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Judith Pape

judith.pape@uab.cat

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Giorgos Kallis

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya

Lund University

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Judith Pape, Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
Judith.Pape@uab.cat

Giorgos Kallis, Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA) and Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Technology and Society Department, Lund University, Swede

Corresponding author:

Judith Pape, Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
Judith.Pape@uab.cat

Abstract

Studies of climate and environmental movements have largely relied on media reporting as a proxy for political influence, yet this proxy cannot account for how movements interfere with the vested economic interests that underpin the existing balance of power. Starting from the premise that movements have been learning to strategise beyond particular issues and sites of struggle, we develop a framework that conceptualises a set of advanced aspects of movement strength as what we call *imposing capacity*. This term refers to the strategic and organisational capacity to limit the terrain of struggle and persistently shape it without being contained or fully repressed. Imposing capacity sits at the boundary between what is currently empirically observable and what history has shown to be possible. The framework draws on dynamics of contention theory and Marxist perspectives on social movements and enables empirical analysis of movement strength at the meso level of society. It treats the balance of power as dynamic rather than fixed: a contingent outcome of conflict between social movements from above and below. Applying the framework to study imposing capacity across contexts allows for sharper theorisations of movement struggle and of its possible role in larger-scale transformation in the environmental justice and degrowth literatures.

Keywords: antagonism, contention, imposing capacity, Soulèvements de la Terre, degrowth, environmental justice

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest to interrogate the ways in which the climate predicament is caused by and interwoven with social power. Power, broadly, is grasped as vested economic interests, as the IPCC has also recognized in its last assessment report (Ipcc, 2023). In its current form, power can be broken down into sectoral clusters of influential industries that oppose and obstruct attempts of ecosocial transformations in various ways (Bärnthaler et al., 2024; Stoddard et al., 2021; Brand et al., 2020). Other engagements theorize it more comprehensively as the longstanding capitalist power flowing from the material properties of the energy system that constitutes modern capitalism (Mitchell, 2023), and as class power with a material interest in suppressing social forces from below to maintain surplus extraction through exploitation (Malm, 2016).

Consequently, research on the environmental and climate movement is asking how the movement can become more powerful. This, however, is harder to operationalise: a movement's strength cannot be derived from a figure of value produced or a percentage of market share. A significant portion of climate movement scholarship has studied the media reporting on movement activity as an operationalisable proxy to political influence and therefore change (Scheuch et al., 2024; Hayes & O'Neill, 2021; Lochner et al., 2024). The advantage of this approach is the availability of different sources of empirical data that show trends over time, like certain tactics and corresponding news articles which allow comparisons with polls and surveys. Within this line of scholarship there is an ongoing debate whether "all publicity is good publicity" or whether public perception of the issue is suffering from controversial movement action or negative media portrayal (Vandeweerdt, 2026; Kenward & Brick, 2024; Fritz et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Joly et al., 2025; Brehm & Gruhl, 2024).

These studies offer valuable insight into protest impacts in the media and on public opinion – yet few critically discuss how public opinion translates into actual political change. What remains unaccounted for is precisely the insight that vested economic interests stand opposed to the goals and demands of the climate movement. Even if public perception changes, attempts towards actual climate transformation remain vulnerable to opposition and targeted influence from elites until and beyond policy implementation (Meng & Rode, 2019; Brulle, 2018; see also Bärnthaler et al., 2024).

More concretely, this way of proxying political influence encounters two issues. First, it leaves undertheorized how a successful "winning" of the discourse interacts with the existing balance of power. Does it assume that the balance of power changes through public perceptions? Or does it assume that the balance of power remains the same, but political institutions absorb and legislate the will of the movement? Second, it conceptualises society at large as a static background on which movement activity unidirectionally and gradually impacts – mediated only by news reporting. This perpetuates blind spots towards the many ways in which society is rapidly shifting today, from economic crises and the rising cost of living, the rise of the far right and the authoritarian restructuring of the state to renewed mobilization to war and a genocide. The climate and environmental movement wrestles with these dynamics as would any successful realisation of climate and environmental politics. These puzzles call for a wider, more encompassing and dynamic conceptualisation of movement strength in society to theorize how it interferes with vested interest in the existing balance of power. In this approach, public discourse remains a

relevant aspect but is neither assumed to be immune to vested economic interests nor to be the main driver of change.

Some studies into the climate and environmental movement have foregrounded these questions of power. They explicate their assumptions on how social movements might interfere with the existing balance of power, accepting this as a necessary condition for political change. Temper et al. (2018) establish that power-focused research of social movements benefits from a conflict transformation approach, meaning a perception of conflict as productive for transformation. Another conceptual advancement is LeQuesne's (2019) work on petro hegemony, which conceptualises fossil power as compliance, consent, and coercion in the state, culture, and the economy. Lastly, Young and Thomas-Walters (2024) reject the public-discourse proxy directly, arguing that "majority support is the wrong metric". Drawing on Young's extensive study of historical movement victories (2024) they contend that change becomes possible when movements manage to impose sustained and escalating costs on polluting industries and financial institutions. This emergent body of power-focused research understands movement strategy as a conscious effort of productive conflict with the state and elites. Our contribution aims to further develop the conceptual toolkit of this line of power-focused movement scholarship by conceptualising the strength that movements build through protracted conflict.

In this article, we present a conceptual framework to grasp movement strength with advanced properties along two dimensions: a horizontal dimension that distinguishes phases of conflict escalation, and a vertical dimension that captures relative strength in society. The framework is tailored for the stage at which a movement establishes itself at the meso level of society as a recognised social force, committed to staying in protracted conflict and building the capacity to impose sustained and escalating costs on elites at the macro level. We call this stage of movement strength *imposing capacity*. Our framework thus built around the central question: How are movements building and expanding their *imposing capacity* and how does this capacity interfere with the existing balance of power in society?

