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Title: Beyond the horizon(tality): Can hierarchical be horizontal? An ethnography of Extinction Rebellion Netherlands

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## **Abstract**

This research reconciles leaders(hip) and organizations with horizontality by showing that they give rise to hierarchies and social authorities that limit power inequalities within the movement. Since authorities and hierarchies are defined un-horizontal (Juris 2008, 354), this research prompts for horizontality's reconceptualization so that its practice actually limits power inequalities, which is ultimately horizontality's *raison d'être* (Maeckelbergh, 2009, 69). By exploring how coordination occurs through alternative politics that redesign the way power operates, this research contributes to Reedy's (2014, 639) quest for "impossible organizing." Through a participatory, militant autoethnography, I unpack the practice of horizontality within Extinction Rebellion Netherlands (XRNL) through the lens of leadership as informed by organizational processes. First, I argue that leadership practice is inseparable from XRNL's organization, which enables actors' leadership practice, legitimizes a leadership practice aimed at power equalization, and distributes leadership and power across the movement. As a result, XRNL's organization does not obliterate power but instills it into formal organizational processes that give rise to collectively accepted hierarchies and social authorities that can ultimately limit power inequalities among activists. This shows facilitators' leadership figures who, being given the social authority to manage meaning and frame actors' interactions, can exercise influence to distributes leadership and mitigate power. However, social authority and its solidification through uneven capital distributions make it difficult to challenge powerholders and might result in power centralization, hampering horizontality. Thus, horizontality is a never-ending project requiring intentionality and continuous monitoring, or else leadership and organization can become liabilities.

**Keywords:** Horizontality, Leadership, Prefiguration, Extinction Rebellion, Power, SMO

## 1. Introduction

*7th October 2019. The sun has not yet risen, and the fresh air awakens me. Amsterdam, usually quiet this early, is the witness of police sirens that disturb the silence. Despite being a new member, I need to pick up arrestee forms and bring them to our back office. For some weird reason, this feels so normal yet surreal. A couple of months ago, I would have never thought of myself as an activist. "Why am I doing this?" I ask myself while roaming through the semi-dark streets, making sure the police are not following me. Once I accomplish my task, I excitedly rush back, curiously wondering what I will find. As I turn the corner, a blockade of two thousand people opens before my eyes. "We pulled it off," I think, smiling. People are ecstatic, chanting, dancing, hugging joyfully, putting tents up. The police, not knowing how to respond to such a massive turnout, offer a deal to the police liaison. "What do you mean there is nobody in charge?!" replies the policeman in disbelief, as the liaison loudly calls for an affinity groups representatives' meeting. Being a representative, I walk a bit hesitantly towards the center of the blockade, where we are presented with the offer and prompted to discuss it with our affinity group. As I walk to mine, I feel a sense of empowerment at the idea of being so directly involved with the decision. Upon reuniting with the representatives, I am amazed by what happens. The appointed facilitator, visibly experienced, distributes power by stimulating people and energetically guides us towards a decision. Most people do not know each other, but it feels like we are talking like one, building on top of each other. I am inexperienced, but my opinion is valued. It feels magical and suspended from time and space. It feels like there is a sense of collective agency. It feels like the beginning of something new.*

That moment has stuck with me throughout my two years of involvement. Participating in a complex division of responsibilities while striving for direct and inclusive decision-making processes inspired me. Curious to better understand how leadership can exist side-by-side with actors' intention to limit power inequalities among members of the organization, I decided to investigate the notion of horizontality, the experimental political repertoire employed by movements to establish internal politics and power dynamics that prefigure the world they strive for (Leach 2013, 1). Through a participatory design, I unpacked the complexities and paradoxes of horizontality within XR NL through a lens of leadership as informed and enabled by organizational processes.

Following the path paved by Freeman (1972), Young and Schwartz (2012), Maeckelbergh (2011), and Schneider (2019), I explore how leadership and formal organization - associated by activists to "verticality" (Sutherland et al. 2014; Swain 2019)- can co-exist with and even support horizontality. Since within XR, leadership and organization support horizontality through hierarchies and authorities -commonly defined un-horizontal (Juris 2008, 354)- I prompt for horizontality's reconceptualization so that its practice achieves what it set out to: limiting power inequalities. Besides these scholarly efforts, exploring XR's everyday political practices contributes to the scarce literature on social movements' internal politics (Della Porta and Diani 2020, 4). By adding to our understanding of how coordination within an organization can occur through alternative, horizontal politics -rather than organizations' centralized hierarchies of rational bureaucracy (Clemens 2005, 355)- my research supports the quest for "impossible

organizing” (Reedy 2014, 639). Finally, using new leadership paradigms – an underexplored field within social movements (Sutherland et al. 2014, 761), I show how organizational processes and informal power dynamics relate to the practice of leadership and horizontality.

Importantly, my motivation to research this topic does not solely stem from academic ambitions. Following social movements' researcher (Reitan and Gibson 2012; Luchies 2015), I opted for a research topic grounded in movement's needs. In doing so, I hope to help XR NL see itself, re-configure its internal power dynamics, and support the movement's growth, functioning, and pursuit of its goals. This effort is particularly relevant considering that XR is a recently founded social movement. XR is a complex, transnational movement that is locally rooted yet globally and nationally coordinated, meaning that what happens at a scale affects the rest of the movement. For my research, I have limited my focus to XR Netherlands and Utrecht. Following the "founding" chapter in the UK, XR NL was founded in April 2019 and now hosts over 20 local branches. Local chapters are grounded in cities, engage with municipal matters, and sustain the execution and reproduction of the movement by building community on a local level. On the other hand, XR NL is a virtual community with the scope of bringing local chapters together for mass direct actions, sharing resources, enhancing the coordination of the movement, and facilitating the co-creation of a national strategy.

Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered different kinds of activists: curious individuals that attend an activity; occasional supporters that join actions; activists that participate in democratic decision-making processes; rebels that actively organize or put their “professional” skills in service of the movement; and finally rebels who are highly active within the organization and fully dedicate their life to XR. Although XR NL and Utrecht have contact with underprivileged communities, members tend to be white, middle-upper class, reasonably educated, and liberal. Gender-wise, there is an even spread among men and women, with some non-binary activists. For reasons I can't elaborate upon due to limited available space, XR attracts mainly first-time activists, making it the first time for most to be exposed to certain discourses and participating in activities (including non-violent direct actions) that challenge institutions and dominant ideologies. Now that I presented my case and my research population, I outline my theoretical framework and methodologies. Next, I outline my ethnographic findings, the yield of five months of partially remote fieldwork. I conclude by discussing my findings and making suggestions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical framework and methodology**

### **2.1. Social movement organization and leadership**

Social movement organizations (SMOs) are complex organizations that, identifying their objectives with the preferences of a social movement (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1218), possess an identification function, as they allow activists to identify with specific goals, philosophies, and ideologies (Della Porta 2009, 3). The literature highlights SMOs as vehicles for channeling actors into powerful collective actions (Young and Schwartz 2012, 235) and an asset that ensures continuity (McCarthy 2005, 189) and prevents energy fading (Clemens 2005, 354). Within SMOs, leadership seems critical for their success (Campbell 2005, 63). According to researchers, leaders are essential for movements' formation and growth (Sutherland et al. 2014), fostering

community, mobilizing resources (Ganz 2010, 9), and crucial for strategy forging (Sutherland et al. 2014). Despite these benefits, new social movements have adversity towards leaders(hip) and organizations. To elaborate on such adversity, I need to present prefiguration, which reflects the importance activists place on means.

## 2.2. Prefiguration and horizontality

In the past decades, academics have recorded social movements' transition from a phase of "protesting" to a stage of "proposing" (Hall 2009, 68). Prefiguration is a way in which movements engage in such "proposing," and it refers to how movements enact and imagine the new world "within the shell of the old" (Graeber 2004, 7). A prefigurative approach to politics complicates the means-end distinction, with these becoming interlinked as activists attempt to enact the future in the present (Van de Sande 2019, 227). Prefiguration can be conceptualized as an "experimental political repertoire" used by activists to experiment with possible alternatives to prefigure society (Van de Sande 2019, 231). Among such experimental political repertoire is horizontality, through which activists attempt to establish internal politics and power dynamics that prefigure the world they strive for (Leach 2013, 1). Horizontality refers to a kind of organizing that attempts to limit power inequalities (Maeckelbergh, 2009, 69) through non-hierarchical interactions, decentralized coordination, direct democracy, and consensus pursuit (Juris 2008, 354). Besides limiting power inequalities, horizontality entails the prefiguration of a different form of collective power that aims to create new power dynamics and allow people to take control of their lives (Maeckelbergh 2009, 116).

Now that I outlined prefiguration and horizontality, I can go back to activists' adversity for organization and leaders(hip). In the past decades, social movements have attempted to depart from organizations and leaders(hip), seen as incompatible with the practice of horizontality. Activists have perceived organizations as systems of order and authority (Clemens 2005, 352), associated them with managerial leaders with power-as-domination (Swain 2019, 48) and thus with illegitimate hierarchy (Young and Schwartz 2012, 229). Furthermore, leadership is problematized due to organizations' reliance on individual leaders, perceived as an attack on autonomy and horizontality (Sutherland et al., 2014). These findings show a tension between prefiguration and "the essentially power-directed and instrumental forms of organizing associated with older organizations" (Swain 2019, 48). This tension led activists to employ structureless and leadership-less organizations to stay true to their prefigurative aspirations and practice horizontality while at the same time criticizing society and political institutions, seen as over-structured (Teivainen 2012, 190).

