today.”

Clearly, the investment JSO have received has been hugely beneficial for the movement, making it possible to grow rapidly in a short period of time. Yet some participants did express concerns that the use of recruitment and arrest statistics as performance indicators, coupled with the professionalised nature of the organisation, helped create the high-pressure culture many were attempting to push back against. While the sense of pressure was mainly described as stemming from the fact that activists were being paid, there was also a sense in which the quantification of their performance added to this.

“We were numbers on a spreadsheet, not actual people who mattered because the narrative was well, we're all going to be dead in a few years if we don't do this now. Like your life doesn't matter. It was very much like that. It was like you were signing your soul away to do this, and we were guilt-tripped because we were told you're so lucky to be able to be paid to do it. Then, because technically it wasn't a job, we weren't paid properly, like they were paying our living expenses so that we could volunteer. It meant that there were no boundaries at all. You could never switch off.”

\[114\] Appendix two.
\[115\] ibid
We can see here how measuring the success of JSO numerically contributed to some feeling undervalued. The feeling the internal targets imposed on paid supporters were more about demonstrating value to investors than the pursuit of specific strategic objectives also emerged from the interviews. Therefore, while some supported a data-driven approach to learning from past experiences, others emphasised the need to draw on the experiences and wisdom of activists when thinking about knowledge production. This subjective approach to learning was also said to have become more prominent since efforts had been made to democratise the group’s hierarchy.

“I feel like it's changed a bit now because there's much more input from people who are doing actions. They've got loads of wisdom, and they've got loads of knowledge that's just as important as people who are sat in a little room looking at the numbers and deciding on the next bit of strategy.”

While a data-driven approach was seen as useful for acquiring funding, many interviewees felt that it was important for JSO to take advantage of the practice-based knowledge of its members when seeking to tweak its strategy. This debate about how learning should occur was closely related to other debates which directly reflect different understandings of what it means to be a radical flank, as many participants who spoke about the need to draw on the wisdom of members, did so while talking about the need for cultural and hierarchical reform. Part of the group’s evolution has therefore been to seek out new forms of knowledge which go beyond measuring the effects of an action on society.116 On this view, moving from the stage of self-activity into a struggle for consent has also seen JSO adopt an engaged subjective attitude to learning. An approach that happens to underpin Gramsci’s own thinking.117

Conclusions

Most accounts of the radical flank effect describe the way groups using radical tactics, or groups with a radical platform influence social norms and “create room” for more moderate groups.118 While Haines’s historical analysis of the civil rights movement is the most nuanced, other quantitative analyses interpret the radical flank effect in similar ways, arguing variously that fringe groups increase support for more moderate groups or policy positions.119 Meanwhile, scholars like Ellefsen understand the radical flank effect more as a leverage-based mechanism in which the radical tactics of the fringe are contrasted with their moderate demand rather than with another group.120 Malm’s interpretation of Haines is arguably similar, as it emphasises the potential for climate groups with radical tactics, to exert

116 Touraine. 1980 p9
117 Buci-Glucksman. 1978 p8
118 Haines. 2013
119 Ozden & Ostarek. 2022; Schifeling & Hoffman. 2019 p217;
120 Ellefsen. 2018 pp112-128
financial leverage on governments and industries. My analysis of interviews with JSO supporters shows that, while both understandings of the radical flank effect exist within the group, the second leverage-based approach is more closely associated with a failed infrastructure-focused strategy, and the first with a shift towards a more successful media-oriented approach. For activists, it is therefore important to distinguish between these two understandings of radical flank theory, as the way the theory is interpreted has wide-ranging strategic and organisational ramifications for the way transformative activity is practiced. Meanwhile, for academics, this is significant as it shows that the type of radical flank effect a group will exert depends more on their strategic and organisational approach than it does on the relative radicality of their tactics or demands. It is, therefore, important for studies aiming to measure the radical flank to define the category more comprehensively, using concepts which describe the overall approach of a movement rather than categorising groups based on their tactics or messaging.

These insights were made possible by embracing the subjective understanding of activists engaged in transformative activity rather than trying to measure the efficacy of each strategy objectively. Inspired by scholars like Chalcraft and David Meek, I describe the two strategic approaches which emerged from the interviews using Gramscian categories. While other frameworks could be used, I felt that Gramsci’s account of the way movements evolve from popular self-activity to a struggle for consent, mirror the forces driving JSO’s strategic shift. The understanding that this was a dialectical process was especially useful for understanding why JSO have adopted tactics which aim to generate media attention through conflict and spectacle – a non-violent approach to the propaganda of the deed which problematises definitions of the radical flank effect which focus on violence. Furthermore, the way interviewees described internal debates around culture, hierarchy, alliance building, and knowledge production influenced the decision to describe JSO’s strategic evolution in Gramscian terms. Efforts to reform JSO’s culture and hierarchy in a less-militant, more democratic direction point to a shift from the vanguardism associated with popular self-activity, towards the more praxis-oriented approach of struggle for consent. This democratisation prompted moves to engage in more purposeful attempts at bloc building and was also associated with the idea that JSO could learn from subjective experience rather than data. As it was this epistemological approach which underpinned this research, I hope this framing is useful to activists seeking to understand how JSO has evolved in the last year and a half.