We mobilise conceptual vocabulary from two different bodies of social movement scholarship: from the Dynamics of Contention (DoC) line of movement research and from Marxist perspectives on social movements. The DoC framework is one of the most cited in social movement research, but its positivist and at-a-distance-from-the-field approach puts it at odds with a more engaged Marxist approach (Cox et al., 2017). Nonetheless, we believe that taken together, these two lines of thought offer a powerful set of conceptual tools: while DoC provides a rich, case-based vocabulary to characterise a range of conflict patterns spanning from local eruptions of discontent to revolutionary rupture, the Marxist school grounds the analysis in dialectical materialism and connects it with insights from the history of class conflict. This combined approach can be a base for research at eye level with movements, taking their own processes of knowledge generation seriously and studying conflict dynamics as they unfold.

Research on Environmental Justice (EJ) and Degrowth, with which we will engage in more detail in this article, have started to conceptualise the role of different socio-environmental movement struggles as part of comprehensive system change. They have, however, addressed only some aspects of the dynamic we want to capture. Scheidel et al. (2018), for example, have laid out how the EJ movement's capacity to oppose, e.g., a local infrastructure project might trigger broader transformative processes, describing

grassroots movements in resistance around the globe as forces for sustainability. Understanding the ways in which these opposing forces exceed the local scale of conflict remains a challenge, nonetheless. Degrowth scholarship, in turn, engages theoretically with possibilities of transformation that emerge through social movements in conflict (Chertkovskaya, 2022; D'Alisa et al., 2013; Burkhart et al., 2020). Yet, as of now, there is little insight into how such possibilities can materialise. Here, our framework offers an analytical vocabulary to study how social movements persistently challenge the status-quo beyond the local level and contribute to transformation: by building their *imposing capacity*.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we lay out the conceptual framework and situate the concept of *imposing capacity* within it, drawing on illustrative examples from Fridays for Future, the Indian Farmers Movement and the French movement alliance Soulèvements de la Terre. Second, we return to scholarship on Environmental Justice and Degrowth and show how the framework can help advance their theories of system change and the role of movements in protracted conflict within these. We conclude by summarising the framework and calling for engaged research at eye level with climate and environmental justice movements.

The analytics of imposing capacity

The horizontal dimension: phases of contention

A useful starting point to conceptualise agile movement strength is the characterisation of different phases of movement action. McAdam et al. (2001) speak of *transgressive contention* when political conflict erupts and shakes up routine politics. Two well-known examples are the storming of the Bastille in eighteenth-century Paris and the Montgomery Bus Boycott against racial segregation in 1950s Alabama. Transgressive contention stands in contrast to the more common phenomenon of *contained contention*, referring to forms of political contestation that pose less of a challenge to existing regimes. For instance, an ordinary election campaign of an opposition party could serve as an example: claims are made that challenge the incumbent government, but through institutionalised channels and by an already established actor in a routinised manner.

A phase of transgressive contention can unfold when a new collective actor emerges, when there is innovation in collective action, or both (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 8). Moments of transgressive contention can, for example, expose the regime's vulnerability or open possibilities for change that before seemed out of reach (McAdam et al., 2001, pp. 54–55) – and thus open a first fissure in a seemingly impenetrable balance of power. Such moments, we may add, need not be confined to an early stage of emergent movement, but can also occur later, as a movement adapts and innovates, manifesting its persistent presence and escalating the conflict to a different stage.

DoC offers a sensitive approach to analyse such shifts over longer stretches of time, when extended phases of contained contention lead to seemingly sudden outbursts of transgressive contention and a regression back into containment. This sensitivity holds space precisely for the developing and shifting qualities of movement strength in protracted conflict. To analyse such qualitative shifts in a concrete contentious interplay, McAdam et al. (2001) introduce the conceptual vocabulary of mechanisms as a family of "smaller chunks" of contentious politics (Goodwin & Jasper, 2012). The mechanisms introduced in DoC serve to deconstruct complicated processes into smaller, transferable components to

make them comparable across contexts and scales (McAdam et al., 2001, pp. 27–28; 38–190). Expanding on the example of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the authors illustrate the mechanisms of *identity formation* and *social appropriation*. They contend that the movement's success with an astounding 90–95% of the local Black bus patronage participating in the boycott was due to skilful organising of the Civil Rights movement during the previous contained phase. Organisers had been active in Montgomery's Black church community – an institution that traditionally avoided political engagement. Over years, they creatively brokered between the movement and the congregation, stressing the shared Black *political identity* and forming new coalitions by emphasizing the common goal of Black voting rights. According to McAdam et al. (2001, 47), these efforts led to the *appropriation* of churches as "vehicles of collective protest", laying the groundwork for the boycott that initiated a powerful phase of transgressive contention.

Could the movement's strength in climate and environmental conflicts be approached with these tools? Arguably, the last decades have seen examples of transgressive contention. A recent example would be the tactical innovation performed by Fridays for Future (FFF), initiating the "generational reproduction strike" – an action that applies the tactic of the strike to schools as institutions of social reproduction by the youth as a generational collective actor (König, 2022, p. 217). The tactic's global impact can be understood through the mechanism of *emulation* – meaning the imitation and broadening participation in contention (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 335) – as the strikes initiated by Greta Thunberg inspired kids across the world. The shared expression of the school strike catapulted the climate crisis to the centre of public attention. During this phase, the climate strikers managed to "morph the so often abstractly talked about 'future generations' into a viable, globally organized political subject actively articulating and defending its material interest" (König, 2022, 218).

