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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Repression as the Closing of the Public Space and Sphere: The Multi-dimensional Repression of Climate Civil Disobedience in Britain

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ABSTRACT: The concept of soft repression has broadened the study of social movement policing by drawing attention to strategies that go beyond states' overt strategies to suppress or control activism. However, the most subtle and insidious practices are often examined in isolation from more coercive tactics, and the meaning of "soft" remains ambiguous – frequently conflated with extra-state, covert, or discursive forms of repression. This article draws on the case of British climate civil disobedience policing to argue for a more integrated approach. I propose that repression should be analysed along two dimensions: repression in the public space, which restricts movements' access to the streets, and repression in the public sphere, which seeks to delegitimise them. I demonstrate that these distinct forms of repression can overlap, precede, or reinforce one another; operate with varying levels of visibility; be enacted by both state and non-state actors; and provoke specific responses from movements.

KEYWORDS: civil disobedience, climate movements, repression, social movements, soft repression

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1. Introduction

To challenge the dominant conception of repression as primarily state-driven, social movement scholars have introduced a distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' repression. The former typically involves material constraints imposed by the state on movements, while the latter is more informal, occurring within society

through efforts to silence and/or stigmatise activists (Ferree 2005). Heuristic, this distinction has mostly fuelled research that reinforced the dichotomy between state/society and hard/soft forms of repression by focusing on one dimension and neglecting their interactions.

In this article, I investigate how so-called ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of repression interact to limit social movements’ ability to access the public space of action and the public sphere of justification. Acknowledging the interplay between these two dimensions is consistent with Habermas’s (1989) demonstration that the public sphere originates in concrete sites where citizens are able to discuss political decisions away from state control. In the case of social movements, it is particularly important to emphasise the centrality of conflict in the publicisation of political issues, a dimension that Habermas tends to downplay (Mah 2000; Mouffe 2002). As Cassegård (2014) notes, such contesting potential is primarily realised when social movements succeed in claiming the streets.

The case of (British) climate civil disobedience movements is interesting in several ways. The United Kingdom has been the epicentre of two major movements that have spread across Western Europe, namely Extinction Rebellion (XR) from 2018 and Just Stop Oil (JSO) from 2022. As highlighted in a report by Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, the country has been at the forefront of these movements’ repression, on both the hard and soft sides of repression. Forst specifically warned Britain against the effect of new anti-protest laws, hostile discourses in mainstream media and less visible constraints such as injunctions and bail conditions imposed on activists (Forst 2024). Britain also presents an interesting case, as the stark increase in repression contrasts sharply with the initial widespread enthusiasm for these movements, fuelled by the broadly shared image of an anxious youth emerging from the 2018 and 2019 climate strikes (Hayes and O’Neill 2021). While contributions have stressed the current repressive vague of climate activism and its effect in different contexts (Storbeck, Jacobs, Schuilenburg and van den Akker 2025), they do not really allow to grasp the contradictions between these two moments of positive reception and harsh repression. As these attacks constitute merely a new chapter in the long history of repression against social movements in Britain (Foot and Livingstone 2022; Cristiano, Dadusc, Davanna, Duff, Gilmore, Rossdale, Rossi, Tatour, Tatour, Tufail and Weizman 2023), and as the country is by no means alone in curtailing activists’ rights (Rossdale, Berglund, Pantazis, Pessoa Cavalcanti and Franco Brotto 2025), this article also examines more broadly how liberal democracies manage dissent in a time of climate and environmental emergency.

My contribution to the study of repression is threefold. Firstly, this article advocates for the need to reconsider repression by examining the interplay between two distinct forms that can be enacted by both state and non-state actors: repression in the public space, where movements’ access to the streets is restricted, and repression in the public sphere, where contentious actors are delegitimised. Secondly, moving beyond the hard vs. soft repression metaphor – which conflates different dimensions that do not necessarily overlap – this article explores how repression in both the public sphere and public space can manifest in highly visible forms or, alternatively, in more subtle, less overt ways.

This contribution builds on previous attempts to conceptualise the multidimensional nature of repression. While Boykoff’s (2007) review of repression mechanisms in the United States, and more recently Rossdale et al.’s (2025) detailed account of the global repertoire of repression targeting green activists, primarily focus on the outcomes of such processes (mainly deterrence), this article reintroduces agency by examining the different, though constrained, ways in which movements can respond. Contrary to the notion of a continuum

(Boykoff 2007), I also show that different forms of repression do not necessarily accumulate in a linear fashion. Harsh policing may take place before or after softer forms of repression enacted by both state and non-state actors, which can serve to justify it simultaneously, retrospectively, or prospectively. Focusing on a single case makes it possible to undertake such a sequential analysis, which large-n studies do not allow (such as Rossdale et al. 2025).

This paper proceeds in several stages. First, I introduce the concept of repression as the closure of both the public space and the public sphere, explaining how this framework extends beyond the traditional hard/soft dichotomy and provides a more effective lens for understanding previous instances of environmental movement repression in Britain. Next, I outline the methodology and data sources, drawing on activists' own accounts of repression, movement press releases, parliamentary debates, and media coverage. I then demonstrate how repression in the public space and public sphere can interact without necessarily overlapping, identifying four distinct stages of repression targeting environmental civil disobedience movements in the UK. Finally, I argue that studying the dynamics of both the public space and public sphere, in their more or less covert or overt forms, not only allows but also necessitates an analysis of how movements and activists respond in varied ways to the multidimensional nature of repression – going beyond the simple deterrence versus radicalisation dichotomy.