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121 Malm. 2021 pp85-90
122 Chalcraft. 2021 pp90-92; Meek. 2015 pp1181-1183
123 Simpson et al. 2022 p3
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Appendices

Appendix one: concept map derived from thematic analysis of interview transcripts using Nvivo.
Appendix two: code book. The twelve interviews were a mix of in-person and remote and took place in London and online over Zoom between May 14, 2023, and June 26, 2023. Coding was done using Nvivo.

Research Question: How do members of Just Stop Oil understand what it means to be a radical flank?

Organising principle: The debates around culture, hierarchy, alliance building and strategy which exist within Just Stop Oil are reflective of two fundamentally different understandings of what it means to be a radical flank.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organising themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Sources / references</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popular self-activity</td>
<td>Leverage over government</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arrest as positive</td>
<td>6/8</td>
<td></td>
<td>“To be honest, this is a personal preference, but I really don’t mind [prison], and you kind of get used to it very quickly to the point where I kind of enjoy it in a weird way.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overwhelming the prison system</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I think it would really take a magic movement to overwhelm the state's ability to process prisoners. But I think XR did come close and Just Stop Oil had the potential to come close too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Messing with police</td>
<td>4/8</td>
<td></td>
<td>“But for example, at height up in the roof here, I didn't fully comply with the police. I didn't move when they told me to move, I didn't say my name. I was a bit of a shit about it. But that didn't come up in court.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternatives are too slow</td>
<td>6/14</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I think at that point, I was like, I need to do something more, and I think that's why I was coming towards Just Stop Oil. Because the other options aren't working.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic disruption</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td></td>
<td>“So, if we get 3,000 people who are willing to take a radical action, we'll be able to hold those for like three weeks and massively affect the petroleum supply in the UK?”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Radical flank theory</td>
<td>8/13</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m also interested in Andreas Malm’s parallel approach of acts of sabotage against private airplanes, oil pipelines and SUV’s”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Targeting infrastructure</td>
<td>Targets related to fossil fuel</td>
<td>5/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I think this concept of targeting the people that are painted as the bad guys, like all the industries that are like causing the most harm rather than everyday people.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Moral justification of property damage</td>
<td>5/12</td>
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<td>“I think that people would members of would still do property damaging actions, if looking back from ten- or 20-years’ time they made sense.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-sabotage</td>
<td>8/15</td>
<td>“I read How to Blow up a Pipeline in COP and I've just been like very pro sabotage and property damage since.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vehicle for emotion</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>“It was kind of nice to let your anger out on something physical; like an actual external thing of the climate crisis you know?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderate demand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radical tactics contrast with demand</td>
<td>7/9</td>
<td>“The government are going to try and get us to stop and when it doesn't look like we're going to stop, they're going to go to our demands.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear Messaging</td>
<td>5/9</td>
<td>“I think definitely the kind of simplicity of the demand you know. It's Just Stop Oil. It's like just stop all new oil and gas licenses, all new fossil fuel licenses. I think because it was really, really focused on just getting one demand met, which is really basic. It's like a no brainer demand.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making concessions easy</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>“And then there’s the demand. So Just Stop Oil has demand that was like feasible to do, but also is like a substantial change to UK climate policy.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural militancy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Militant attitude</td>
<td>5/7</td>
<td>“I would say they've become potentially less militant in some ways.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defensive posture of members</td>
<td>3/6</td>
<td>“Everyone was very defensive, you know it was almost like a performance because it was so frowned upon to interrupt.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doom-ism</td>
<td>5/8</td>
<td>“They criticized the culture of like doom-ism, and the lack of like care about the specific impact like their actions slash rhetoric have on groups of people with mental health or like precarious economic situations.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Camaraderie</td>
<td>4/6</td>
<td>“Yeah, whereas with XR, you don’t kind of feel like foot soldiers in the same squadron as you do in Just Stop Oil which has a camaraderie about it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young people</td>
<td>7/14</td>
<td>“I think it’s also been a success in terms of bringing a massive wave of young people into the climate movement.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>4/8</td>
<td>“I think weirdly, it was the level of commitment. I was kind of impressed. I’d like to think that I'm, sort of, committed. And to see all these other people doing this stuff, was like, oh, wow look at them, they really believe in this.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counterculture</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>“Really, we are a counterculture so we take care of our own as much as we can because the mainstream culture isn't and won't, so we do it all in-house.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guilt and obligation</td>
<td>6/12</td>
<td>“Fuck it. Like, let's just get arrested and lay in the road. And yeah, I think it was more out of guilt than anything else, or like out of a sense of obligation.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top-down hierarchy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>6/9</td>
<td>“I just. Decided to do it. And from there, we finished uni, graduated, and then they were hiring people for mobilization. Got a job, and now it's like 7, 8 months later and I'm here.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Efficient decision making</td>
<td>6/8</td>
<td>“The good thing about JSO is yeah, there is more of an organized structure. So, if you're new and you don't know what you're doing it's a lot easier to be guided.”</td>
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<td>Pragmatism</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>“Even though in principle, the design of the Just Stop Oil campaign, unlike XR, which is completely anarchist in the way it makes decisions, this was designed to have a more top down military style structure.”</td>
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<td>Chain of command</td>
<td>5/7</td>
<td>“I think its meant to just be like, this person's in charge, this person's underneath them, this person’s underneath them.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stagnation of other movements</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>“But I guess I was a bit tired of extinction rebellion like I think a few people were. I mean they call it a holocracy but it felt like it was hitting a wall”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inspiration from past movements</td>
<td>7/12</td>
<td>“If we look at history, you know, the suffragettes were hated at the time, they were called terrorists. Now they're considered heroes because they were effective in their movement.”</td>
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<td>Movement autonomy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t want to be liked</td>
<td>7/15</td>
<td>“I always understood that as, you're never going to win everyone over and you actually don't need to win everyone over.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical movements unpopular at the time</td>
<td>8/14</td>
<td>“So what we used to say in the talks was like 70% of people hated Martin Luther King.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct action is the only way</td>
<td>4/6</td>
<td>“Just Stop Oil, it like hit more of the criteria of things that I really want to be involved with in like a direct-action space.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alliances with direct action groups</td>
<td>5/7</td>
<td>“It’s called the A22 network or something, and it's where they meet with other European direct action people and resistance movements. So there's like people in Germany, people in France, and a lot of them are adopting similar tactics and doing it better than we are.”</td>
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<td>Quantitative approach to learning</td>
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| Financial Investment                       | 3/5   | “There's famous philanthropists who've given just a pool of money including Dale Vince is a guy in the UK, including some famous Americans yeah like I
think Leonardo DiCaprio as well as Meryl Streep. She's not American. And Adam McKay who directed Don't Look Up yeah. Then there's also the yeah, I don't know what it's called, the Climate Fund.”