Mechanisms such as emulation and identity formation can converge in a *scale shift*, meaning a process of expansion of contention from local to broader scales, involving more actors and higher stakes. The Fridays for Future school strike for the climate is a case in point here, with contention shifting from a local to a global scale within months (König, 2022, p. 219).

At first glance, transgressive contention might resemble "disruptive protest", which in the recent literature on the climate movement is often understood as disrupting the flow of normalcy and breaking society's rules (see Mattheis, 2022; Berglund, 2023; Jansma et al., 2024). But what McAdam et al. (2001) flesh out conceptually is the possibility, or even likelihood, of an initially disruptive tactic over time regressing into containment if the movement fails to adapt to changing conditions. Many considered climate strikes as disruptive during FFF's meteoric rise in 2018 and 2019 (see Friberg, 2022; Marquardt, 2020). Over the years, however, it became a routine – or in the words of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly: *contained*. It follows that disruption, as understood here, is not an inherent feature of a tactic but is instead shaped by shifting societal conditions. Movements, in turn, face the challenge of building the strategic and organisational capacity to adapt to those shifting conditions and to persistently engage in protracted conflict, so as to defy a regression into containment.

Such regressive shifts can be analysed with the help of mechanisms as well. A shift from transgressive to contained contention can occur through the following: *accommodation*, a

mechanism triggered when the state or elites offer partial concessions (McAdam et al., 2001, pp. 173, 289); and *repression* (McAdam et al., 2001, pp. 69, 315).

Conversely, when trying to understand advanced movement strength, close attention should be paid to contention that can be neither accommodated through partial concessions nor repressed. Here, transgressive contention marks an important but fugitive opening phase. In the following section we introduce the emergence of imposing capacity as a distinct phase of intense contention that is marked by movements persistently shaping the terrain of their struggle.

DoC offers a flexible conceptual framework to break down societal dynamics that may develop possibilities towards an imposing capacity over time, as movement actors learn to move in these dynamics. Its broad terminology allows careful comparison of mechanisms of contention across different societal contexts. However, DoC remains agnostic regarding the relevance and specifics of material drivers and historical causes of any contentious interplay (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 330). If not consciously examined, this agnosticism can turn into a serious omission, as is exemplified in DoC's brief discussion of the Sukarno-Suharto regime change in Indonesia (McAdam et al., 2001, 328–330). In this case, the authors overlooked the influence of U.S. covert interventions to weaken Sukarno's government (Kahin & Kahin, 1995), as well as U.S. support for the Indonesian military, led by General Suharto, which helped lay the groundwork for anti-communist mass killings that followed the regime change (Scott, 1985). This example illustrates the shortcomings of an approach that focuses on immanent conflict patterns while neglecting the historical and material causes of conflict. We hence turn to Marxist social movement research to close this conceptual gap and structure the field of investigation of conflict and movement strength.

The vertical dimension: social movements from above and below

Marxist perspectives on social movements understand conflict as stemming from the material constitution of society, realized through contradictions, and playing out as antagonisms (Krinsky, 2024, pp. 79–82). This theoretical lens allows us to situate the collective learning processes that manifest in emergent movement strength within the material reality of climate and environmental justice struggles. Furthermore, it incorporates elite organisations and the state into the analysis as animated forces that shape the terrain upon which the movement builds its strength. Both interventions are necessary for theorising a movement's relative strength and its interference with the existing balance of power. Cox and Nilsen (2014) offer *social movements from above* as a term for precisely this kind of analysis. They define it as:

> the collective agency of dominant groups [...] that aims to maintain or modify a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities in ways that either reproduce or extend the power of these groups, and their hegemonic position within a given social formation (Cox & Nilsen, 2014, pp. 59–60).

Social movements from above can advance their interest through privileged access to state institutions. They can take diverse institutional shapes, from conservative organisations to think-tanks and transnational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. And just as broad has been the set of strategies available to them: from structuring economic production to the globalisation of flexible accumulation in the neoliberal era; "via political practices, whether counter-insurgency and policing strategies or models of crisis

management espoused by international financial institutions; to cultural strategies" (Cox & Nilsen, 2014, p. 60)

This concept compels researchers to form a deeper assessment of agency formation in protracted conflict. It offers a lens to connect the micro and meso scales of movement struggles to the broader scale of ecosocial conflict and the underlying material contradictions that sometimes escape analytic scrutiny when zooming in on particular social movement organisations or regional environmental conflicts. Such a dual-centred analysis creates an "ontological comparability" between the collective agency of dominant and subaltern groups (Cox & Nilsen, 2014, p. 61).

Cox and Nilsen understand the agency of social movements from above as a constant and longstanding historical reality that "first produces and then buttresses what Marx called 'the silent compulsion of economic relations'" (2014, p. 62). Their activity becomes more salient in times of heightened conflict, when the existing order is challenged. Davies (2025, pp. 443–447) describes how, in Montreal's 2012 anti-austerity-struggles, the regional government of Quebec contained the challenge by driving a wedge into the popular Maple Spring coalition: it offered established trade unions in the alliance minimal concessions, thereby weakening the alliance and sidelining informally organised actors like movement organisations.

However, in dozens of historical cases, popular struggles have not only resisted containment but even managed to alter the cost-benefit calculation of capitalist decision-making. Citing the successful auto worker strikes against General Motors in the 1930s, for instance, Young shows how one local victory over a powerful opponent can have national, sectoral, and institutional ripple effects (2024, pp. 123–156). Today, as the climate and environmental crisis throws the hegemonic order into question, social movements from above might run into more serious constraints. By taking such constraints into account, and by taking the possibility of such volatility in protracted conflict seriously, research moves towards a dynamic conception of the balance of power – including possible scenarios in which movements from above fragment, regress, or collapse.