2. Repression as the closing of the public space and sphere

The effort to study repression beyond the traditional scope of state policing has led scholars to seek a broader definition. For this purpose, it is relevant to endorse Earl's account of repression as "state or private action meant to prevent, control, or constrain noninstitutional, collective action (e.g., protest), including its initiation" (Earl 2011, 264). If this definition acknowledges that repression can come both from state and non-state actors, the consequence of this dual nature remains unclear. While Earl (2003) has previously provided a fine-grained typology that is useful in this regard, it focuses on the distinction between types of actors (in a private to public continuum), forms of constraint (coercion or channelling) and degrees of visibility, while leaving behind the question of (hostile) discourses that is at the core of the soft versus hard dichotomy. I now examine the benefits and shortcomings of such an approach.

2.1 Beyond hard and soft: repression in the public space and sphere in a spectrum of visibility

The literature has primarily relied on Ferree's account of the soft versus hard dichotomy. While both forms can theoretically emanate from either state or non-state actors, in practice, hard repression is typically employed against movements challenging authorities, whereas soft repression originates from society in the form of stigmatisation or silencing in the public sphere (Ferree 2005). A prime example of soft repression is the emergence of counter-movements, which oppose movements that threaten dominant interests by delegitimising their goals (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Dufour and Dussault 2022). However, the concept

of soft repression can be somewhat fuzzy, as it not only encompasses discourses from society but also, as García (2014) suggests, includes less visible strategies from public authorities to limit movements' access to public space. Such lack of clarity may stem from the fact that the hard versus soft metaphor conflates three distinct elements: the actors involved (state versus society), the dimension of repression (efforts to limit movements' ability to access the street versus attempts to delegitimise them), and its intensity or visibility (overt versus discreet).

So far, the most interesting contribution of the soft repression literature has indeed been its exploration of its micro and meso-level consequences on movements and activists. Soft repression can indeed force movements to negotiate their presence in the public spaces while prompting activists to self-restrain or even defect (García 2014). Jämte and Ellefsen (2020) demonstrate that soft repression can push movements to either turn outward, seeking to regain legitimacy, or focus inward, retreating from public spaces and adopting more clandestine forms of action. Similarly, in their study on volunteers supporting refugees in Britain, Maestri and Monforte (2022) suggest that soft repression can lead individuals to react in three ways: avoiding to mention their action publicly, seeking approval around them by presenting their cause as non-political (by emphasising compassion or insisting on its pragmatic contribution to society), or choose to bear witness, actively engaging in political discourse rather than avoiding it.

While the literature on soft repression challenges the macro view of policing as solely state-centred, it often remained focused on these more informal, less visible forms of repression, studied in isolation from harsher methods. An example of how soft and hard repression interact can be found in Koopmans' notion of the 'discursive opportunity structure'. He argues that a movement with a positive public image, shaped by media and public opinion, is less likely to face state repression (Koopmans 2005). However, his focus remains primarily on the public sphere at the macro level of mass media, as it is also the case with Boykoff's (2007) stigmatisation mechanism.

For all these reasons, I propose to decompose the soft vs. hard dichotomy. The first level of analysis concerns the domain of repression. While repression in the public space restricts the ability of movements and activists to occupy and navigate the streets, repression in the public sphere involves attempts to delegitimise them. This distinction owes much to John Parkinson (2012), who emphasised the importance of examining how contentious actors use public space (i.e. the streets) to intervene in the public sphere (i.e. political debate). I contend that both forms of repression can be carried out by state and non-state actors, and that they do not necessarily overlap, as the analysis will demonstrate.

The second level of analysis concerns the degree of visibility of these two forms of repression. Contrary to a simplistic reading of the hard versus soft dichotomy, state repression can be very subtle, as illustrated by covert police tactics such as infiltration (Schlembach 2018). Similarly, hostile discourse can shape simultaneously the macro media environment and activists' sense of legitimacy at the micro level (Maestri and Monforte 2022).

2.2 The case study of British environmental movements

The study of repression in Britain is interesting as it fits well within a broader western trend of policing. After a period in 1990s that focused on human rights and cooperation with protestors, police forces seem to have

returned to more forceful strategies. This shift became clear with the rise of new protest movements, such as the anti-globalisation movement, which used more confrontational tactics (Della Porta and Reiter 2022). This change does not mean there has been a definitive move away from attempts to pacificate protest policing, but rather that police responses should be seen as selective and dependent on authorities' openness to movements (Combes and Filleule 2011). However, many discourses continue to present Britain as a paradigmatic example of the democratisation of policing, focusing on the move from the hardline policing under Thatcher of the early 1980s – used to suppress all forms of dissent – to the more balanced approach of the 1990s-2000s that includes respect for human rights and negotiation with protesters (Gilmore, Jackson and Monk 2017). The introduction in the early 2010s of Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) were seen as a continuation of this change in their role to keep communication open and reduce the need for harsh police actions (Gorringe, Rosie, Reicher, Portice, Tekin and Hamilton 2024).