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<th>Data-driven approach</th>
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<td>“I think it's on the front frontier of like, yeah, exactly experimenting and trying to get trying to always collect statistics on it, see what works, see what you know”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Lack of insight from academia</th>
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<td>“Before XR there was nobody, so it's not like there are these gurus who know everything, we're all basically writing it as we go. There's no, you know, there's a thousand books of movement theory and I've read probably half of them. But none of them can be effectively applied to this you know socioeconomic situation that we find ourselves in.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Struggle for consent</th>
<th>Engaging public opinion</th>
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<th>Disruption for attention</th>
<th>11/30</th>
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<td>“I think about one week in it was on the TV news like every day. So that was kind of more public facing disruption, because we knew that that was going to get a more media coverage. So therefore, it's more political pressure, there's more awareness being raised.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Exposing state overreach</th>
<th>9/15</th>
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<td>“But the government are going to then want to make it illegal. And then that overreach is hopefully then going to cause a backfiring effect on them. Hopefully, the public will then kind of sympathize with those people who are taking direct action because it's clearly unjust”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Inspiration from past movements</th>
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<td>“Growing up, my mother has a master's degree in the effects of climate change on the third world. So she taught me a lot about that. And you know the family names were, you know, the Pankhurts, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, those sorts of people.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Intersectional messaging</th>
<th>5/14</th>
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<td>“a lot of the people are just citizens and pensioners, but a lot of the mobilisers are people who have quit university and they’re doing this full time and unpaid, which is fine, but it means that the intersectional conversation is not happening.”</td>
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<th>Radical flank theory</th>
<th>8/13</th>
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<td>“I think it’s something to do with the radical fringe effect, isn't it? I mean I think it works if you've got two groups and one group is antagonistic and the other group represents a sort of middle ground that people are going to be more receptive to.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidentiation as spectacle</td>
<td>Confrontation with public</td>
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<td>Drama and spectacle</td>
<td>7/9</td>
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<td>Cultural actions</td>
<td>8/12</td>
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<td>Media-oriented strategy</td>
<td>Biased media</td>
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<td>Polarisation</td>
<td>7/7</td>
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<td>Notoriety</td>
<td>4/7</td>
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<td>Transformational culture</td>
<td>Prison as negative</td>
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<td>Arrest as unsustainable</td>
<td>6/14</td>
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<td>Burn-out</td>
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<td>High pressure</td>
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<td>Sense of community</td>
<td>8/14</td>
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<td>Fear of crackdown</td>
<td>3/5</td>
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<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>8/22</td>
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<td>Hierarchical democratisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening to people on the ground</td>
<td>6/10</td>
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<td>Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparent decision making</td>
<td>5/11</td>
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<td>Flat hierarchy</td>
<td>2/6</td>
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<td>Bloc building</td>
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<td>Alliances with more moderate groups</td>
<td>7/12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alliances with other movements</td>
<td>6/15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost-of-living</td>
<td>3/4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expanding the base</td>
<td>2/4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eco-system of movements</td>
<td>3/6</td>
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<td>Wisdom of experience</td>
<td>6/11</td>
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<td>Subjective approach to learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge sharing</td>
<td>4/5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning from experimentation</td>
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