Unlike social movements from above*, social movements from below* cannot rely on any pre-established dominance or a privileged access to the state (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, pp. 64–65). On the contrary, they involve or are led by economically exploited or excluded groups – workers, peasants, the urban poor – whose material position in society forms the basis for their potential challenge to the existing balance of power (Barker, 2013, pp. 52–55). Rather than merely being victims, these segments of society can become drivers of change by analysing their conditions and engaging in praxis to transform material contradictions into broad societal conflicts. Cox and Nilsen therefore characterize *social movements from below* as generative projects or simply collective learning processes. Through struggle and under the right conditions, they collectively develop their analysis and praxis to move from issue-specific mobilisations to challenging the overarching structures that generate societal problems (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, pp. 82–87). Such a theorisation helps us grasp ongoing phases of heightened contention as the contingent phenomena they are. It avoids predetermining them as brief phases of transgression that will eventually be contained from above, instead keeping the analytical attention open to a wider spectrum of possibilities. It also provides the analytical criteria needed to study how contemporary movements build and expand their imposing capacity as they learn to challenge the existing balance of power.

To illustrate how material conditions enable collective agency from below, Cox examines the 19th century European working class. He argues that Marx and Engels focused on the working class not because workers were the most impoverished, but because they represented the most effective political force: "with a specific interest in radical change (the proletariat as universal class), a potential for rational organization, and a strategic position within globalizing capitalism" (Cox, 2024, p. 373). Such a materialist perspective on movement strength can be broken down into three analytical categories: their social base, strategic position and tactics.

Analysing a movement's *social base* means examining which social groups are actively engaged or supporting it passively. The second step is to examine what capacities that movement gains being rooted in a concrete social base and how that might limit it. Following the Marxist perspective, social movements from below to are faced with the question about which parts of society are in such a material position to have, in our case, a specific interest in radical ecosocial change. Their challenge is to unite these parts of society and tailor a political project that centres those needs vis-à-vis the needs and capacities of social movements from above.

Coming back to the example of Fridays for Future, König (2022) argues that, in places like Sweden and Germany, their primary base of support came to be what he calls the "green bourgeoisie", a part of society that aligns with 'green' NGOs, businesses, and political parties. While the material backing of the green bourgeoisie was fuelling the movement's rapid rise, it also led to an unresolved relationship to green capital (meaning those fractions of capital that support the ecological modernisation of capitalism rather than a fundamental challenge to it). As a result, König argues, much of the political momentum generated by FFF has been absorbed into projects of ecological modernisation that left the existing balance of power and with it the roots of the climate crisis untouched (König, 2022, pp. 227–232). Of course, the distinction between those segments of society that have a material interest in radical change and those that stand to benefit from a perpetuation of capitalism is never neat – even less so in ongoing struggles[1]. The concept's strength is that it directs attention to the material dimensions of a movement's supporting base and offers a hypothesis for interpreting a tendency in relation to the existing balance of power. Rather than asking whether a movement has found the most powerful patrons to pick up its demands, the Marxist perspective would argue that entanglement with, or reliance on such actors may constrain the movement's capacity to force change.

The question of the *strategic position* in concrete flows and dependencies of capitalism is then linked to the examination of *tactics* of a movement. This is best illustrated by the history of the labour movement itself. As Cox (2024) remarks, organised workers occupied a strategic position within globalising capitalism. This position gave them a powerful tactic, the mass strike. Mass strikes expanded workers' collective power by targeting the interdependence between labour and capital: while capitalists owned the means of production, they couldn't generate profit without workers' labour. Mass strikes exploited

1 For a deeper investigation into the class composition of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring revolts as well as the contradictions and limitations of "middle class politics", see Tuğal (2015).

this specific vulnerability in the economic base of capitalist power and temporarily shifted the balance of that power.

A successful exploitation of the strategic position of a social group in capitalism is by no means limited to Western industrial working classes. In 1916-1917, Russian peasants seized land from the gentry during a moment of military exhaustion from WWI. By redistributing the land, they gained economic autonomy while weakening the gentry's economic base. This led to a destabilisation of the feudal-capitalist system in rural Russia, which in turn contributed to the possibility of the Russian Revolution (Skocpol, 1979, pp. 135–137). On a smaller scale, the Montgomery bus boycotters famously understood the strategic advantage that came with their specific position in the local economy: the city's public transportation system depended on the revenue from Black patronage. By collectively acting against their habit and boycotting the bus services, they took hold of a material lever that increased pressure on the city's ruling class by tackling its economic base (Jenkins et al., 2025). These examples highlight how movements, embedded in particular material circumstances and historical moments, effectively analysed and acted on their respective material positions to expand their strength. Transferring this insight to ongoing climate and environmental struggles, and accounting for this crucial aspect of movement learning conceptually, research should ask specifically whether and how social movements from below consciously limit the terrain of their struggle in a way that (a) fits their current strength and organisational capacity and (b) imposes sustained material loss on their opponent.