The case of environmental activism, and particularly British anti-fracking protests of the 2000s, allows to challenge the dominant view of a uniform pacification of policing in the country. It reminds how policing in the United Kingdom is marked by a blurred boundary between public and private actors in the organisation and delivery of policing (Jones and Newburn 1999), a heavy reliance on surveillance, notably through the widespread use of CCTV (Jones and Lister 2015), and the alternance between soft and hard forms of policing (Gilmore, Jackson and Monk, 2017) that can be furthered by police infiltration (Schlembach 2018). The coexistence on the ground of police and private security intimidation, surveillance, and efforts to maintain dialogue with movements created a climate of uncertainty encouraging anti-fracking activists to remain within the boundaries of what authorities deemed acceptable protest (Gilmore, Jackson and Monk 2017; Jackson, Gilmore and Monk 2018). While the constant oscillation between the 'velvet glove' and 'iron fist' approach to policing (Gilmore, Jackson and Monk 2017) was closely tied to informal classifications made by officers – distinguishing between "good" protestors who adhered to the rules and 'bad' activists who crossed the often-unstated boundaries of legitimate protest – it was also strongly influenced by whether the protests were perceived as threatening to state or corporate interests (Gilmore, Jackson and Monk 2017). Over time, anti-fracking activists were increasingly classified through the lens of extremism, a shift that was not solely the result of police strategies framing them as radical and 'unreasonable' (Jackson, Gilmore and Monk 2018, 13), but also reinforced by media narratives. As Muncie (2020) notes, media representations of environmental activists underwent a broader transformation – from being portrayed as peaceful protestors to being cast as disruptive elements. This framing remained inconsistent, with coverage oscillating between depictions of activists as 'hippies' or unemployed outsiders one day, and as peaceful representatives of 'middle England' the next (Muncie 2020). While the literature on anti-fracking protests provides valuable insight into the multidimensional forms of repression, existing studies tend to focus either on policing practices or on media framing, without directly examining the interaction between the two. The study of the repression of contemporary climate civil disobedience movements in the UK will offer a clear case of how these dimensions can interact and reinforce one another – though not always in overlapping or coordinated ways.

3. Data and methodology

I rely on multiple data sources and analytical methods. Such ‘triangulation’, which is well suited to painting a holistic picture of a single, complex phenomenon (Ayoub, Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2014), aligns closely with my objective of understanding how different forms of repression interact to restrict movements and activists’ ability to access the public space and the public sphere.

The use of semi-structured interviews makes it possible to understand activists’ experiences of repression within the broader context of their activism, while also gathering information about their movements (Blee and Taylor 2002). In total, I have conducted interviews with thirty activists from Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Just Stop Oil (JSO). Snowball sampling, implemented across different local groups throughout Britain¹, enabled the recruitment of activists with a wide diversity of experiences, ranging from individuals involved since the early days of the movements in 2018 to newcomers who had joined only a few weeks prior to the interviews. The interviewees’ profiles are consistent with previous studies on the characteristics of environmental activists in Britain (Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020; Saunders, Doherty, Hayes, Cammiss, and Walker 2024) with most of them coming from highly educated backgrounds. The interviewees’ ages range from 19 to 76, with concentrations among those in their early twenties, early thirties, and young retirees in their sixties. The interviews were conducted in 2023, a period characterised by increasing repression that coincided with significant shifts in the movements’ strategies. In December 2022, Extinction Rebellion announced a new strategic direction, which was operationalised in April through a three-day, large-scale action (‘The Big One’) held near Parliament. This period also saw the emergence of significant controversies surrounding Just Stop Oil’s disruptive roadblock tactics.

In addition to the interviews, I collected data from parliamentary speeches and media articles. Unlike most existing studies, this discourse analysis does not seek to examine movement framing, but rather the ‘discursive battle’ unfolding between opponents and supporters of repression (Lindekilde 2014, 199). To capture the role of the media - a key actor in Koopmans’ (2005) concept of ‘discursive opportunities for repression’ - I analyse articles from progressive-leaning outlets, such as *The Guardian*, as well as from right-leaning publications, primarily tabloids such as *The Daily Mail*. I manually retrieved articles covering the main -controversial, large-scale, and/or spectacular - actions of XR and JSO. To acknowledge and measure the fact that hostile rhetoric may also emanate from public actors, I extracted parliamentary debates recorded in Hansard from 2019 to 2023. I manually classified excerpts in which Members of Parliament and/or government ministers referred to environmental or climate movements. Where a positive or negative statement could be assigned to multiple categories, it was counted more than once.

¹ Primarily large and medium-sized cities in the South and North of England. For reasons of confidentiality, I cannot provide the precise locations.

4. Self-reinforcing but not overlapping: the closing of public space and sphere for climate civil disobedience in Britain since 2018

According to Koopmans' (2005) account of the discursive opportunity structure, hard-line material state repression is likely to follow a shift in the public image of social movements. Similarly, by acknowledging the selective stance of authorities toward protest, one might expect that the imposition of harsh repression would result from the labelling of protesters as 'bad activists' who are deemed unfit for negotiation. However, I will demonstrate that the interplay between repression in the public space and the public sphere has followed a more complex pattern since 2018 for British climate civil disobedience movements. The closure of the public space, with massive arrests of XR's activists, has indeed preceded attacks on the movement in the public sphere. The hostile rhetoric's progressively employed by state and non-state actors has then constructed the need for new protest laws that have further restricted activists' ability to access the public space in 2022 and 2023. These most visible strategies of public space and sphere repression have eventually been supplemented by more insidious repressive measures. Table 1 provides an overview of these different forms of repression.

4.1 Policing a popular movement: a positive public image despite mass arrests

On October 31, 2018, around a thousand people gathered in Parliament Square, London, to declare their intention to engage in civil disobedience against climate inaction. This was the beginning of Extinction Rebellion. In November, the movement put these threats into action by organising the blockade of five bridges in the capital. This was repeated a few months later, in April 2019, with similar blockades around the capital. Taken by surprise by these disruptive methods, the police made hundreds of arrests. This was not in contradiction with the movement's goal but part of its strategy. 'Manufactured vulnerability' (Doherty 1999) is indeed a central feature of civil disobedience used to highlight the contrast between the justice of activists' cause and the brutality of state repression with the intention of winning over public sympathy.