However, employing Bourdieusian and Foucauldian theories that consider power, not a quality possessed by actors but a permeating force that exists and is exercised relationally, researchers have highlighted subtle(r) processes maintaining power asymmetries in social movements striving for horizontality through structureless and leadership-less organizations. By perceiving structureless-ness as a more accessible and fairer discursive space, power asymmetries among activists are not consciously tackled but lead to their (re)production (Juris 2008, 357). In those organization, power, rather than being obliterated, manifest in 'invisible' autocratic leadership that centralizes decision-making (Freeman 1972, 151; Morris and Staggenborg 2010, 190), (re)producing hierarchical relationships rooted in informal power dynamics (Sutherland et al.

2014, 763). In this view, horizontality requires a critical account of power dynamics and a continuous attempt to equalize power relations between actors (Orton and Biar 2020, 239).

Thus, it seems that prefigurative aspirations lead activists to employ strategies that do not limit power inequalities but reproduce them, thus impairing horizontality. Paradoxically, social movements researchers have shown that structures and leaders might even aid horizontality. For example, Schneider (2019: 281) questions “decentralization” by arguing that centralized entities can confront power blocks that emerge informally. Similarly, Freeman claims that selecting who holds power would create accountability structures and allow people to demand powerholders to be responsible for the influence they exercise (Freeman 1972, 162). For this reason, to find effective methods that foster horizontality, there is a need to theorize on what kind of leaders(hip) and organizations can support horizontality without clashing with activists’ prefigurative aspirations. Researchers have already paved this path and claimed that, despite protest organizations might naturally tend towards oligarchy and cooptation, they are not inherently hierarchical nor fixed, thus not clashing with horizontality (Young and Schwartz 2012, 235; Maeckelbergh 2011, 19). However, contrary to these researchers, I attempt to reconcile horizontality with the very same hierarchies and authorities that might stem from employing organizations and the presence of leaders. To achieve such reconciliation, I will have to reconceptualize horizontality and leadership. To assist this attempt, I will employ organizational theory and leadership studies.

### 2.3. Organizational theory and leadership studies

Because I research an SMO, I follow Campbell’s (2005, 41) encouragement to use organizational theory. Within organizations, culture is seen as a process that manifests and emerges in the interplay among the formal organizational system (i.g. organizational structure, job descriptions, hierarchy of decision-making), the informal systems of relationships among actors, and the environment in which the organization operates (Wright 2004, 17). Within organizations, power tends to be “coded into structural designs and bolstered by widely shared cultural norms and ideologies” (Davis 2005, 10). Since organizations provide schemas and structures for actors to “perceive, interpret, and act in ways that are socially efficacious and appropriate” (Lounsbury 2005, 75), I will look at the organization both as socializing agents and norms producers (Della Porta 2009, 5).

Having such a significant effect on actors and practice within the field, it is no surprise that organizations intersect with leadership. In recent leadership ontologies, leadership is inextricable from the socio-cultural context (Spillane 2004, 22; Drath et al. 2008, 650). Contexts provide actors with the organizational structures and a repertoire of practices (Spillane 2004, 22) and possess a distinctive “leadership culture” that determines what kind of leadership practice is accepted (Drath et al. 2008, 646). As a result, Spillane (2004, 21) developed a new leadership paradigm and called it distributed leadership, where leadership is stretched over the situational context. In general, the rise of collaborative contexts prompted the development of new leadership paradigms with a more dynamic understanding of leadership (Sutherland et al. 2014, 761). Distributed leadership -one of the new ontologies and the one that I will employ in my research- sees leadership as a collective, emergent practice that arises in interactions, is affected by the organizational context, and entails actors collectively exerting influence and collaborating

to complete complex tasks (Spillane 2004, 21). This conceptualization is very different from older, Weberian-like leadership ontologies, where leadership was incarnated into individuals who possess specific characteristics that were used to exercise interpersonal influence (Crevani et al. 2010, 80; Drath et al. 2008, 640, Spillane et al. 2004, 6). In such an old ontology, leadership existed if there were leaders to enact it, and power dynamics come to be necessarily explained as "power-over," a top-down process in which leaders influence followers (Sutherland et al. 2014, 772).

Instead, in newer ontologies such as distributed leadership, leadership is no longer the act of an individual but a shared accomplishment of leaders and followers (Drath et al. 2008, 652). Followers are constitutive elements of leadership activity and possess power (Sutherland et al. 2014, 760) through their influence on leaders and their legitimization of leaders' authority (Spillane 2004, 19). Bringing it a step further, I will align with the view that leadership does not necessarily involve leaders and followers (Spillane 2004, 14; Sutherland et al. 2014), but becomes a practice that encompasses the range of activity whose purpose is bringing actors into the conditions required for achieving mutual goals (Drath et al. 2010, 651). In this view, anyone can be a leadership actor and exercise power by "managing meaning, defining reality and providing a basis for organizational action" (Sutherland et al. 2014, 764). Even though in contexts that facilitate the distribution of leadership, informal power dynamics and forms of social authority still emerge (Woods 2016, 155), power within distributed leadership gets reconceptualized as the collective performance of leadership. This kind of power, which occurs among equals, is defined as power-with: "the power not to command, but to suggest (...), to begin something and see it happen" (Sutherland et al. 2014, 772).

#### 2.4. My research

In general, my research explores horizontality within XRNL through a lens of leadership as informed and enabled by organizational processes. I employ distributed leadership to investigate how leadership practice and power dynamics emerge from complex interactions among actors and the organization in which they operate. Paired with considerations on how the organization structures power, socializes actors and creates a field for them to interact, I account for structures and processes, established and emergent power dynamics, which will enrich my analysis. Ultimately, this thesis attempts to reconcile horizontality with the hierarchies and authority that stem from the organizations and the presence of leaders. By showing that hierarchies and authorities do not clash with activists' prefigurative aspirations as they support a more just prefiguration of power, my research attempts to reconceptualize horizontality, which is typically defined in terms of lack of hierarchies and authorities.

#### 2.5. Methodology

Regarding data collection techniques, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews and relied on participant observation. On the one hand, interviews deepened my understanding of members' interpretation of the XR world and its power dynamics. Participant observation, on the other hand, allowed me to experience organizational processes and observe power dynamics as they play out in real life. About my methodology, I performed a militant, grounded globalization ethnography. Whereas grounded globalization entailed following activists' connections and

activities through the different scales of the movement (Juris 2007, 155), militant ethnography entails facilitating activists' (self)reflection and is characterized by activist practice and collaborative knowledge production (Juris 2007, 165). Furthermore, a militant approach, generating embodied and affective understanding (Juris 2008, 20), allowed me to pursue an autoethnography, a systematic analysis of personal experiences (Ellis et al. 2011, 273).

That I could use myself as a full participant/informant was further exacerbated by Covid, which limited me to executing an "at-home" ethnography by researching the social movement I have been involved with for the past two years. In general, being already involved in the community prompted a similar experience to my fellow activists, resulting in analogous emotional responses, meaning-making, and interpretation. Paired up with my militant approach, an "at-home" ethnography" allowed for a collective search and co-construction of meaning with my fellow activists, with interviews and informal chats turning into joint reflections that led to the co-production of knowledge. At the same time, being so invested in the community resulted in the impossibility to leave the "field" and made it difficult to "outgrow" my activist role and take the sometimes-necessary distance to conduct academic research. Furthermore, even though I had access to any part of the movement due to the trust others had for me, fellow activists were sometimes hesitant to recount "incriminating" anecdotes due to my status as a central community member.

Finally, although my "militant" stance reduced the researcher/participants' power dynamics, my positionality as an experienced member gave rise to other power dynamics that I describe throughout my thesis. Importantly, since my involvement, I have consistently been a "leadership actor" and occupied the two formal positions with the most authority. This short paragraph shows that my positionality had a highly significant effect on my research, and it made me particularly susceptible to leadership's complexity in a horizontally prefigured movement. Complemented by the challenges I encountered in the field and the influence from my fellow activists, my positionality shaped my research, directed me during fieldwork, and impacted my analysis, which I now turn to.

### **3. Ethnographic analysis**

My thesis is divided into three chapters, each exploring how the organization and leadership practice intersect and affect the practice of horizontality. Chapter one theorizes on leadership's inextricability from the organizational context, which informs, enables, and distributes leadership, affecting XR's power prefiguration and the pursuit of horizontality. Concerning the distribution of power among its different parts, chapter one starts the reconceptualization of horizontality by showing how the organization supports what I term "organizational horizontality" through hierarchies. Chapter two, concerning what I term "relational horizontality," presents activists' informal hierarchies using Bourdieusian theories, through which I analyze how power and leadership manifest and are negotiated at an intersubjective level. Chapter three shows how organizational processes relate to the pursuit of "relational horizontality" as impaired by the dynamics described in chapter two. Showing how organizational processes support relational horizontality through "intersubjective" hierarchies and the legitimization of a leadership practice aimed at horizontality, chapter three concludes the reconceptualization of horizontality started in chapter one.



### 3.1 Organization, leadership practice, and horizontality

*I enter a room so packed that I do not know where to sit. My slight social anxiety and performativity fire up whenever I enter a room full of people. I take a deep breath and sit, reminding myself that I am here to be hosted. It is a week before mass disruptive actions, and people are looking for opportunities to get involved. At least, that is why I am attending this “introduction to XR.” The two hosts are standing at the far end of the room. I cannot help but notice the tension in their body, as their shoulders are unnaturally contracted upwards. They are visibly stressed, probably due to the workload they are bearing to coordinate what they call “Rebellion week.” A bit jittery, they introduce themselves as Manik and Elonore and share their motivations for being involved in XR. A tremendous amount of information is thrown at us as they tell XR’s raison d’être, its demands, values, and organizational principles. I go home a bit overwhelmed but feeling that XR is worth exploring.*

A couple of years after this “Introduction to XR” talk, I realize that I was presented with what Scott et al. (2000) define as the three components of an organization: institutional logics, governance structure, and institutional actors. In this chapter, I analyze how the first two are inextricably connected to the practice of leadership and organizational horizontality.