Towards an analysis of imposing capacity

Combining the conceptual tools introduced above enables researchers to illuminate the middle ground between grand theory and case-study-specific analyses of advanced movement strength in different contexts, with a focus on the main concept in this article: imposing capacity in protracted conflict. While DoC structures the horizontal dimension of our framework by offering tools to analyse conflict patterns over time, the Marxist perspective introduces the vertical dimension by grounding this endeavour in a dialectical materialist analysis. Yet, there is a tension between the two approaches that stems from their respective research ethos and approach to knowledge generation. The primary purpose of DoC, according to the authors, was to identify recurrent causal mechanisms and processes in contentious episodes (Tilly, 2008, p. 10; McAdam et al., 2001, p. 314). For this, they built on existing scholarly analyses of historical contentious episodes, neglecting primary material from activists and relying mostly on US-American and European scholarship. The Marxist perspectives mobilized above, in contrast, are informed by direct exchange with movements. Barker and Cox (2002) emphasise the vital role of activist theorising that comes with a practical purpose and is applied to a concrete context. Their position resonates with considerations within scholarship on degrowth and environmental justice which favour knowledge co-production at eye level with the movement (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020; Burkhart et al., 2020; Temper, Walter, et al., 2018).

We propose to apply the conceptual framework of DoC to advance a normative approach, i.e., towards the transformation of economic and political systems in an action-oriented and dialogical research design. Such a normative approach should strive to produce movement relevant theory, meaning theory that provides usable knowledge for those seeking social change (Flacks, 2004, p. 138). This requires engaging with movements already for the formulation of the research, to identify areas for research that are of concern

to the movements themselves, and a continued engagement throughout the production, refinement, and application of the research (Bevington & Dixon, 2005, p. 198).

Situating imposing capacity

We mobilise this set of vocabulary to situate the central concept of this article, *imposing capacity*, which we argue is one concrete shape movement strength takes in climate and environmental struggles today. By imposing capacity, we mean a flexible movement strength that is shaped by a commitment to stay in protracted conflict with the state and/or elites. Its force stems not from privileged access to the state but from a combination of a consciously fostering of a social base, as well as alliances and tactics that are exploiting the movement's strategic position within capitalism. It is proactive in the sense that it exceeds place-based struggles. It is a capacity that is mostly independent from an external mediator or recipient, such as the media or government. Movements that have built an imposing capacity refuse to be accommodated through partial concessions while they also can't be fully repressed. Their imposing capacity marks an unstable societal moment: the balance of power is not (or not yet) shifting, but it also cannot fully reproduce itself, precisely because these movements persistently shape the terrain of their struggle. Figure 1 illustrates how imposing capacity is situated in the analysis of a movement's strength and how it corresponds with some of the other concepts we mobilised in this article.

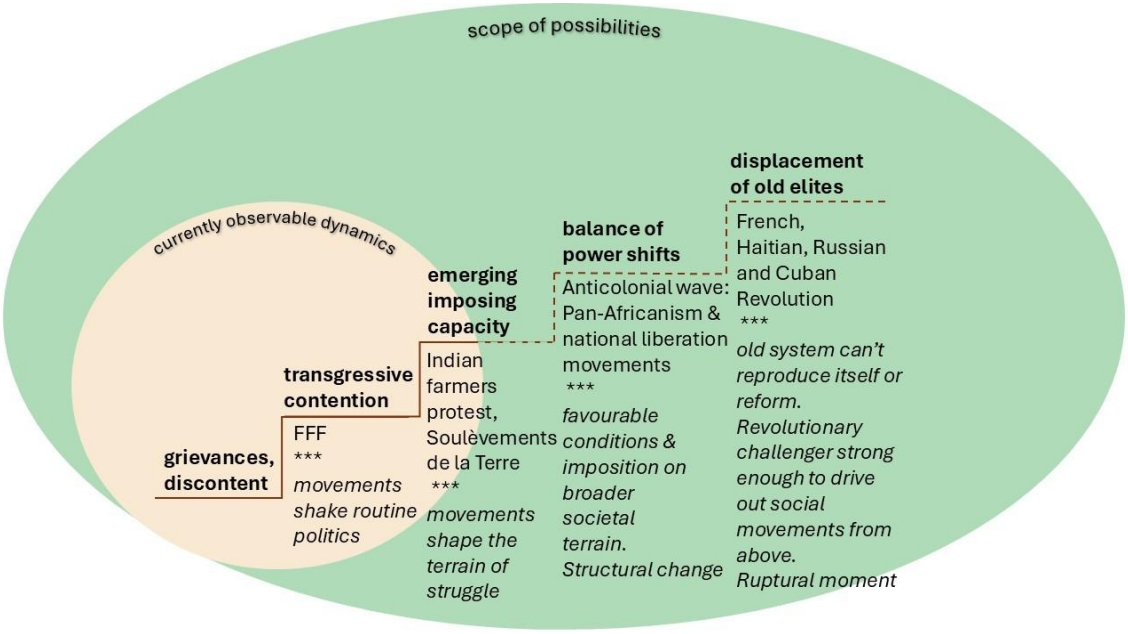

Figure 1. Visualisation of imposing capacity

Social movements from below are generative projects that initially possess limited capacity. Under certain conditions, they can develop greater skills and build imposing capacity – first shaping their immediate terrain of struggle by exploiting their strategic position in capitalism. Bit by bit they expand their strength and impact to a broader societal terrain, possibly propelled by further moments of transgressive contention. Through these processes, social movements from below can move upward and pose a serious challenge to social movements from above. Vertical lines in the step function mark a qualitative difference between each of the shapes and the difference in organisational strength that comes with it.

The staircase aims to centre a perspective on persistent and agile forms of movement strength; it does not posit movement actors as the only factor in structural change or rupture in the historical examples mentioned in the graph. Its purpose is to emphasize the qualitative differences in movement strength and its impact on the broader conjuncture and political system. It does not presuppose a fixed or consecutive order of forms that movement strength takes. Rather, qualitative shifts between these levels can occur in many ways and can be understood through mechanisms. Some mechanisms, such as identity formation and emulation help understand escalating, upwards momentum. Repression, accommodation and other forms of demobilisation mark a downward momentum.