This strategy appears to have worked well at first, as surveys found that XR raised public concern for climate issues (Kountouris and Williams 2023). The most striking success was the vote of a 'climate emergency' declaration in Parliament in direct reaction to April's blockades. XR also benefited from positive media coverage, particularly in *The Guardian*, which relayed very early a letter of support for civil disobedience from scientists² and extensively covered its actions. Surprisingly, despite the well-known tendency of tabloids to espouse climate-sceptical views (Boykoff 2008) and to give a predominantly negative representation of climate-related protests (Gillings and Dayrell 2024), their reporting on XR was not the most critical at first. While *The Daily Mail* initially labelled the first series of blockades in November 2018 as a day of 'eco-carnage' and 'crime' in London, describing the activists as radical and trained to cause chaos, the tabloid did report the

² The Guardian (2018, October 26), "Facts about our ecological crisis are incontrovertible. We must take action | Letters", *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/26/facts-about-our-ecological-crisis-are-incontrovertible-we-must-take-action>) [Accessed 31 Jan. 2025]

movement’s demands and strategy (to pressure the government into action). The article even made an educational effort by offering its readers a definition of carbon neutrality, which was demanded by XR³.

Civil disobedience actions in favour of climate action were also met with some enthusiasm in Parliament. A back-and-forth developed between Labour and Conservative MPs. While the former seized the opportunity to press the government on its climate agenda, the latter, although not agreeing with the disruptive methods, expressed understanding and shared the protesters’ concerns:

Ed Miliband, Labour MP: “[...] People can believe that the tactics of Extinction Rebellion are right or wrong-the Minister obviously believes they are wrong-but the demonstrators are certainly not wrong about the failure of politics to do anything like what is necessary to fight climate change: they are right [...]”.

Claire Perry, Conservative Minister of State (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy): “[...] I do not disagree with the protests. I disagree with some of the methods, but certainly not with the message. As I have said to him before, I think that just a few years previously he and I would have been out there ourselves carrying placards”⁴.

How can we explain the positive reception of XR, despite the numerous arrests made by the police in its early months? Firstly, the ‘Greta effect’ (Hayes and O’Neill 2021) undoubtedly played a role, as the narrative of anxious young people lends legitimacy to the protest while softening its perceived radicalism. Another factor is likely to be the identity of the participants, who were predominantly educated, middle-class individuals new to activism (Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020), enabling them to avoid being viewed as dangerous. Finally, XR’s original demands remained vague and centred on the need to discuss the climate emergency, which made them appear not to directly threaten the interests of the state or capital, as opposed to the anti-fracking movement (Brock 2020).

Table 1 - An overview of the different forms of repression encountered by climate civil disobedience movements

	<i>Exclusion from the public space</i>	<i>Exclusion from the public sphere</i>
Most visible	Repressive protest laws, arrests	Hostile rhetoric within media and political discourse, contempt of court
Least visible	Injunctions, surveillance	Interiorisation of criticisms

³ Boyd, C., and D. Hussain (2018, November 17), “Day chaos in London! Radical climate change activists to go on crime spree in capital”, *The Daily Mail* (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6400395/Day-chaos-London-Radical-climate-change-activists-crime-sprees-capital.html>) [Accessed 31 Jan. 2025].

⁴ Hansard (2019, April 23), “Climate Action and Extinction Rebellion” (Vol. 658) (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-04-23/debates/3795D207-E894-4E34-AC21-1177141DBEEC/ClimateActionAndExtinctionRebellion>)

4.2 Constructing the need for new protest laws: the negative shift in public discourse

The literature suggests that a movement is most likely to provoke a reaction from a countermovement when it experiences partial success and threatens established interests (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Unsurprisingly, the negative shift in public discourse surrounding climate disobedience was fuelled by the classic actors of the climate countermovement, namely think tanks, right-wing media and conservative political parties (Dunlap and McCright 2011, 145). The most hostile reaction emerged from the right-leaning lobby group *Policy Exchange* as early as July 2019. Opposing the ‘honeymoon period’ enjoyed by XR in public opinion, the organisation aimed to counter its influence by denouncing the hidden ‘anarchist’ agenda of an ‘extreme left’ hostile to liberal democracy and the free market economy. The think tank called for stronger police and judicial repression of the movement, as well as the introduction of new laws designed to counter its methods⁵.

In parallel, tabloids quickly developed an obsession with XR. As with the anti-fracking movements, their coverage oscillated between portraying activists as either naïve hippies or dangerous extremists (Muncie 2020). In both cases, the negative image of protesters was reinforced by framing them in opposition to the figure of the ‘ordinary working person’ whose daily life was disrupted by such actions. This polarisation intensified following an action for which XR ultimately issued an apology. In October 2019, activists climbed onto a commuter train at Canning Town station and were forcibly removed by angry passengers. A Daily Mail columnist celebrated the event, describing it as a “joyful revenge on eco-zealot Ruperts and the grungsters as Londoners fed up of Extinction Rebellion take matters into their own hands⁶”. While early criticism focused on the ineffectiveness of the tactic, discourse quickly shifted to presenting any form of disruption as a threat to democracy and the economy – leading to growing calls for stronger repression. A paradigmatic example of this was Nick Ferrari’s ‘Enough is Enough’ campaign on LBC, which dedicated an entire week to lobbying for new legislation aimed at curbing protest rights⁷.