#### 3.1.1. Institutional logics

Institutional logics, defined as the “belief systems and associated practices that predominate in an organizational field” (Scott et al. 2000, 170), have been employed to investigate the interconnection between the dominant organizational ideologies and collectively held cognitive framework with the “lower-level” material practices occurring among its members (Davis 2005, 73) Within XR, the most evident and “official” institutional logics are its demands, principles, and values, which I attach in Figures 1 and 2. Describing these in-depth goes beyond the purpose of this paper. It suffices, for now, to say that taken together demands, principles, and values determine which goals are worth pursuing and the means, strategies, and prefigurative practices that ought to be employed in their pursuit. Therefore, they become the basis for meaningful organizational action, as highlighted even on XR’s website: “Anyone who follows these core principles and values can take action in the name of Extinction Rebellion” (Extinction Rebellion, 2019).

Since, due to limited space, I cannot elaborate on the origins of the institutional logics and how they pragmatically affect actors' actions, it suffices for now to underline the ways they intersect with leadership practice. By providing goals, guidelines, and organizing principles for actors to act in meaningful and appropriate ways, XR’s institutional logics inform leadership practice, a practice that encompasses the range of activities whose purpose is bringing actors into the conditions required for achieving mutual goals (Drath et al. 2010, 651). Hence, within XR, these institutional logics act as a “social contract” and an (often unexpressed) collective agreement that binds actors -in case they want to operate as Extinction Rebellion- to pursue specific goals and employ specific means. Although XR’s institutional logics are interpreted by individuals in heterogeneous ways, whenever actors’ leadership practice is perceived as deviating from them, activists make comments such as “*This is not what XR is about (...) you know, what we all agreed upon, I guess*” (Rens).

## WE DEMAND THAT OUR GOVERNMENT

- 1 TELL THE TRUTH** about the climate and ecological crisis that threatens our existence and communicate the urgency for change.
- 2 ACT NOW** to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025 in a just and fair manner.
- 3 LET CITIZENS DECIDE** by establishing a Citizen's Assembly which takes the lead on climate and ecological justice.

*Figure 1. Demands*

## Principles & Values

1. WE HAVE A SHARED VISION OF CHANGE
2. WE SET OUR MISSION ON WHAT IS NECESSARY
3. WE NEED A REGENERATIVE CULTURE
4. WE OPENLY CHALLENGE OURSELVES AND THIS TOXIC SYSTEM
5. WE VALUE REFLECTING AND LEARNING
6. WE WELCOME EVERYONE AND EVERY PART OF EVERYONE
7. WE ACTIVELY MITIGATE FOR POWER
8. WE AVOID BLAMING AND SHAMING
9. WE ARE A NON-VIOLENT NETWORK
10. WE ARE BASED ON AUTONOMY AND DECENTRALISATION

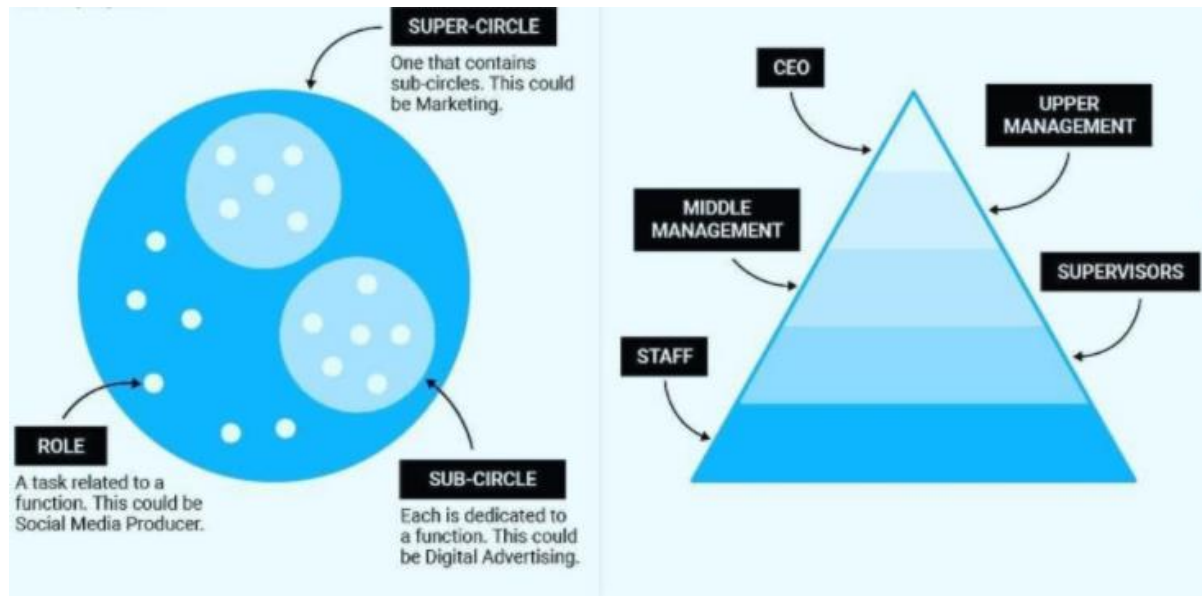
### ***Figure 2. Principles and values***

Besides providing goals and values, XR offers its actors a repertoire of tools and practices. A practice particularly relevant for my analysis is consent decision-making, the way decisions are made within XR. Like consensus decision-making, every actor is to be involved. Contrary to consensus, in which all the actors agree on the best possible outcome, consent decision-making operates with the concept “*Zone of tolerance*” (Zachary), which entails making a decision that each actor can live with, even when it is not their preference. Within XR, even though it comes with its challenges, consent decision-making is cherished by actors and seen as an indispensable strategy to achieve long-term goals while practicing horizontality.

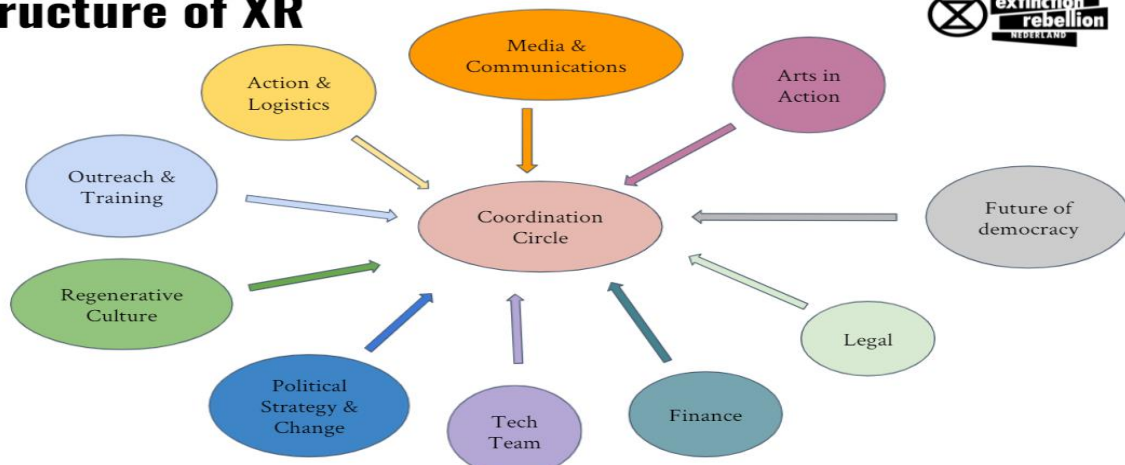
Whereas in chapter two I analyze how effective this tool is in the pursuit of horizontality, for now, it suffices to say that actors are expected to employ consent decision-making in their leadership practice. The collective agreement to utilizing such tools became visible during one meeting, where Lucas, a not-so-experienced actor, expressed reservations over employing consent decision-making and proposed, for the sake of efficiency, to employ a less inclusive decision-making technique. Hearing these words, I felt physically uncomfortable and irritated at Lucas, as I felt he was infringing on one of the (unspoken) rules so intrinsic to XR. Others reacted similarly and, even though we had never discussed the institutional logics with this group, Celia replied slightly angry: “*This is not how we decided to do things. What he said violates some of the values that we have agreed upon.*”

When actors’ leadership practice does not include such practices, other participants can contest it by appealing to XR’s institutional logic. For example, while sharing an episode in which consent decision-making was not employed, Dina shares: “*I think they just failed on their own rules.*” Because of the power dynamics I elaborate upon in the other chapters, the participant did not manage to contest the facilitator’s leadership practice and left the meeting feeling the “*Powerlessness of being too few. And this is not something you should be experiencing in XR*” (Dina). In this section, I described how the organization informs leadership practice through its institutional logics that, manifesting as a sort of a priori collective social contract, provide actors with a direction, a set of repertoire, and an array of strategies to be employed. I now move to another organizational component.

### 3.1.2. Governance structure



## Structure of XR



**Figure 3: Sociocratic governance structure**

*“As you can see from the slide, within XR we work with a decentralized instead of hierarchical structure, and each of us can work on what we like. We do so by using a sociocratic model, an organizational structure with multiple working groups....”*

These are these words I use for “introduction to XR” talks to describe XR governance structure, another organizational component that intersects with the practice of leadership and horizontality. Scott et al. (2000, 173) define governance structure as “the arrangements by which field-level power and authority are exercised involving formal and informal systems.” XR utilizes Sociocracy, a governance structure first employed by XR London (the “founding” chapter) that quickly spread to other chapters worldwide. Sociocracy employs various “working circles,” as shown in figure 3. Within it, circles can operate autonomously as long as they operate within their “mandate.” In Zachary’s words, a mandate is “What a circle can do (...). It’s their tasks, their

*domain*". Mandates are documents listing the decisions circles can independently make without engaging in movement-wide deliberation, and the responsibilities they need to fulfill to achieve the movement's goals. Although they can be re-negotiated, mandates manifest an a priori collective agreement over the distribution of work within the movement. As a result, mandates are relevant concerning leadership practice, as they influence and legitimize circles' leadership practice by delineating the kind of work they can (and are supposed to) do.