Imposing capacity captures an expression of movement strength that sits right at the boundary of what is currently observable with regard to persistent social movement strength on the one hand, and the broader scope of possibilities that is informed by historical cases of social transformations and ruptures on the other. Like transgressive contention, it marks a stage of heightened conflict that signals the possibility of alternatives or a leap. But while transgressive contention refers to a short-lived eruption, imposing capacity demonstrates persistence and agility – operating on a *limited but critical terrain of struggle*. This terrain is small enough to be shaped by the movement's current organisational strength, yet too significant to ignore. This was the case with the Indian farmers' movement alliance that won a repeal of three neoliberal farm laws in 2021. After blocking major highways to Delhi for more than a year, it became clear to the Indian government that the movement's will, imposed in protracted conflict, could neither be ignored nor repressed (see Hasan, 2025). The organisational strength needed to impose the movement's demands at the gates of the capital for such a long time was achieved through continuous coordination of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (United Farmers Front), a decision-making body that united several dozen farmers unions from across the country. The year-long blockade successfully brought together people from different communities, religions, castes, states, regions, and organisations (Singh Tiwana, 2025, p. 76).

Another illustrative example for imposing capacity on a strategically limited terrain of struggle is the French movement alliance Les Soulèvements de la Terre (Uprisings of the earth, SLT). SLT have mobilised tens of thousands of people to industrial or infrastructure construction sites and is known for applying antagonistic tactics, such as mass blockades, land occupation or disarmament (sabotage) (Les Soulèvements de la Terre, 2024, p. 10). The alliance aims to support territorial resistance against controversial infrastructure projects, to build an overall stronger movement by winning winnable fights (Les Soulèvements de la Terre, 2024, p. 238). Instead of mobilising to more typical sites of contestation for climate and environmental issues, e.g. urban centres, where disruption is perhaps more easily contained, SLT choose the opposite direction and limit their terrain of struggle to rural areas, more precisely to concrete sites of environmental harm and injustice. These sites are then fought persistently in alliance with local resistance collectives through a variety of tactics from repeated mass direct action aimed to obstruct ongoing work to litigation efforts, with the stated goal to shut them down.

A testament to the movement's agility and persistence is, on the one hand, the failed attempts to fully repress it, and, on the other hand, the success of the strategy, for instance in the fight against water reservoirs[2], also known as *méga-bassines*, in western France.

[2] The construction of water reservoirs for irrigation is a contested drought adaptation strategy. They are big open basins, built on private land, that aim to help farmers store water for irrigation. Peasants, citizens and

Many of the activists have suffered serious physical and psychological trauma through repression in various forms, from house raids to the excessive use of "less lethal" crowd control weapons by the police at sites of mass action. Especially the police strategy at the "battle of Sainte Soline" in March 2023 sparked sharp criticism by national and international organisations regarding its systematic targeting of activists' bodies and heads with grenade launchers, as in the case of Serge Duteuil-Graziani (Carpentier et al., 2023; Feletin & Khider, 2024; Observatoire toulousain des Pratiques Policières, 2023). While the physical harming and maiming of dozens of activists undoubtedly caused multilayered trauma, it failed to undermine the movement's emerging *imposing capacity* for two reasons. First, SLT came back just as strong, or perhaps even stronger, to the region of Sainte-Soline in 2024 with several thousand activists to protest water hoarding (Meslet & Cortes, 2024), demonstrating their persistence. Second, four reservoirs in the region, including the Sainte-Soline reservoir, were declared illegal by the Bordeaux Administrative Court of Appeal at the end of 2024 (Myers, 2024). In the neighbouring prefecture la Vienne 28 out of 30 planned water reservoirs are reconsidered, delayed or given up, according to the region's prefect Serge Boulanger (Ici Poitou, 2025).

The government's failed attempt at dissolving the alliance via decree further demonstrates how the movement has built a capacity to adapt to shifting conditions. Promulgated by the government in June 2023, the decree could have been a fatal blow to the movement, but it was annulled by France's highest administrative court later that same year (HRW, 2023; Le Monde, 2023). Upon the decree's surprise enactment, instead of lying low, SLT rapidly reacted by decentralising its structures and setting up 180 local chapters across the country. The alliance also called for immediate proclamations of solidarity from broader society, with 110,000 declarations of membership within days (Reporterre, 2023). The formal annulment of the decree in November 2023 cemented the uncontained nature of SLT and its persistent imposing capacity.

SLT's case also points to a broader feature of imposing capacity: unlike transgressive contention, the emergence of imposing capacity exceeds any single movement organisation's strength. It marks a contingent societal moment that can escalate into a shift in the balance of power in institutions and society alike, leading to structural change. The anticolonial wave of national liberation movements in the mid-20th century exemplifies how profound structural shifts converge with movements anchoring their claims in broader society, resulting in shifts in the balance of power. Lastly, some historical revolutions have illustrated that a persistent and agile contender can build the power to effectively displace old and structurally weakened elites.

As the macro level crises deepen, and the sphere of currently observable dynamics in movement strength expands, it becomes increasingly crucial to study these meso level phenomena in conjunction with tensions and shifts in the capitalist world system. The central research question that comes with the analytics of imposing capacity is: How are movements building and expanding their imposing capacity and how does this capacity interfere with the existing balance of power in society?

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environmentalists oppose the construction of mega-bassines because (1.) they are effectively a means to privatize water; (2.) They are equipped to pump up groundwater, exacerbating regional drought effects, and (3.) because they are cross-subsidized through water bills (Confédération paysanne, 2022).