A similar evolution can be observed in Parliament. I have classified parliamentary hostile discourse on environmental movements into five categories, with over 90% of such discourse originating from Conservative MPs. In 2019, criticism primarily focused on the movements’ tactics and strategies, often portraying protests as naïve, ineffective, or counterproductive. A common pattern involved MPs acknowledging the legitimacy of the cause while arguing that the movements were undermining it through unrealistic demands and confrontational methods. By 2020, however, environmental movements were increasingly framed as threats to democracy. This shift followed an Extinction Rebellion (XR) campaign targeting the tabloid press through blockades near printing facilities. It also occurred within a broader context shaped by the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020, which contributed to a growing Conservative consensus on the need for

⁵ Wilson T., and R. Walton (2019), “Extremism Rebellion”, *Policy Exchange* (<https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/extremism-rebellion/>).

⁶ Moir J. (2019, October 18), “Londoners fed up of XR take matters into their own hands”, *The Daily Mail*. (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7586393/Londoners-fed-XR-matters-hands.html>) [Accessed 16 May 2025].

⁷ LBC (2020, February 7), “Enough Is Enough: Nick Ferrari’s message to protesters outside LBC”, *LBC* (<https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/nick-ferrari/enough-enough/message-to-extinction-rebellion-protesters/>) [Accessed 16 May 2025].

new protest legislation⁸. In 2022, calls from MPs for greater repression intensified, largely in response to the emergence of Just Stop Oil (JSO) and its disruptive actions, including blockades of oil depots and roads, as well as interruptions of cultural and sporting events.

While in 2019 the Labour Party referred to environmental movements as frequently as the Conservatives in their speeches, from 2020 onwards, Conservative MPs increasingly dominated parliamentary discourse on the topic. These interventions often aimed to denounce the radicalism of the movements, praise police actions, and call for the reaffirmation of law and order. Tory MP Tom Hunt offers a clear example of this rhetoric, following an intense weekend of Black Lives Matter (BLM) mobilisation across the UK:

Tom Hunt, Conservative MP: “Following the immensely destructive Extinction Rebellion protests last year and the violence and the criminal damage committed over the weekend by a small minority of thugs, is my right hon, and learned Friend confident that the law as it stands is on the side of the law-abiding majority and our brave police officers, who have really stood up and been counted over the past couple of months?”⁹.

Table 2 – A classification of parliamentary hostile discourse on environmental movements

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Naive / useless / unproductive protest	10	8	9	7	3
Condemnation of Tactics	6	17	8	25	16
Threat to economy / working people	4	6	3	5	20
Threat to democracy / extremism	2	22	6	9	10
Calls for repression	0	23	8	23	11
Total of hostile quotes per year	22	76	34	69	60

Source: Classification of parliamentary speeches relating to movements, extracted from the *Hansard*.

In this narrative, environmental activists are portrayed not as advocates for the environment, but as individuals whose actions undermine the majority’s right to order and stability. This portrayal of a law-abiding public calling for stronger policing and legal measures strongly echoes earlier political discourse surrounding immigration in the UK (Clarke 2025). Negative positions taken by Conservative MPs and right-wing tabloid media further delegitimised environmental activists, denying them the right to intervene in both the public sphere and public space. These stances then helped justifying the introduction of new protest laws, which were

⁸ Siddique H., and M. Weaver (2021, March 15), “Why is anti-protest bill generating so much controversy?”, *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/15/why-is-anti-protest-bill-generating-so-much-controversy>) [Accessed 21 Mar. 2021].

⁹ Hansard (2020, June 9), “Topical Questions” (Vol. 677) (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-06-09/debates/A88B64D9-9590-449E-A48C-EC9508D3D877/TopicalQuestions#contribution-C9E1ED4C-FBF8-4134-ADA1-31265D7FE427>)

passed in 2022 and 2023. In parallel, Labour has been hesitant in its defence of protest movements. While initially stating that they would oppose new laws they deemed unnecessary and emphasising the importance of the right to protest, Labour MPs gradually shifted towards a firmer stance. During the JSO oil depot blockades in April 2022, they even called to ‘simplify arrests’¹⁰.

4.3 Anti-protest laws as the tip of the iceberg: the insidious closure of the public space and the public sphere

In recent years, a series of new protest laws have been passed in reaction to civil disobedience movements. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (PCSC 2022) grants authorities the power to impose conditions on protests causing ‘serious disruption to the life of the community’ or considered ‘noisy’. The Public Order Act (2023) further expanded police powers, introducing new offenses specifically aimed at civil disobedience, such as ‘locking-on’, ‘obstruction of major transport works and key national infrastructure’ and ‘serious disruption by tunnelling’. The effects of these laws manifested rapidly. According to *The Guardian*, more than half of the 630 arrests made during JSO protests in London in autumn 2023 were under the newly implemented Public Order Act. In December, a climate activist was sentenced to six months in jail for participating in a peaceful slow march protest, marking one of the first convictions under this new law¹¹.

While arrests and convictions provide straightforward examples of ‘hard’ repression, the effects of the new laws in the UK have extended into more insidious forms of public space closure, particularly through the widespread use of civil injunctions, police surveillance, and the tendency of some judges to prevent activists from speaking about their motivations in court. Civil injunctions allow (public or private) companies to ask a court to prevent individuals from protesting on specific public roads or motorways. Activists are liable for the company’s legal costs, and breaching an injunction can result in unlimited fines, up to two years in prison (Forst 2024). Although the effects of injunctions are straightforward, they are not so visible as they are often issued without media attention or parliamentary scrutiny. Instead, activists receive letters informing them of the injunctions, creating an administrative and financial burden that can discourage participation:

“So your name is on the list. I have a pile of papers that high, I mean literally it keeps sliding down, and then the dog loves that and she lies on top of it [...] I’m probably liable for something like 5000 pounds.” (JSO activist, 2023).