Connecting it to the intuitional logics described in the previous section, the existence of the principle "We need a Regenerative Cultures" highlights that pursuing regenerative cultures within the organization -however that might manifest- becomes an organizational ambition. This institutional logic translated into the "Regenerative Cultures working-circle," which, through the governance structure and the circle's mandate, creates the foundation for actors to engage in leadership practice that fosters Regenerative Cultures within the movement. Interestingly, since Regenerative Cultures entail challenging normative ideologies and fostering alternative values within the organization, other actors sometimes perceived Regenerative Cultures' leadership practice as an imposition. However, Regenerative Cultures' members legitimize their leadership practice by appealing to XR's governance structure and institutional logics, which allow them to "claim" a role within projects even when other actors challenge their leadership practice on the ground of illegitimate authority. In an episode in which their leadership practice was being challenged, the circle posted on the XR internal communication platform: "*In accordance with our third principle "We need a regenerative culture," and the love, passion, and faith that unites and motivates us, we won't back down on our intention and desire to foster a Regenerative Cultures for our splendid community.*"

This example highlights that the governance structure enables circles' leadership practice by legitimizing them to create meaning and provide the basis for organizational action (always informed by XR's institutional logics). In so doing, I argue that XR's organizational structure aims at and enables distributed leadership, as it manifests in an emergent process of actors collaborating to collectively exercise influence and achieve results (Spillane 2004, 21). Whereas I will elaborate that such distributed leadership is not void of power dynamics, XR's governance structure distributes leadership to circles that can -and are even expected to- practice leadership to contribute to achieving XR's goals from their situated positionality. Puck and other members cherish that circles can contribute in their ways to the movement: "*We work well as a movement because people roll into the role they're good at. It's a collective of people working from their perspectives*".

Distributed leadership and situated involvement are evident during meetings of the coordination circle (CC), the circle composed of elected representatives from the other circles that "coordinate" the movement's efforts. For Alex, the CC "*Brings together the activity of all the circles and creates an exchange of thoughts and activities from one circle to another. [It allows to] move as one.*" These meetings are interesting, as they manifest how each actor operates from within their mandate by contributing to the aspect of distributed leadership expected of their circle of origin. In one such meeting, Joris, a kind, professional facilitator contributing to XR by putting his skills in service of the movement, starts: "*Today we discuss how each circle can contribute to improving the support structure for activists that get arrested during a direct action.*" After a couple of people intervened, despite being there as a researcher and the only one without an organizational role, Joris invites me to participate in the discussion. Taken by enthusiasm and thanks to my knowledge on the matter, I provide a detailed analysis of the problem and how each circle could

engage in leadership practice to improve arrestee support. Everyone was visibly impressed by my analysis of the issue and how to go about it. Joris, a bit surprised, broke the silence by saying ironically: “*Wow, you are stealing everyone's perspective.*”

This short vignette highlights that the governance structure of XR enables distributed leadership, which manifests in circles contributing to an issue from their situated perspective as informed by the circle’s mandate. By enabling and distributing leadership across the movement, I argue that XR’s governance structure eventuates in what I name “circle authority.” By spreading authority to engage in leadership practice as delineated by the mandates, XR’s organization structures and distributes power across the various circles.

However, leadership and authority being distributed among different circles does not necessarily result in an equal distribution of power. The Coordination circle is relevant in this regard. In the conceptualization of the governance structure as outlined in figure 3, the CC occupies a central position rather than a vertical position and is not “mandated” to make decisions for the rest of the movement but just coordinate its effort: “*The CC doesn't have like necessarily strong power as the body itself, but it's where all the circles come together to coordinate stuff*” (Rens). Even though it does not possess “power-over” (the imposition of will through authority over other circles), due to its characteristics, the CC can exercise asymmetrical influence; through the presence of a representative from each circle, the CC is the body where information flows the most, and its members know most of what occurs across the movement. A more significant amount of information, different perspectives, and positionalities confer power to the CC and place it in the best position to engage in leadership practice, making it what Ganz (2010, 11) calls a “leadership team.” Naturally, the existence of a circle with these characteristics impacts XR’s prefiguration of power, which I now fully outline.

### 3.1.3. Power prefiguration and trust

In the previous section I argued that, by spreading authority to engage in leadership practice as delineated by the mandates, XR’s organization structures and distributes power across the movement. By having authority over a specific realm of leadership practice, circles occupy a hierarchical position in what falls within their mandate. Thus, this shows that XR’s organization does not obliterate power and prevent authority and hierarchies from arising, but prefigures power by consciously distributing it to different parts, making hierarchies and authority a collectively accepted and legitimized socially constructed phenomena: “*Often it says also that these [governance structures] don't have a hierarchy, but I still think they do and that's also not necessarily bad because the body also has hierarchies. And that's fine*” (Sage). What is it that sustains such power prefiguration?

“*I do think the most like transformative part of XR is sort of the trust that people put in each other to do stuff*” (Flora). As Flora shares, throughout my fieldwork, I discovered trust to play a significant part. Concerning what I have described so far, trust plays a critical role in reproducing, maintaining, and accepting the prefiguration of power and leadership within XR. XR’s power prefiguration rests on trust because of the collective agreement on what each circle can autonomously accomplish. Furthermore, because of the complex division of responsibilities, actors develop situated knowledge and skills that make them better suited to practice leadership within their realm of expertise. Trust then reflects a practice that allows members to accept others' expertise and leadership practice. In Steve’s words: “*If there's a little group of people who think of*

*an action for me, (...) because they thought about it (...) they are smarter in action. So, I accept their insights. Like you are not the boss, but we accept you have thought of the idea, so we accept your knowledge”.*

At the same time, such complex and precise division of responsibility and distributed leadership gives birth to trust, as it becomes virtually impossible for people to engage with all the different parts of the movement: *“Like having a limited amount of time and a limited amount of focus for activism, you cannot ask everybody to make decisions about everything, and that would be overwhelming”* (Alex). Thus, trust becomes a collective practice rooted in a desire to let go of control and not to centralize power, which manifests in accepting that power to engage in leadership practice is given to different circles, as Lois shares: *“I trust that you're going to make the right decisions and I'll follow. Yeah, that is the two-way thing. Like you cannot be in everything and cannot expect to be in everything.”*

#### 3.1.4. Organizational horizontality

How does the power prefiguration described so far relate to horizontality? As already said, within XR, power, leaders, hierarchies, and authorities clearly exist. Although activists and literature commonly cite these as “un-horizontal” (Sutherland et al. 2014; Swain 2019), I argue that they do not impair horizontality but can even foster it on an organizational level. First, as long as they operate within their mandate, circles are not impinging on the collective agreement on the distribution of authority, and will therefore not concentrate and centralize more power than was given them. The extent to which horizontality is impaired, therefore, depends on how actors operate. For example, about the Coordination circle, mandated to coordinate the work of the different circles rather than making decisions, Rens shares: *“It all depends on how people do what they do, if it's any sort of hierarchy or power, or if they just discuss how can circles help each other. It's more facilitation (...) rather than “Oh, we have to do this.”* Even though Rens shares that the CC is not on top of the hierarchy because of its central position, the concentration of leadership actors within it, and the authority to coordinate the movement's effort, I argue they are effectively on top of the hierarchy as a collective actor.

This can be beneficial for horizontality. In line with Schneider (2019, 281), centralized entities can confront power blocks that emerge informally, thus limiting the rise of invisible' autocratic leadership that centralizes decision-making and operates free of accountability structures. For example, during a meeting with actors from different circles who occupied the most central roles with the greatest authority within the movement, I tried to comment on an issue that fell in another circle's mandate. Although we could have easily made and implemented a decision due to the configuration of people present within the meeting, I was cut short by Jasmine, who told me to *“bring the concern to the relevant circle; this is not in this group's mandate.”* In general, spreading power across the movement and creating multiple hierarchies prevent power centralization, as Sage shares: *“There is nobody at the top that can say “This is what we're going to do now” (...), nobody that can have that has an extensive impact or power to control the whole movement because that is divided. (...) In a sense, XR has a hierarchy because it's bottom-up.”* In sum, if circles employ their power in respect of XR's institutional logics and governance structure, hierarchies can support what I termed “organizational horizontality.”

### 3.1.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have painted a picture of an organization that plays a significant role in leadership practice. As a result, in line with Spillane (2004, 21), I can say that leadership is stretched over the situational context (i.g. the organization), which creates the conditions for leadership to be practiced and spread across the movement. On the one hand, the organization enables distributed leadership, as multiple actors collaborate to complete complex tasks and pursue the movement's goals. On the other hand, XR's organization does not prefigure a field void of power but instills it into formal organizational processes that, sustained by trust, give rise to authorities and hierarchies. Despite hierarchies and authority contrast with the notion of horizontality, I have shown that, at an organizational level, they can support horizontality's ultimate rationale: limiting power inequalities within the movement.

However, since they are not static states that can be achieved but never-ending projects, horizontality and distributed leadership are not accomplished by XR's organization alone, as they can be impaired by intersubjective social interactions. Indeed, as Steve argues, intersubjective dynamics endanger the pursuit of horizontality: "*We think power is not accumulated, but yes, it is. I'm also to blame because I stick my nose everywhere, so people know where to find me*". In the next chapter, I elaborate on the (informal) power dynamics that arise in interactions and create hierarchies that threaten horizontality.