Imposing capacity in Environmental Justice and Degrowth studies

In this section, we discuss how the framework enriches two lines of scholarship that have grappled with the question of how radical climate and environmental movements can build power: the scholarship on Environmental Justice (EJ) and degrowth scholarship (Temper, Walter, et al., 2018; Hickel, 2021). Both EJ and degrowth scholarship are interested in productive conflict, albeit from two different starting points. Conflict and resistance are the means through which the EJ movement entered the world stage and with the EJ Atlas, scholars in this field have built a rich understanding of EJ conflicts around the globe (Scheidel et al., 2020). Degrowth, on the other, hand carries its "combativeness" on the theoretical level (Akbulut et al., 2019, p. 6), challenging the dominant paradigms of capitalist economic growth, consumerism, and exploitation.

Research on the global EJ movement approaches questions of movement strength by studying territorial resistance struggles around the world as in-depth case studies and by documenting them with mapping tools such as the EJ Atlas, enabling data analysis at the aggregate level (Martínez Alier, 2023). The literature focuses on struggles against resource extraction, dams, waste disposal, urban pollution and climate justice struggles (Mohai et al., 2009; Scheidel et al., 2020, pp. 587–588; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). We argue that the qualitative, reflexive and eye-level approach of case studies developed by EJ scholars could benefit from applying the conceptual framework presented above. We make this argument by discussing two prominent categories that currently serve to conceptualise EJ movement strength, namely 'tactics' and 'success', to then point out how the conceptual framework proposed here can complement these and support a deeper analysis of the transformative potential in protracted conflict.

In the EJ lexicon, a focus on tactics, repertoires of contention or simply 'actions' helps to understand which avenues and means a movement chooses to resist a harmful project. This focus, however, tends to overlook how a movement builds its capacity to foster transformation, either in the scope of a local struggle or more broadly in society. Narrow hypotheses that connect a set of tactics directly to outcomes of EJ conflicts risk implying a linear trajectory of change as a yardstick to evaluate movement strength and they risk reifying the active and equally strategic engagement of social movements from above as 'normal' background.

In a similar vein, the category of 'success', meaning, e.g., a movement stopping a project, is central to documenting the outcome of local EJ conflicts and to the subsequent examination in comparative analyses. Success, as set out in the EJ Atlas (Temper, Demaria, et al., 2018), relies on the activists' evaluation and is assigned on a success-failure spectrum (see also Özkaynak et al., 2021). While the operationalisation of success as a concrete and quantifiable impact does enable the study of movement strength, it also pre-emptively confines such research to local manifestations of a more profound societal conflict. Whenever a movement achieves not only the termination of a destructive project locally, but also broader regulatory changes and thus success of a higher degree – as was the case, for example, in anti-mining struggles in Argentina, see Walter and Wagner (2021) – this calls for in-depth analyses of the movement's organizing practices towards higher societal scales. Single case studies are methodologically well suited to raise the ceiling of EJ successes across scales according to their respective empirical findings. However, these more expansive discussions of success and strength have yet to be integrated in a common conceptual language.

As a first step, the framework widens the scope of EJ movement research beyond tactics and case-specific successes to what has historically been possible. This methodological curiosity is anchored in the observation that trajectories of contention often proceed in a nonlinear manner, in interchanging phases of what McAdam et al. (2001) call transgressive and contained contention and the insight that movements from below might move from issue-specific struggles to challenging the balance of power.

As a second step, it suggests a way forward for studying the various aspects of movement strength (including the agency of social movements from above) in environmental conflicts of the globalising EJ movement. By asking how a movement embeds itself in broader society, how it mobilises specific social bases in its particular material context, and how that corresponds with the tactics it chooses, its capacity to foster broader transformation might be understood more thoroughly. The framework we developed in this article offers a structure for this analysis: it encourages the integration of macro factors and patterns by examining concrete interventions by social movements from above as well as learning processes at the local level. As a common interpretive vocabulary, it lays the groundwork for paired comparisons with historical cases of conflict as well as EJ conflict dynamics across territories. On this basis, it allows for the careful articulation of middle-range hypotheses regarding the development of protracted EJ conflict that is raised from the micro or meso scale to a broader societal antagonism.

Degrowth, by contrast, is a contemporary framework that provides a critical diagnosis of the current crisis in the context of climate breakdown, using this diagnosis for prognosis (Demaria et al., 2013). Schmelzer et al. (2022, p. 252) establish three types of processes that would mark a transformation of the scale and magnitude necessary for degrowth: crises in which the old order dies away, processes of adaptation and innovation, and "consciously manifested struggles" that are likely to escalate insofar as the transformations directly oppose the interests of the powerful.

In degrowth literature, tangible expressions of such struggles, i.e., blockades and civil disobedience – are discussed as ruptural movement strategies, meaning practices that temporarily halt or even "smash" harmful activities, disrupting the rhythms of capitalism (Chertkovskaya, 2022, pp. 66–67). Chertkovskaya draws on Wright (2010), who conceptualises 'rupture' as a distinct strategy of transformation that can lead Western societies away from capitalism; the other two being interstitial strategies, i.e., growing alternatives in the cracks of capitalism, and symbiotic strategies that seek transformation through reform. Wright, however, refrains from seeing ruptural strategies as a desirable way forward in overcoming capitalism. In fact, he laments the "absence of a compelling theory of mechanisms" that could generate the intensification of crisis towards rupture (ibid, 320). Similarly, ruptural strategies and more broadly persistent actors that struggle beyond the local level have received limited attention in the empirical examples of strategies in degrowth literature (see Barlow et al., 2022). So far, the concept has been a placeholder in the theorisation of transformation pathways but without offering analytical support for studies of trajectories towards its realisation. Our framework fills this gap, taking into account the dynamics of conflict at the point of collision between movement forces from below, and those that have a vested interest in maintaining the status-quo, as well as the broader societal configurations. The framework provides analytical support for inquiries into ruptural strategies and for cautious comparisons across different contexts. Through this research, degrowth scholarship can move from the conception of ruptures as

spontaneous moments that “may happen rather than be made” (Wright, 2010, p. 309) towards understanding how they may be made rather than just happen and under what structural conditions.