¹⁰ Smith S. (2022), “Labour calls on Tories to block and ‘simplify arrests’ of Just Stop Oil protesters”, *The Independent* (<https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/labour-just-stop-oil-injunction-b2056684.html>) [Accessed 21 May 2025].

¹¹ Gayle D. (2023, December 15), “Just Stop Oil Activist Jailed for Six Months for Taking Part in Slow March”, *The Guardian*, (www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/15/just-stop-oil-activist-is-first-to-be-jailed-under-new-uk-protest-law) [Accessed 21 May 2025].

Apart from the administrative burden (a usual consequence of state policing), the complexity of these injunctions can also make activists uncertain about which roads remain accessible for their protests, complicating their ability to navigate the public space, as this example illustrates:

“The march was being planned to try to avoid those particular roads. [...] And one time [the road] that was chosen was between two roads that were implemented, and it wasn't a very long road, so we had somebody who was cycling between to make sure that the backup traffic didn't back up onto that road because if it did we'd be breaking the injunction so as soon as it was, they'd alert us and we'd get off the road” (JSO activist, 2023).

Beyond legal injunctions, the freedom to navigate public spaces is also constrained by the fear of police surveillance. In extreme cases, activists can be arrested without having breached the law or even planned to do so, fostering the suspicion that they are constantly being watched. For example, during the coronation of Charles III, activists were arrested simply for wearing JSO T-shirts which they had not even publicly displayed. Many believed this was made possible using facial recognition technology. This feeling of being under surveillance can also arise in more routine and infrapolitical contexts, even when there are no immediate consequences. For example, one activist I interviewed was surprised when an officer he had never spoken to addressed him by name during a protest, confirming that he was known to the police.

While activists are uncertain about their access to certain public spaces or whether they are under surveillance and should behave within the boundaries of the law, the repressive environment in the UK also limits their understanding of the potential consequences they may face for their actions. In July 2024, five JSO activists were convicted to several years of imprisonment for ‘conspiracy to cause a public nuisance’ after organising a Zoom call to recruit volunteers for a M25 blockade. This uncertainty about the potential consequences of civil disobedience actions is further compounded by the fact that activists are now unsure whether they will be able to express their motivations in court. In several cases, judges have prohibited activists from mentioning climate change in their defence. Some activists even have been charged with ‘contempt of court’ for speaking out, including those who protested outside courts to highlight the motivation behind their actions¹². This directly undermines a core principle of civil disobedience: the use of trials to draw attention to a cause.

The hostile environment surrounding climate movements can also affect activists’ personal lives. Many interviewees reported losing friends after tense discussions, and some faced threats to their families or jobs. One activist, after his face was published in a local newspaper, encountered negative judgments at work and feared permanent exclusion. His wife left him, accusing him of prioritising activism over family. While it’s hard to distinguish whether these consequences stem from repression or are simply part of most intense activist experiences, two conclusions are clear. First, the hostile environment can only increase the personal cost of protesting. Second, hostility in the private sphere can, in this context, be interpreted as confirming a broader

¹² Siddique H. (2024, 11 July), “What Restrictions Are Placed on Defendants in Climate Protest Trials?”, *The Guardian*, (www.theguardian.com/law/article/2024/jul/11/climate-protest-trials-evidence-restrictions-m25-activists) [Accessed 9 Oct. 2024].

societal hostility, as exemplified by one activist’s fear of the ‘eye-roll moment’ she encountered in every conversation about climate change. Thus, repression is not limited to the most direct forms of public space policing that have resulted from the implementation of new protest laws. Rather, repression can also arise from less visible mechanisms that constrain activists’ access not only to the public spaces where they act, but also to the public sphere of their justifications, extending even into their interactions within the private sphere. The way movements and activists respond to this multidimensional repression demonstrates its effectiveness, even if some agency remains for movements’ strategies.

5. Responding to a Multi-Dimensional Repression

The impact and scope of repression cannot be fully understood – particularly when examining its most insidious dimensions – without considering how movements and their constituents respond, whether by constraining, amplifying, or transforming their activism. The literature presents mixed findings on this issue, ranging from deterrence to increased motivation and radicalisation (Della Porta and Reiter 2022; Della Porta 2018). Similarly, with regard to soft repression, Jämte and Ellefsen (2020) demonstrated that movements may respond either by turning outward – seeking legitimacy and moderation – or inward, retreating into clandestinity. Drawing on my case study and taking advantage of the account of the multidimensional nature of repression in its more or less visible expressions, I propose to enrich these perspectives by identifying four distinct ways in which movements (at the meso level) and activists (at the less immediately noticeable micro level) can respond to repression in both the public space and the public sphere, ranging from dissuasion to radicalisation. The typology, shown in Table 3, is conceived as a continuum, permitting overlap between responses and leaving open the possibility that actors move between them over time.