### 3.2 "Relational horizontality"

*It has been two months since my last meeting with the regenerative cultures circle. Presupposing the switch from being an activist to being a researcher was an arduous one, I took a two-month break from my involvement, and I am thrilled to get back at it. I enter the zoom meeting, and I am warmly welcomed by people whom I consider dear friends by now. A few months ago, when I was the only official member of the circle, I spent a significant amount of time reaching out to people, socializing them into the circle, and consciously building a team feeling. Seeing that no one has left since my break fills my heart with deep relief and satisfaction. That feeling soon fades away and leaves space for frustration, concerns, and even irritation from witnessing the circle's lowered effectiveness. As I get over the guilt and judgment for experiencing these feelings, I share them with others. For the rest of the meeting, the tension is palpable. My words visibly touched the others. After the meeting, Gerry, a sensitive activist that always tries to help others and support them in reaching their fullest potential, reaches out to me, inviting me for a walk. My relationship with Gerry, one of my university teachers, is interesting, as we have switched the "host-hosted" roles multiple times in the various projects we have participated in. During the walk, Gerry shares words that I now consider responsible for directing my research: "your authority within the group created a child response in me of "I'm not doing enough, I am not good enough, I need to do more and pick things up"; it's as if you were the dad coming home after the children made a mess of the house."*

- *Field entry*

As highlighted in the vignette, this chapter focuses on the intersubjective, relational component of horizontality by describing how unequal distribution of capitals affects leadership practice. As with any community of practice, spending time on projects and activities within XR results in growing routine, expertise, knowledge, and connections. In Bourdieu's (1986) terminology,



what I have described is defined as social and cultural capital. Members' cultural capital, visible in the (intuitive) knowledge of the field and skills they have developed, allows activists to speak the “XR language.” On the other hand, members' social capital is the number of people actors know, can reach out to, and mobilize when in need (Bourdieu 1986, 21). In general, actors that spend time practicing activism learn the logics of the field and how to operate within it, know more people, are more known and are aware of the various ongoing projects. Naturally, this influences activists’ social interactions: “*Jonson is involved in everything and is the one with the most information about every single point, and therefore is the one that speaks the most*” (Kristen).

As Kirsten highlights, the level of involvement and capitals influences people’s participation. This aligns with my observation and with Woods (2016, 155), who claims that possessing capitals allows actors to thrive within the organization by being better positioned to participate, exercise influence, and practice leadership. However, these dynamics are natural within a volunteering community where members have different times at their disposal and within XR and where newcomers need to be socialized into the complex practices and logics of the field. Indeed, as probably the reader gauged from the vignette at the beginning of the chapter, I discovered that socialization readily leads to informal hierarchical relationships between experienced members and those to be socialized. In the words of Alex: “*You trust the people who have already been there for a long time (...), they have more insight and more experience or what goes on in the movement*” (Alex). Puck, referring to experienced members with large amounts of capitals, says: “*They give some kind of direction too (...) I wouldn't say we were following them, but more like they had a vision that we all shared. But they were the first to come up with it*”.

Within XR, I have noticed that experienced members' leadership practice is accepted and legitimized and one of the core ways XR operates. This kind of leadership can be enabling, with leadership actors creating the condition for everyone to participate and advance the movement's goals. When reflecting on the concept of horizontality, John says: “*Of course there is a horizontal level, but that's the level of the spoken word. (...) On the levels of energy or feelings then you have different levels, but that kind of energy brings the people together. And then it's ok when one level is higher because it brings us all higher and closer to what we want*”. Therefore, within XR, uneven distribution of capital, power, and leadership is not necessarily perceived as impairing horizontality if actors’ leadership practice is directed at enabling others’ autonomy. Is this always the case?

### 3.2.1. Capitals, socialization, and leadership practice

In this section, I unravel how unequal capitals affect the practice of horizontality. First, members might be inclined to naturally reach out to known people with larger capitals, asking them to engage in leadership practice. In my experience, due to my extensive involvement within regenerative cultures, I came to embody this working circle and the roles associated with it, as Valerie's words directed at me highlights: “*To me, you embody regenerative cultures.*” As a result, rather than reaching out to the Regenerative Cultures circle, activists often directly reach out to me with requests to engage in leadership practice. This short example shows the existence of an informal network that actors with high involvement and capitals bring about, leading to the circumvention of the formal structure of XR. In the words of Sage, a prominent leadership actor within XR: “*I just contact my friends. If I weren't so well embedded in the*

*movement, I wouldn't know whom to go to, so it's definitely like you find your way better when you know people. And that also means that actually to get into it and get shit done” (Sage).*

Thus, certain actors have more opportunities to engage in leadership practice, employ (and further develop) the large capitals they possess, and get more known, giving them more opportunity to engage in leadership practice. As also highlighted by Diani (1997), I discovered that the more central and embedded actors are in the movement, the more opportunities they have, the more they control exchanges among different components of that network, and the greater their influence. This phenomenon might also lead to the formation of cliques of activists that know each other well and that informally contact each other: *“It also makes it it's kind of like a more elite culture of people that know each other well, and that also get shit done, and it also gives them then status again because they do a lot of things.”* The fact that possibilities to engage in leadership practice depend on the capitals people possess has problematic effects on the pursuit of horizontality, as it might cause centralization of capitals and leadership within the hands of the most experienced members, preventing new members from developing the capitals that would allow them to be effective within the organization.

Furthermore, leadership practice's reliance on those with high capitals can have dangerous implications for circles' work, which might depend on specific individuals. After leaving the team I was engaged with for multiple months, Gerry commented on the reduced effectivity of the circle: *“It's not about Marco being Marco, but it's the connection he had and his sixth sense, communicative capacity with the rest of the movement, amount of hours per week being in touch with the movement.”* Hence, dependence on individuals can diminish the distribution of leadership, as described in chapter one. Having described how capitals "pragmatically" affect leadership practice and horizontality, I now describe how uneven distribution of capitals leads to asymmetrical influence grounded in informal power dynamics.

### 3.2.2. The social construction of authority

Throughout my fieldwork, I have noticed that people with large capitals, through their presence and leadership practice, can affect less experienced members. For example, comparing himself to more experienced members, John says: *“I don't have the time and energy for spending so much time. And sometimes I feel a little bit guilty”*. Bernard, sharing his worries about the amount of work he can take up, says: *“We don't want to let people down within the movement, like Marco, you're an incredible climate warrior.”* For me, being an experienced member relegated to a non-leadership role because of my researcher positionality was illuminating to reflect upon the effect I have on others. Many people claimed that my presence within a meeting makes them nervous due to my knowledge and skills. As a result, such uneven distribution of capitals might result in interpersonal power dynamics grounded in what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital. Symbolic capital, stemming from possessing the configuration of capitals valued within a particular field, gives actors prestige and recognition and become a source of legitimation and influence (Bourdieu 1986, 12). In this view, power is an emergent property (re)produced through social interactions.

Indeed, due to their dedication, the time they allocate for the movements, and the skills they possess, experienced members are valued and respected within the community: *“I was looking up to all those people. Because I was thinking ‘Wow, they spend a lot of time for XR, and they know everything how it works’ (John). Less experienced actors value experienced members to such a high standard to allow them to have more influence in discussions: ‘People started to look up to me. If I said something, it was like: ‘Oh yeah, you’re right this is probably a better idea’ (Rens). This coincides with my experience as a new member when I respected and admired senior members to such an extent that, partially motivated to get on their good side, I would value more their opinion at the expense of my own, even in fields where I would consider myself knowledgeable. These power dynamics affect leadership practice, as less experienced actors feel disempowered and less confident taking initiative, which is left for the experienced members to take.*

Partially because of less experienced members’ lack of initiatives, senior and experienced members feel empowered yet responsible for engaging in leadership practice: *“It’s now on me to make the first step. I just can’t wait for another person to make the first step. But I realize I have to do it” (John). However, their tendency to engage in leadership practice also stems from their perfectionism, which prevents them from letting go of control and let less experienced members take the lead. Bram, speaking of his struggles to let others engage in leadership practice, shares: “Part of me doesn’t give that trust automatically.” Such lack of trust might centralize tasks within their hands, impairing others from practicing leadership and developing capital through it. This phenomenon might be caused by what Gerry called an “Epistemology of being above, that comes from having an idea of what XR is and what it should do.”*

In these ways, through a joint effort between members with different levels of expertise and seniority, I have discovered that uneven distribution of capitals leads to an informal social construction of authority, confirming Woods’ (2016, 155) observation that in distributed leadership contexts without formal hierarchies, social authority arises out of social interactions. As described in this section, the existence of social authorities impairs the pursuit of “relational horizontality” through centralization of leadership and the collectively accepted asymmetrical influence that comes with it. Besides depending on unequal distributions of capitals, the social construction of authority is partially grounded on socialization processes. However, I have noticed (and experienced) that the socialization’s effects fade away once members gain capitals and thus feel on equal ground with those that socialized them. If the issue is unequal possession of capitals, what is it that prevents their equalization? Besides the obvious answer, lying in different time availability, other processes interfere with attempts to distribute power. For example, because of the discourse on horizontality within XR, Kees shares his doubts about giving feedback to a less experienced member: *“I am afraid of giving that person a bad feeling or creating the idea of some kind of a top-down hierarchy.”* This phenomenon makes experienced members feel uncomfortable explicitly sharing their knowledge, which would allow others to develop their cultural capital. Motivated to reach satisfactory outcomes but not feeling comfortable sharing their capitals nor exercising explicit asymmetrical influence due to horizontality’s aspirations, experienced members might resort to exercise explicit asymmetrical influence in subtler ways.