Within degrowth literature, there is also a growing interest in questions of state transformation (Buch-Hansen et al., 2024). While problems with state selectivities – such as neoliberal orientation and closeness to large capital – are recognised, work on the topic suggests that a state’s actions can be channelled towards transformation, including through pressure on its various institutions from civil society, such as social movements (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Koch, 2022). However, the conceptual and empirical engagement with the role of protracted conflict as part of or as a driver of transformation is rather limited. The framework encourages the examination of civil society as textured and dynamic: consisting of movements with distinct social bases that pass through different phases of contention. Here, systematic investigations into climate and environmental movement strength can provide an empirical basis for deepening the conceptual understanding of conflictual transformation pathways in different contexts, as well as for a more nuanced conceptualisation of the role of the state in conflict and transformation.

Taken together, both EJ and degrowth scholarship have established a solid empirical perspective on the local level (Martínez Alier, 2023; Kallis et al., 2022) and have begun to theorise the macro-level transformation-through-conflict (Scheidel et al., 2018, 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Yet movement strength on the meso level remains under-theorised. Our framework offers a way to narrow this gap by enabling analyses of advanced movements as proactive social forces in protracted conflict beyond territorialised conflict, possibly interfering with the societal balance of power and possibly moving from imposing conflict to shaping outcomes of the conflict. It adds value to EJ scholarship, first, by offering tools to understand EJ movement strength that exceeds the local level and second, by providing empirical grounds to theorise the transformation of larger-scale economic structures through a shaking and shifting balance of power towards environmental justice. Meanwhile, degrowth gains a systematic engagement with the ways in which the global EJ movement is shaping the possibilities of a degrowth transformation. As Martínez Alier and Rodríguez-Labajos have pointed out, the struggles of movements against extractivism and for environmental justice in the Global South can be considered as “degrowth in practice”, since they actively fight the metabolism that supports the imperial mode of living in the North (2026, p. 3). The framework proposed here pushes this insight a step further by offering an operationalisation of proactive and combative movements in the South and in the North, as we have discussed above, drawing on cases such as the Indian Farmers’ Movement and Les Soulèvements de la Terre.

Conclusion

In this article, we developed a conceptual framework for analyses of movement strength in protracted conflict. The aim of this contribution is not to find a general formula to explain forms of advanced movement capacity removed from context, but rather to systematise what we can learn empirically about it, specifically against the backdrop of the climate and ecological crisis.

The red thread that guided us through this discussion was the concept of imposing capacity. It refers to a movement's ability to create configurations in which its presence cannot be contained, and its claims cannot be ignored: a phenomenon that we see right at the

boundary between what is currently empirically observable in social movement strength and what has historically been possible. We argue that studying imposing capacity – how it emerges, expands or regresses – is key to understanding social movements' potential to widen the space for profound socio-ecological transformation.

To support empirical studies at this boundary, we mobilised two contrasting lines of social movement inquiry. The first was Dynamics of Contention, which invites researchers to analyse nonlinear and contingent processes of a movement's capacity building in protracted conflict. It focuses on one core challenge that social movements face today: transgressing the bounds of contained contention while embedding themselves advantageously in society. By breaking these complex processes down into smaller components, it allows comparisons of those components in different territories and contexts without otherwise presuming equivalence between them. We stressed that such analyses should be carried out in collaboration and at eye level with movement actors.

Second were Marxist perspectives on social movements. They offer a conceptual language for the organised agency of groups working to exacerbate the climate crisis or hinder socio-ecological transformations: social movements from above. This expansion enables an "ontological comparability" of the longstanding agency of social movements from above and the emergent strength of social movements from below. Building on a dialectical materialist perspective, we have argued that movements (from below) build their strength through analysing and acting upon their material position in society. Marxist perspectives remind us of the open field of possibility for building strength from below, as demonstrated by the history of the labour movement and national liberation movements. They emphasize a second core challenge that social movements face as they build strength: continuously learning and improving their skills in analysis and praxis through protracted struggle.

As macro-level crises deepen, advancing the conceptual integration of proactive and flexible movement strength into analyses of the balance of power that sustains business as usual becomes increasingly urgent. Further empirical studies should aim to understand and theorise aspects of an increasingly challenged or reinforced balance of power. Another possible line of inquiry would be concerned with understanding the broadening social basis of climate and environmental justice struggles and the contradictions that lie in movements' attempts to expand that social basis. Lastly, it remains to be conceptualised what possible next phases of escalation could look like, phases that might follow the emergence of imposing capacity, as movements start shifting from imposing conflict to shaping or imposing outcomes. Such work is vital to advance social movement research, to better understand the global EJ movement, degrowth transformations, and not least to make these debates relevant for the movements themselves.

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Author Contributions

J.P. conceptualised the framework, conducted the literature review, and wrote the original draft. G.K. and E.C. contributed to the conceptual development and supervised the project. J.P., G.K., and E.C. revised and edited the manuscript. All authors reviewed the manuscript and approved its submission.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

This article is a conceptual contribution and does not involve the collection or analysis of primary data. The material discussed consists of publicly available sources: online news articles, a movement manifesto (a published book), a publicly available press release from the Confédération Paysanne, a report published by an NGO, and previously published scholarship on movement dynamics. All sources are cited in the text and listed in the References. No new data were generated or analysed for this study.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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