Table 3 – A classification of how movements and activists can respond to public space and sphere repression

	<i>Public space strategy</i>	<i>Public sphere strategy</i>	<i>Effects on activists</i>	<i>Example</i>
<i>Dissuasion</i>	Abandonment of a controversial mode of action	Public apology or distancing to regain legitimacy	Contrition or defection	XR’s public apology following the Canning Town action (2019)
<i>Depoliticisation</i>	Negotiation of presence in public space	Reframing actions to counter stigmatisation and appeal to the ‘public’	Internalisation of perceived unpopularity	XR’s ‘Big One’ action and strategy shift (2023)
<i>Persistence</i>	Disobedience to restrictions, acceptance of prison	Denunciation of repression / expansion of the cause	Sacrificial commitment	Repeated road blockages (JSO)
<i>Radicalisation</i>	Retreat from the public space	Anonymity in the public space	Clandestinity	Sabotage

5.1 Dissuasion

The first type of response to repression is dissuasion. In the face of public criticism, movements may abandon more controversial forms of action in an attempt to regain legitimacy. This was evident when XR renounced railway disruptions following the widely criticised Canning Town action. The internal strategic shift was not considered sufficient as the movement felt compelled to publicly announce the change and issue an apology. At the same time, XR became increasingly cautious about actions that disrupted traffic, particularly as tabloid coverage intensified. *The Daily Mail*, for instance, took clear satisfaction in publishing a photo of a tearful activist, alleging that a roadblock in Bristol had prevented a man from attending his father's funeral¹³. At the level of individual activists, repression can lead to contrition when they internalise criticism and experience guilt about their actions. In some cases, this results in defection, with activists distancing themselves from the movement after disagreeing with particular actions, as it has been the case within XR.

5.2 Depoliticisation

A second form of response is depoliticisation, particularly evident in movements' interventions in the public sphere when they feel compelled to counter stigmatisation. This reflects Maestri and Monforte's (2022) observation that, when faced with criticism, pro-refugee volunteers often sought to regain approval by framing their actions as private initiatives rooted in compassion rather than as political commitments. A similar dynamic shaped Extinction Rebellion's direction following its 'We Quit' statement in late 2022, in which the movement announced a temporary suspension of disruptive tactics in an effort to regain public support. Such pursuit of consensus and legitimacy can lead to negotiated forms of visibility in public space (García 2014). In April 2023, XR indeed negotiated a three-day occupation of Parliament Square as part of this new approach, deploying pink-jacketed stewards to ensure demonstrators avoided unauthorised areas.

The outcome of the 'Big One' was ambiguous: although XR fell short of its goal to mobilise 100,000 participants, it still drew several thousand. The action received limited media coverage, but XR used the event to reaffirm that civil disobedience remains necessary to draw attention to the climate crisis. However, this did not mark a simple return to earlier tactics. The Big One phase prompted activists to internalise public criticism and led to a reconceptualisation of civil disobedience – not as a unified strategy, but as two distinct tactics: disruptive actions targeting the general public (increasingly viewed as counterproductive), and 'targeted disruption' focused on powerholders and corporations (perceived as more legitimate).

"There's one woman who lives a few streets down, she slammed the door in my face. About two years ago. I kind of wish I could find her door and go knock again, you know and say what do you think now? [laugh] Will you come? And also you can use it to manipulate people into thinking about their

¹³ Platell, A. (2019), "Platell's people: Heartless Extinction Rebellion anarchist cries crocodile tears", *The Daily Mail*, (https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-7266847/PLATELLS-PEOPLE-Heartless-Extinction-Rebellion-anarchist-cries-crocodile-tears.html?ico=authors_pagination_desktop) [Accessed 23 May 2025].

behaviour. Because you can say you know, to people, look, you didn't like the tactics, now we've given them up, now are you going to show up?" (XR activist, 2023).

While they once thought themselves as embodying the general interest, many activists began to see themselves as a marginal minority needing to win back the elusive, abstract figure of 'the public'.

5.3 Persistence

The third type of response is persistence for movements that refuse to alter their tactics even as the political context worsens. This dynamic is exemplified by two groups that came to the forefront of UK climate activism after winter 2021-2022. In response to Extinction Rebellion's perceived ineffectiveness, Insulate Britain (IB) and Just Stop Oil (JSO) focused on a single demand (insulating homes and halting new fossil fuel licensing), while reviving disruptive road blockades tactics, especially targeting the M25 near London. During parliamentary debates on the Public Order Bill, Conservative MPs used IB and JSO as examples to argue that new restrictions were not aimed at protest generally, but only at those deemed 'illegitimate':

*Paul Bristow, Conservative MP: "I am not talking about those quite nice Extinction Rebellion protesters, local Peterborough people, to whom my office gave tea when they protested outside it. Those people were not blocking the highway or gluing themselves to public infrastructure"*¹⁴.

This framing of 'good' versus 'bad' protesters recalls the 'velvet glove' and 'iron fist' tactics used by the police during anti-fracking protests to keep protestors within the acceptable limits of protest (Gilmore, Jackson and Monk 2017). We can today find a similar way of dealing with climate protests depending on whether the disruption is deemed acceptable (if negotiated) or intolerable (when unpredictable) by the police. An XR activist recalls liaising an XR protest that unexpectedly took place near another (unreported) JSO action. The police officer present clearly signalled that he was making a difference between the two groups:

"[He] said 'they do what they do, you do what you do. [...] we are taking it as two different protests because you came to speak to us first'." (XR activist, 2023).

Indeed, unlike XR, which frequently negotiates its presence or notifies the police in advance of its actions, JSO has chosen to preserve the unpredictability of its tactics. However, persistence here does not simply mean sticking to the same strategies of civil disobedience. In reaction to repression, JSO has broadened its message to include the defence of democratic protest rights, similar to the anti-fracking movement in the 2010s (Muncie 2020). At the same time, many activists have adopted more radical rhetoric, positioning themselves in 'resistance' to a 'fascist government' committing 'genocide'. This shift is often accompanied by a heightened sense of personal sacrifice:

¹⁴ Hansard (2022, May 23), "Public Order Bill" (Vol. 715) (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-05-23/debates/73F4EB27-59E6-4CF4-98A5-2CF89A6CA34F/PublicOrderBill>)

“I’ve been in [jail]. I’ve been arrested over 20 times. I have a criminal record now. [...] I’m on injunctions, civil injunctions not to go on the M25, not to go on to the strategic network, not to be in front of an oil refinery. And yes, the feeling is one of civil resistance, I’m pushing against this genocidal government, it’s a toxic system, that needs to change, and I’m prepared to do what I can to try and secure a liveable future for my grandson. However, it’s not just about my grandson. It’s about humanity and I have this privilege and I’m using it.” (JSO activist, 2023).