### 3.2.3. Exercising influence

Throughout fieldwork, I have witnessed that, through their high-capitals, experienced members are in a position to exercise asymmetrical influence by “exploiting” the logics of the field, as Steve indicates with an example: *“I know if I go somewhere and I say “Ok, I want to have this role” I can make that happen. Even if I want someone under specific role, I can make that happen”*. One of the ways experienced members exercise asymmetrical influence in decision-making processes is through soft power, a communicative power based on arguments and appeals to experiences and emotions that direct and nudged the conversation in a preferred direction (Della Porta and Rucht 2013, 38). Interestingly, actors’ use of soft power goes unnoticed by less-experienced members, maintaining a façade of relational horizontality.

Being a very experienced member myself, I noticed I exercised soft power in meetings whose attendees did not possess large cultural capital nor an understanding of the logics of activism. Rather than explicating why specific outcomes were preferable, I would subtly guide the conversation towards the outcome that I deemed optimal. Opting for soft power prevents the acknowledgment of the uneven distribution of capitals and their explicit influence on decision-making processes. Indeed, I argue that influence stemming from uneven capitals’ distribution would not interfere with the pursuit of horizontality but even support it if actors verbalize their knowledge more explicitly. Paired up with an attempt to equalize capitals distribution, I believe that such asymmetrical influence can manifest in power-with: “the kind of power that occurs in a group of equals; the power not to command, but to suggest and to be listened to, to begin something and see it happen” (Sutherland, 2014). Whereas power-with is an aspiration, actors might (unintentionally) even exercise power-over while a façade of horizontality is upheld. I illustrate this phenomenon through an example of consent decision-making.

Consent decision-making, seen as an essential practice to pursue horizontality, allows individual actors to block a decision. Although consent-decision making is conceptualized to prevent certain actors from centralizing decision-making, this practice might lead to the centralization of the decision within individual actors' hands. Power centralization occurs when actors, rather than operating with the notion of “range of tolerance,” do not consent to anything that is not their best interest and preference. This happened after a direct action, where the municipality of Utrecht accused the participants of having damaged property. All the participants wanted to issue a statement explaining that they only damaged the scaffolding around that property and were willing to take responsibility and pay for it. One participant blocked the proposal arguing that we should not apologize (nor pay) for property destruction and threatened to leave the movement if the statement was issued.

The exploitation of consent decision-making, in this case, was paired up with what is commonly defined as hard power, which occurs when speakers, through their possession of capitals, can impose sanctions or grant rewards (Della Porta and Rucht 2013, 38). Because of a lack of awareness on how this behavior can impair horizontality, and because it is in respect of XR’s institutional logics, it became difficult for others to challenge such behavior, who ended up complying with the person blocking the decision, as Zachary shared: *“They said “if you do this, I will forever leave XR.” This is not ok; this is not who we are. Who am I to go against that?”*. This example shows that practice that enables horizontal decision-making can be exploited and lead to power centralization.

### 3.2.4 Conclusion

In this section, I have described how uneven distribution of capitals can give rise to informal power dynamics and social authorities that impair the pursuit of “relational horizontality” through centralization of leadership and the collectively accepted asymmetrical influence that comes with it. Through their capitals, members can also exploit the system’s logics and exercise explicit asymmetrical influence that results in power centralization. In general, the dynamics described in this chapter show how leadership is a social practice in which all actors are involved in its legitimization, where complex interactions grounded in socialization and uneven distribution of capitals give rise to informal social authorities. Referring to leaders, Steve shares that “*as a leader, people put you there. And maybe not officially, but people put you there, they acknowledge your seniority (...) [leaders] make us all go in a direction that we can choose to follow.*” Even if leadership can be enabling and is an integral part of XR, members seem to fail to understand how, in a space where, in principle, everyone can be a leadership actor, subtle power dynamics affect the practice of leadership within the movement. This belief is summed up by John, who says: “*In XR nobody says: “You have to do this.” People are working from their own energy.*” As a result, power dynamics and asymmetrical influence go unnoticed and unacknowledged, preventing critical reflections on the effects the uneven distribution of capitals have on the distribution of leadership and the pursuit of relational horizontality. Having described these insights on power dynamics stemming from uneven distribution of capitals, I will show how organizational processes can aid the pursuit of relational horizontality and the distribution of leadership.

### 3.3. Organizational processes and relational horizontality

In this final section, I connect the previous two chapters by showing how various organizational process intersects with “relational horizontality,” impaired by the dynamics described in chapter two. First, I describe how power and authority are given to individuals through sociocratic elections and how activists’ considerations on informal power dynamics and “relational horizontality” affect the election. Next, I present how the organization informs and enables a leadership practice aimed at relational horizontality. Finally, I present the facilitator’s institutional role and the critical role it plays in distributing leadership and pursuing “relational horizontality.”

#### 3.3.1. Institutional actors and sociocratic election

Institutional actors are those that “create (produce) and embody and enact (reproduce) the logics of the field” (Scott et al. 2000, 172). Within XR, institutional actors are activists that occupy a formal role in the organization. Circles’ main roles -facilitator and representative- are nominated through a “Sociocratic election”. Sociocratic election is yet another institutional logic during which members nominate someone to formally occupy a role for three to six months. After a round of nominations, actors elaborate on what makes the nominated person suitable for the position. In a subsequent round, people share concerns or objections for candidates, followed by a round in which they can change or confirm their nominations. Lastly, the appointed facilitator makes a proposal based on the participants' nomination and considerations, succeeded by a round of consent decision-making.

The practice of sociocratic elections intersects with “relational” horizontality in various ways. First, these election processes show intentionality grounded in a desire to avoid the

centralization of power, visible in the official rule that ensures that members can occupy institutional actors' position for a limited amount of time. This is highlighted by Bram during an election, who objects to the proposal of re-electing the activist currently holding it: *"There's a risk that a lot of knowledge gets stuck with people. (...) Also, because the other people in the team might be inclined to say: this person knows best"*. Desire to equalize power relations is further visible in members' attempts to consciously nominate less privileged actors not to reify the power dynamics of society at large.

For example, I witnessed activists that, reflecting on patriarchy, were more inclined to nominate non-men for the position of institutional actors. Speaking of a creeping gender imbalance among institutional role holders, Sage shares: *"One of the things I did as a national coordinator is to say that, if there were new nominations from circles, it would be good to nominate people that don't identify themselves as male."* In these instances, actors show a desire to prevent the (re)production of oppressive societal structure within the movement. Many actors bring in these reflections, as Zachary's words highlight: *"When I think about how easy it went to get into the position of internal coordinator, I'm aware that's also partly because of being a man (...). Yeah, you have privilege, but you should also act on that privilege, so it's difficult when you want to do something like make a speech and it's better to let someone else speak, even though you think "I have such a good speech!""*

Activists' desire to further pursue "relational" horizontality is evident in their attempt to equalize the distribution of capitals and power within the movement by consciously electing inexperienced members. Indeed, because of the leadership practice expected of this role, institutional actors quickly develop capitals grounded in practice and interaction with others. Furthermore, just by being elected, members can gain recognition and status. Sage, a prominent institutional actor, shares: *"Roles give status. Like I felt that my status was increasing once I became national coordinator"*. Hence, through an increase of capitals and status that comes from holding this role, people will have more opportunities to practice leadership, which will lead to better power distribution within the movement. John, a not-so prominent participant, upon knowing about his nomination, shares surprised: *"I see myself as a person who does things a little bit in the corner. Of course, I'm part of XR, but I have the feeling that XR is over there and I'm here"*. Following Woods' (2016, 159) considerations, I argue that activists attempt to reduce the impact of privileges' in the social construction of authority through Sociocratic elections. However, despite these attempts, sociocratic elections are naturally affected by the possession of capitals. For example, people with lower social capital are less likely to be nominated by participants in the first round and by the facilitator in the last round, as highlighted by Puck, a sociocratic election facilitator: *"there were names on there, and I did not know who these people were, and then I'm not going to pick them because I don't know them."*

How does the presence of institutional actors relate to the prefiguration of power within XR? Like circles, institutional actors' leadership practice is legitimized by their role's mandate, which describes *"what a person should do and what that person is allowed to do"* (Kees). Thus, roles come with a set of responsibilities and accountabilities that role-fillers can act upon autonomously. This kind of leadership is cherished by members, as it is seen as enabling: *"I think it can free energy, especially if the rules are distributed in a way which is accepted (...). If everybody has the same saying stuff, nothing happens. (...) With roles, a person can express themselves and their qualities, without having to negotiate everything all the time."* (Kees).

Thus, institutional actors allow me to complete my analysis of XR's power prefiguration. By formally appointing leaders to fulfill tasks and responsibilities, power and leadership status are collectively given to specific individuals, as Kees shares: "*As a role holder, you have some decision power.*" Thus, sociocratic elections lead to what Woods defines as "social authority", a concept that underlines the incessant creation of legitimized power through social interactions (Woods 2016, 156). Within XR, the social construction of authority is an integral part of the organization, making social authority and leadership an accepted yet temporary phenomenon.

Similar to circles, trust sustains this process of construction of authority. For example, what sustains the representative element within XR's democracy is the practice of trust: "*Circles give empowerment to the representative. So there's also some trust that we are like: 'Ok, I can trust this person to provide the needs of your circle, and to make decisions for us'*" (Zachary). In general, trust plays a major role in the construction of social authority for institutional actors: "*We do have to trust each other in what role we give each other*" (Celia). Elected members claim they feel trusted by the group, as Rens shares: "*Quite some people also voted for me, so that felt nice. I was like: 'Oh, people trust me with stuff.'*" Zachary even told me that feeling trusted empowered and gave him the confidence to engage in the leadership practice that is expected of institutional actors: "*[A person] nominated me, and I'm so thankful for that (...). You heard it more often than you know you nominate someone, and they say: 'I never thought about it.'*"

Connecting it to horizontality, social authority leads to the creation of hierarchies that do not necessarily impair its practice. Like circles, as long as institutional actors respect their mandate, they are not taking more power than the one given them. As Kees shares: "*with roles it still stays horizontal in the same way, because role switches and they are designed in a way that is not top-down*" (Kees). Similar to circles, conferring power to individuals can even support horizontality. Besides equalizing the distribution of capitals, giving certain actors power and responsibility to engage in leadership practice makes it less dependent on the possession of capitals, thus mitigating the impact of unequal distribution of capitals on participation and relational horizontality as described in chapter two. This phenomenon aligns with Freeman's (1972, 162) observations, who argued that since power cannot disappear, it would be best to collectively confer it to individuals so as to render power explicit and prevent leadership from being based on informal power dynamics. However, I will build on top of Freeman by showing that conferring leadership and power to individuals can support relational horizontality beyond simply reducing the impact of informal power dynamics on leadership. For that, I need to show how XR's organization legitimizes and enables a kind of leadership aimed at pursuing relational horizontality.

### 3.3.2. "We actively mitigate for power."

Among the institutional logics that intersect with the pursuit of relational horizontality, the one that undoubtedly stands out is XR's 7<sup>th</sup> principle: "We actively mitigate for power." On the website, "We actively mitigate for power" is described as "Breaking down hierarchies of power for more equitable participation" (Extinction Rebellion, 2019). As shown in the first chapter, being an institutional logic, this notion intersects with actors' leadership practice. I have observed that the seventh principle enables and informs actors' leadership practice and justifies their attempts to prefigure alternative power structures. This is exemplified by Lara, who never misses a chance to draw connections on XR's social media platform between the climate crises

and world events manifesting structural injustices. Lara is sensitive to power issues and engages in this kind of work to spread awareness about structural injustices while making the movement safer for less-privileged actors directly affected by them: *“Not speaking out about it leads to less inclusiveness because it ignores the pain and concerns of many people who, because of their position in society, are more affected by the toxic system the consequences of the climate crisis.”*

Although other actors deem such efforts important, leadership practice aimed at power mitigation and re-configuration is often contested by appealing to the 10<sup>th</sup> principle: “We are based on autonomy and decentralization.” Thus, actors accuse Lara of illegitimate authority to decide on issues that could jeopardize the support of and appeal to the broader Dutch population. This situation underlines a perceived tradeoff between horizontality and building a mass movement, deemed by certain actors as possible solely by focusing on the climate crises and not watering down XR’s message. This interesting example highlights a tension regarding horizontality, evident in actors engaging in leadership practice aimed at “relational” horizontality (where power is acknowledged as a relational force linked to structural discrimination and inequalities), whom others contest by appealing to the “organizational” facet of horizontality (where power is seen as stemming from hierarchal and centralized structures).

This tension underlines a different view on the role prefiguration should play within the movement, with certain actors refusing to privilege goals at the means' expense and others believing that goals take precedence over means. Nevertheless, actors who have been radicalized within a subtler understanding of power feel their leadership practice legitimate and justify it by appealing to XR's institutional logic, which has informed it in the first place, enabling a kind of leadership practice that aims at the pursuit of “relational horizontality.” Although this example regarded power linked to structural injustice (i.e. racism), the principle “We actively mitigate for power” also enables a leadership practice to deal with the informal power dynamics as described in chapter two. Having outlined both the social construction of authority and the kind of leadership practice aimed at relational horizontality, I can turn to that by presenting the institutional actor of the facilitator.

### 3.3.3.1 Facilitators: leadership and power distributors

The way the organization intersects the most with “relational” horizontality is through the institutional role of the facilitator, which I now describe. According to the official role description, the facilitator “facilitates the flow of the meeting, make sure it runs smoothly and covers the main agenda items” (Official document). Ideally, their leadership practice is informed by XR's institutional logics: “Facilitators have to maintain the principles of XR and the “Ways of Working” that are derived from them” (Official document). The existence of this role is cherished by members of XR, as exemplified by Alex: *“It's nice to have a figure who has under control, (...) a clear idea about the agenda and the points and how the meeting should be structured”*. Since describing the role and functions goes beyond this paper's purpose, I limit my analysis to the facilitators' effects on horizontality and distributed leadership.

First off, I discovered that the working of a circle highly depends on the leadership practice of facilitators. This is visible in how Kees shares his frustration concerning the circle's facilitator not picking up the task appropriately: *“Come on man, we're all dependent on the outer support, the structure [the facilitator's role] gives, and you're the one who should give it now and hold up*



onto it.” Because of the responsibilities and expectations placed upon the facilitator, facilitators come to have the unique role of “leadership distributor.” Throughout my fieldwork and my years of involvement, I have indeed observed the extent to which facilitators, through their leadership, can facilitate others’ autonomy and leadership practice: *“As a facilitator, (...) [you are] giving freedom to people to do what they want”* (Penny). In the word of Gerry, good facilitators do *“so much more than making an agenda but sensing into the movements’ needs, put them in the meeting, and create opportunity for others’ involvement.”* In this view, facilitator’s practice is the leadership that Sutherland describes, a kind of leadership that manages meaning, defines reality, and provides the basis for organizational action (Sutherland et al. 2014, 764).

Furthermore, because of the characteristics described so far and the social construction of authority as described in chapter one, facilitators are, as already mentioned, in the best-suited position to pursue “relational” horizontality through the distribution and mitigation of power. In Dina’s words: *“The role of the facilitator is not to decide at all. It just makes the decision possible (...) You are the distributor, not the power holder.”* For example, facilitators are responsible for promoting, facilitating, and “enforcing” the use of hand signs, one of XR’s institutional logics used by activists to communicate during meetings. Hand signs (visible in figure 4) are vital for relational horizontality. As Sage shares and as I have observed myself, they ensure that certain voices do not dominate: *“I find [hand signs] very inclusive, and it makes that it’s not only who can jump in the in the gaps from speaking the fastest but allows everybody to speak up. So, it mitigates for power”*.

Sage is an activist who has nurtured inclusive democratic processes within XR. Together, Sage and I have cultivated a community of facilitators who, through their practice, distribute and mitigate for power, fostering “relational horizontality.” In our facilitation practice, we are prone to mitigate for power by, for instance, proactively inviting high-capitals actors to leave space for others by saying something along the line of: *“You’ve already given a valuable contribution, and before coming back to you, I would like to hear from someone else.”* Another way we mitigate the informal power dynamics as described in chapter two is by making sure that proposals are not overly affected by high-capital actors’ asymmetrical influence but contains contributions from multiple actors before the group formally engages in consent decision-making.

The picture of the facilitator that I have painted so far starts delineating a leadership practice aimed at distributing leadership and pursuing “relational” horizontality. In this view, facilitators can use the social authority assigned to them and the asymmetrical influence that follows it in ways that foster horizontality and the distribution of leadership. Horizontality and distributed leadership become collective projects aided by facilitators’ leadership practice in respect of XR’s institutional logics. This is indicated from one of my field entries about a meeting where I was appointed facilitator: *“I am being given a set of authority by the group that is so powerful in creating and setting the scene for the culture that we are trying to achieve”* (field entry). Whereas I have described how it can be beneficial, I will show how facilitators’ leadership practice and social authority can have problematic implications.



**Figure 4. Hand signs**

### 3.3.3.2 A cloud on the horizon(tality)

To begin with, the existence of this role creates dependence on the person filling this role to provide the basis for organizational action, distribute leadership, and pursue horizontality. Referring to a clear episode that escalated because of a member trying to centralize power and exercise asymmetrical influence, Jonson shared: *“If we had someone who has some more experience with facilitating, this would not have happened.”* Such dependence on facilitators risks depriving other members of the collective responsibility to engage in leadership practice aimed at horizontality. It might even result in teams not collectively owning the responsibility to engage in any kind of leadership practice: *“People depend on you a little bit in regards. When you're a facilitator, people listen to you, and they sometimes forget that they're supposed to contribute”* (Puck).

Furthermore, not surprisingly, facilitation requires practice if it is to be aimed at the distribution of leadership and the pursuit of horizontality. I remember at the beginning of my XR facilitation journey, when I discovered that I could use my authority to distribute and mitigating power, I would feel insecure and frightened. As I became more acquainted with the logics of the field and developed more capitals, I felt more assured to engage in such practice. Indeed, this kind of leadership requires cultural capital, which manifests in practical skills to mitigate for power and communication abilities to legitimize their leadership practice in culturally appropriate ways. To do so, facilitators need to be familiar with the logics of the field and with XR’s institutional logics. On the other hand, facilitators need symbolic capital which, manifesting in an overall sense of confidence, empowers facilitators to address instances in which horizontality is compromised.

Thus, by depending so extensively on this role, facilitators' lack of capital might impair horizontally and distributed leadership. Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed many facilitators that impaired leadership practice for the circle due to a lack of capitals. I remember a meeting where an unskilled facilitator quickly moved through agenda points without providing opportunities for people's engagement. In my view as an experienced member, I noticed how this impaired people's autonomy and leadership practice, as indicated by my field entry of the time: *"The facilitator just did not know what questions to ask, how to activate the people, how to bring things together"* (field entry). Furthermore, facilitators might overlook and not acknowledge the asymmetrical influence resulting from an uneven capital distribution when they lack capitals. As Celia's words highlight, such practice impacts horizontality: *"I think most people have no clue what they're doing. Maybe they are technically doing it, but then not feeling into the group and just skip people, feelings, or thoughts"*. As a result, without capitals, an understanding of the logics of the field, and of how power operates, facilitators cannot even engage in leadership practice aimed at the distribution of leadership and the pursuit of horizontality, turning the role of the facilitator, potentially beneficial, into a liability.