The sacrificial aspect of persistence is seen as a moral obligation, particularly by those who believe not everyone can endure the costs of repression. JSO’s strategy contrasts with XR’s focus on rebuilding a mass movement, supporting previous research that suggests repression can strengthen the motivation of a small group while deterring broader recruitment (Combes 2020). However, the concept of persistence emphasises that repression can narrow a movement without necessarily radicalising its overall strategy. JSO remains indeed committed to the same initial goal as XR – using public space to intervene in the public sphere in order to influence public opinion and pressure the government. The key difference of the persistence response is that JSO has chosen to continue this strategy despite repression.

5.4 Radicalisation

However, proper radicalisation can still occur as a result of repression, as often described by the literature (see for example Della Porta 2018), particularly when activists begin to doubt the effectiveness of their movement’s initial strategy. The popularity of Andreas Malm’s book *How to Blowup a Pipeline* illustrates this strategic debate. For him, civil disobedience’s commitment to nonviolence has limited movements from truly challenging the business-as-usual status quo. Rather than peacefully appealing to power holders, Malm argues that environmentalists should embrace more direct tactics such as sabotage. This tactic remains on the extreme fringe of the British climate movement with a new group, Shut the System, that has claimed a small number of eco-sabotages. The Guardian reports that their first action in early 2025 involved damaging electric cables to cut off internet access for insurance firms in the City¹⁵. This action represents a clear break from XR and JSO’s adherence to civil disobedience, which prioritises visibility in public space to push for demands. In contrast, sabotage often entails invisibility in public space, anonymity in the public sphere, and clandestine organisational structures for activists.

Although Shut the System did not exist at the time of my interviews in 2023, some activists predicted that sabotage would eventually be adopted:

¹⁵ Gayle, D. (2025, March 8), “‘A new phase’: why climate activists are turning to sabotage instead of protest”, *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/08/a-new-phase-why-climate-activists-are-turning-to-sabotage-instead-of-protest>) [Accessed 21 May 2025].

“I think that the climate movement will scale up its tactics, so I think there'll be more sabotage, I can see even acts of terrorism, depending on how you define that. And I think there's going to be a shift into more of an anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian kind of ideology.” (JSO activist, 2023).

Despite this, none of the activists I interviewed – whether from XR or JSO – had committed or considered committing acts of sabotage. Among their reasons, they cited the potential cost of repression (including prison time) and the possible backlash from public opinion.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the conventional distinction between soft and hard repression should be overcome in order to study how different forms of repression can interact to limit, in more or less covert ways, the ability of movements and activists to access both the public space of action and the public sphere of justification. I have shown that these different forms of repression can reinforce one another without necessarily overlapping.

During an initial phase, the media and political reception acknowledged the role of civil disobedience movements in raising awareness about climate issues. However, over time, a shift towards hostile rhetoric began to frame activists as a threat to democratic values and economic stability. This transformation was primarily driven by traditional actors of the climate change countermovement, including tabloid media and conservative MPs. This discursive shift paved the way for more visible forms of repression, such as new laws explicitly targeting civil disobedience. Yet, the true extent of repression went far beyond these legislative measures. Civil injunctions, surveillance, and contempt of court emerged as more insidious forms of exclusion, quietly narrowing the space in which activists could operate and express themselves.

Drawing on this case study, I have argued that accounting for the different dimensions of repression can deepen our understanding of the various ways in which it compels movements and activists to reinvent their strategies within both the public space and the public sphere. Moving beyond the traditional deterrence/motivation dichotomy, I identified four distinct responses to repression: dissuasion, depoliticisation, persistence, and radicalisation. While dissuasion may lead activists to withdraw from public activism as a form of contrition – often prompted by the internalisation of criticism – radicalisation, at the opposite end of the spectrum, can drive them to abandon the public sphere altogether in favour of more extreme forms of action, such as sabotage.

However, I have shown that climate movements have primarily followed the paths of depoliticisation and persistence. As exemplified by Extinction Rebellion, depoliticisation has meant regaining legitimacy in the eyes of a ‘general public’ – portrayed by tabloid media and conservative actors as a law-abiding silent majority. Persistence, by contrast, has entailed from Just Stop Oil continued reliance on disruptive tactics such as roadblocks, despite the risks of repression. While depoliticisation comes at the expense of the political character of civil disobedience, placing emphasis on consensus-building, persistence exacts a high personal toll on activists, who must bear the consequences of sustained repression.

These findings on the interaction of different forms of repression should be tested in other contexts and/or with actors whose relationship to the public space and sphere differs from that of civil disobedience movements. On the one hand, group-level characteristics (such as ideology, strategic repertoire, organisational structure, and social composition), as well as national contextual factors (including political culture and partisan configurations in government) and the nature of the cause itself, may produce divergent patterns and outcomes. On the other hand, in representative democracies where public space and the public sphere are institutionally and normatively intertwined, different forms of repression may likewise be expected to be structurally interconnected, involving both state and non-state actors in mutually reinforcing ways.

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