On the other hand, when actors holding this role possess large capitals, because of the characteristics of this institutional actor, they are in the best position to centralize power within their hands and exercise asymmetrical influence, thus exacerbating the informal power dynamics described in chapter two. By being given authority to decide the agenda points and how they are discussed, facilitators can frame the discussion as they please and nudge it towards their personal preference, thus (unintentionally) exercise soft power. Whenever I have done this as a facilitator, I was usually motivated by urgency. This is visible in my field entry of a meeting in which we had to make multiple decisions to engage in our circles' situated leadership practice to contribute to a movement-wide project: *"I feel like I've made the agenda, and I said what had to be done in a way that wasn't open up for changes. I felt a bit of a project manager distributing tasks, instead of fostering and hosting a discussion; feeling and sensing into what people wanted to do"* (field entry). Whereas I am usually self-conscious of my facilitation practice, facilitators seem largely unaware of the effects their practice has on power dynamics and horizontality, as Zachary, a prominent XR facilitator, shares: *"When it's about informal structures (...) I never thought about that"* (Zachary). If the facilitator plays a massive role in the practice of horizontality and distribution of leadership, what happens when their practice does not foster them?

#### 3.3.3.3 Over a barrel

When participants understand that facilitation practice does not lead to horizontality and the distribution of leadership, challenging facilitators and addressing their practice is arduous. Sharing an instance in which a participant felt bypassed by the facilitator, Celia says: *"If I do not trust you to be a good facilitator, then I have to speak up and say that I don't want you to do it because I don't trust you with it. But I don't do it"*. In general, I have witnessed multiple instances in which others do not address the facilitator's "un-horizontal" practice. Facilitators' social authority and the trust reposed on them impinge on individuals, activating feelings of subordination that make it hard, in any field, to challenge an authoritarian figure. This is especially so for non-experienced members, who do not possess the capitals required to do any better through their practice: *"I don't want to judge because I cannot do it any better"* (Celia)

For experienced and “powerful” members, other dynamics prevent addressing facilitation practice. In meetings where facilitation practice does not lead to horizontality and distributed leadership, knowledgeable members experience frustration and other challenging emotions, as Flora shares: *“It's like I can't be in a meeting if a meeting is badly facilitated. I can't be there anymore. It's like counterproductive. I don't know why it happens.”* In my experience, the frustration, irritation, and agitation arising in poorly facilitated meetings make me even feel physically unpleasant, but these do not always lead to challenging facilitation practice. This is because attending poorly facilitated meetings create tension and contrasting motivations within experienced members. On the one hand, feeling they can only support horizontality and distributed leadership by being a facilitator, they are motivated to take over the role. On the other hand, they feel that doing so would strip away the trust given to the facilitators and entail concentrating power within themselves, which they perceive as un-horizontal.

Experienced members' tension usually resolves itself in two ways. The first outcome I have observed results in experienced members being given the facilitator role, either through formal sociocratic election or through informal facilitator's re-negotiation on the fly. This is potentially problematic, as putting experienced members in positions of social authority further reproduces their capitals and impairs new members to develop capitals, exacerbating the dynamics stemming from unequal distribution of capitals described in chapter two. The second outcome is that un-horizontal facilitation practice goes unaddressed also by experienced members. As Kees shares: *“It's just cool if the person feels that is their responsibility, comes from the person itself. And [by commenting on their facilitation] I am afraid of (...) creating the idea of a top-down hierarchy because I already did the role for as long as it exists.”* If the situation persists, members' struggles lead them to move to a different circle where capitals are higher, as Celia highlights: *“One of the reasons I left is because of the facilitator. I just get annoyed and bored most of the time”*.

### 3.3.4 Conclusion

This chapter explored how organizational processes intersected with relational horizontality. First, I presented the social construction of authority through sociocratic elections and how activists consciously pursue relational horizontality by ensuring that privileges do not determine who holds power and authority within XR. In XR, conferring power to engage in leadership practice makes it less dependent on the possession of capitals, thus fostering relational horizontality by mitigating the impact that unequal distribution of capitals has on participation. Next, I theorized how XR's institutional logics enables and legitimizes leadership practice aimed at “relational horizontality.” Social authority and a kind of leadership practice aimed at relational horizontality aided me in discussing the facilitators as power and leadership distributor. Although facilitators can positively impact the pursuit of relational horizontality and distributed leadership, I also showed how, through their practice, they can endanger it.

## 4. Conclusion

This thesis has unpacked the complexity and contradictions of horizontality within XR NL through the lens of leadership practice as informed and enabled by organizational processes. Following Spillane's theory on distributed leadership, I have demonstrated that XR's organization is inseparable from leadership practice. By spreading authority to engage in leadership practice, XR's organization structures and distributes power across different circles.

Complemented by the presence of formally elected institutional actors and the social authority that comes with it, power within XR is instilled into formal organizational processes that give rise to collectively accepted and legitimized hierarchies.

Following authors such as Freeman (1972) and Morris and Staggenborg (2010), the way power is prefigured within XR shows an understanding of power as something that cannot be wished away but as something that needs to be collectively dealt with by selecting who exercises power and mitigating for it. Although the presence of hierarchies directly contrasts with definitions of horizontality (Sutherland et al. 2014; Swain 2019), I showed how hierarchies can be positive forces for its pursuit. Whereas organizational hierarchies can confront power blocks that emerge informally and prevent “organizational” power centralization, intersubjective hierarchies can equalize the distribution of capitals among members, make leadership practice less dependent on their possession, and actively foster relational horizontality through a facilitation practice aimed at the distribution of leadership and the mitigation of power. Although facilitation practice is not the ultimate solution to pursue every aspect of horizontality, I believe that my research sheds light on the ways leadership practice can limit power inequalities among the members of the movement.

In sum, following the path of authors such as Young and Schwartz (2012) and Maeckelbergh (2011), I have shown how organizations and leaders can co-exist with and even support horizontality and activists’ prefigurative aspirations. Contrary to them, who try to argue that organizations are not necessarily hierarchal, I argue that the very way they can support horizontality is through the existence of hierarchies and authorities, as long as they do not stem from possession of privileges but are consciously and collectively accepted phenomena. Through these efforts, I prompt for reconceptualizing horizontality as a practice that includes authority, hierarchies, and power, so that it can achieve its ultimate goal: limiting power inequalities.

However, I have also shown how informal social construction of authority and its solidification through an unequal capitals’ distribution leads to the centralization of power and leadership, makes it difficult for actors to challenge powerholders, and might create dependence on individual actors to distribute leadership and pursue horizontality. Thus, in line with Juris (2008), I argue that horizontality is not a state but a never-ending project that requires intentionality, needs to be sustained, and continuously monitored. Without critical reflection, continuous monitoring, and capital re-distribution, leadership and organization can become liabilities for horizontality and the movement’s goals.

This research only touched the surface of the intricate practice of horizontality. The relationship between XR NL and XR Utrecht needs to be better investigated for a complete understanding of horizontality. Further research is also needed to investigate how leadership practice and horizontality are affected by what Maeckelbergh (2009, 114) calls “decentralized hierarchical power,” power linked to structural discrimination and inequalities such as sexism and racism. Finally, since my findings indicate that trust might be indispensable for actors to engage in leadership practice, develop capitals, and embrace their autonomy within the movement, further research is necessary to investigate the role trust plays in the practice of horizontality. Despite these limitations, I hope I humbly increased the understanding of how coordination occurs through alternative, prefigurative politics that redesign the way power operates, contributing to

the quest for “impossible organizing” (Reedy 2014, 639). Through this, I wish to support activists to strive for a better world while staying true to their prefigurative aspirations to create a better world within their movements.

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## 7. Summary

In this thesis, I explored how the organization of Extinction Rebellion Netherlands informs actors' leadership and how leadership and organization affect the movement's internal power dynamics. I discovered that the organization of Extinction Rebellion Netherlands plays a critical role in influencing leadership within the movement by directing actors' actions towards the pursuit of specific goals and the employment of particular strategies in their pursuit. Furthermore, through its governance structure, the organization distributes power across the movement and confer authority to its various circles. Thus, I demonstrated that XR's organization does not try to relinquish power but secures it into formal organizational processes by creating explicit hierarchies and authorities. Whereas power, authority, and hierarchies might be seen as contrasting activists' attempts to develop alternative power relationships, formalizing power into organizational processes opens the possibility for it to be consciously distributed, mitigated, and accounted for.

Finally, I have discovered that the formal election of institutional role consecrates one type of intersubjective social authority and confers leadership status to the actors filling these roles. Combined with considerations that XR's organization legitimizes a kind of leadership that is directed at the equalization of power dynamics among movement's actors, I discovered that hierarchies stemming from intersubjective social authority can further support activists' attempts



to create equalize the movement's internal power dynamics. This is visible in the figure of the facilitator who, being given the social authority to frame others' interactions, can engage in leadership and use their influence to actively mitigate and distribute power among other actors.

In sum, in my thesis, I showed that hierarchies, authority, and power, as long as they do not stem from the possession of privileges, can even be positive forces supporting activists' aspirations to equalize power dynamics among its members. Nevertheless, informal power dynamics stemming from experience, knowledge, and social connections within the movement give rise to informal social authorities and complicates the picture painted so far. The presence of social authorities leads to hierarchical relationships among activists, asymmetrical influence, and a smaller likelihood that less-experienced members will engage in leadership. When informal social authorities are also those occupying intersubjective social authorities (i.e. facilitator), the power dynamics that stem from it become indistinguishable from a superior-subordinate relationship of regular hierarchical organizations. In conclusion, creating alternative power structures is a never-ending project that requires continuous monitoring and a conscious attempt to distribute and mitigate power, or else leadership and organization can turn into a liability for a more equitable distribution of power.