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Andreas Malm

***How to Blow Up a Pipeline:
Learning to Fight in a World on
Fire***

**New York and London: Verso,
2021. 208 pp.**

ISBN 9781839760259 (PB)

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‘No Excuses for Passivity’. This is the message that Andreas Malm wants to send with this must-read book. Calling for the start of a counterattack on the deadly forces of production and business-as-usual that at once produce the crisis and narcotise all top-down responses to the devastation generated, the Swedish scholar and activist brings to the table a theme that has been absent in most of the activists and scholarly debates on climate-change resistance and movements in the past three decades: violence. Violence and the role of violence in the present phase of capitalism-driven climate change is at the centre of the discussion. Concretely speaking, the book calls for a scaling-up of the responses to climate disruption which translates into acts of sabotage against fossil fuel infrastructure. Therefore, it is a call for violent actions against things and certain forms

Global Environment 16 (2023): 616–621

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doi: 10.3197/ge.2023.160308

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of property, not against people — as the author decided to further clarify in a post-scriptum appendix that first appeared on Verso's blog.¹ But why does Malm propose such a radical shift in climate movements' tactics?

As he specifies in the preface to the volume, Malm wrote the book during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when the global lockdown had cut emissions to an unforeseen low. But differently from his colleague at Lund University, Alf Hornborg, who saw much potential in the power of present and future pandemics in forcing governments and fossil fuel producers to reduce emissions on a global scale, Malm did not see the pandemic as a useful resistance tool, quite the opposite; Covid-19 abruptly silenced millions of climate activists who, until the very eve of the first lock-down wave across Europe and North America, were occupying city streets in the whole Global North. I myself remember the thrill of taking the streets together with hundreds of thousands of young students and activists in Italy in the fall of 2019, but also the great disappointment of being confined at home and interrupting that momentum for climate change activism worldwide. As many feared, the post-pandemic time — if there is such a thing — was quite different from before in terms of activism. As the economy bounced back from the big downfall of the lock-down, so did CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions, following the return to what Malm defines as the slow violence of 'the business-as-usual'.

Although the escalation he was hoping for did not occur in the first years after the pandemic, Malm was nonetheless right in his analysis of the defeat – to use an expression familiar to many political activists, including the green movements.

In the first section of the book, entitled 'Learning from Past Struggles', Malm scrutinises with a merciless eye the failure of COPs (Conference of Parties), starting from the very first one in Berlin, in 1995, where he was present in the streets of the city and at the UN summits

¹ See <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/5061-when-does-the-fightback-begin>. This response is included in the latest edition of the book and its translated versions.

on climate change. Among the many testimonies (and data) he brings to the table is one speech given by the president of the Dominican Republic Roosevelt Skerrit about the destruction brought on his island by Hurricane Maria in 2017, and the famous ‘How dare you?’ speech of 2019, when Greta Thunberg shouted her and her generation’s rage against UN leaders’ inaction. From there, Malm goes on to analyse how climate camps came to be the mobile platforms from which the climate movements in the Global North are elaborating new ways of fighting fossil fuels through sabotaging and other coordinated actions that draw upon tactics and strategies developed by other activist groups in the Global South and elsewhere by indigenous communities. As a model, Malm presents that of Ende Gelände, a German-based climate activists’ group who successfully blocked extraction from the biggest European open-pit lignite mine and impeded the clearing of Hambach, one of the few ancient forests still standing in Rhineland. The main point Malm wants to make is that Ende Gelände – through a form of coordinated violent opposition to extractivism – was successful in sabotaging the plan of further expansion for the wealthiest and most-polluting state in Europe: Germany.

While Ende Gelände is signaled out as the forefront of climate activism in Europe, Malm insists on the analysis of the failings of other climate activists’ groups and their strategies in making significant change happen in the new phase of the struggle; from Bill McKibben-led 350.org and the so-called ‘second and third cycles of climate activism’ in the Global North, Malm then spends some time enumerating the failures of various contemporary environmentalist groups, especially XR – Extinction Rebellion. Why so? Because of their insistence on the use of non-violent methods. According to Malm, the supposed tactical advantages brought by non-violence in terms of sympathies and efficiency are simply not true. This is where the human ecologist delves into twentieth century political history. The Swedish scholar ruthlessly demolishes the heroes of non-violence, from scholars to politicians, focusing especially on Gandhi, who is depicted as little more than an opportunist and uncoherent politician who did not hesitate to sacrifice Indian and non-British lives during his contradictory career as a political leader. On the

other hand, as a virtuous example, Malm takes Nelson Mandela, who abandoned non-violence as soon as he realised that it was not producing enough results for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. As examples, Malm describes the sabotaging and attacks on property perpetrated by the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) which were the radical (and armed) fringe of the ANC. The case of the Suffragettes is similar: far from peacefully standing still in the streets demanding the right to vote, they embarked on a prolonged campaign of violent destruction of property to make their voices heard and to show their power to threaten the British ruling classes.

Similarly, Malm discusses the success of the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King in the 1960s US. Following the recent studies of various black radical scholars, Malm argues that the actions and, even more, the fear of the possible consequences of government inaction posed by extremist movements such as the Black Panthers and radical leaders such as Malcom X were key in achieving the success of protesters' milder demands. Sabotage and the use of violence in response to state and business-as-usual violence is also illustrated as a key element in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and in the 1979 Iranian Revolution as in the case of fedayeen. This pushing-to-action pressure concretely exerted by extremist movements ultimately led to the acceptance of parallel milder claims by less radical groups: this is in a nutshell the 'radical flank effect'. Malm advocates for a similar turn to happen in climate activism, with sabotage as a key tactical resource.

In Chapter 2, entitled 'Breaking the Spell', Malm looks at the ways in which different resistance groups have engaged with sabotaging fossil fuel infrastructure in the past: from the first Palestinian attack against British refineries in Haifa in 1936 to the ANC strikes at pro-apartheid state-controlled oil company Sasol in South Africa in the 1980s, also touching upon PFLP guerrilla actions against Israel in occupied Lebanon in 1969 and MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta) raids on refineries, offshore drilling platforms and oil tankers in Nigeria in the 2000s. Writing against 'strategic non-violence' groups, Malm then describes how business-as-usual is a very concrete and deadly form of violence that capital-

ists and groups of interests in the Global North daily perpetrates against dispossessed and working-class people, mostly in the Global South, a form of slow violence that kills. The Tropical Belt is and will be the area most affected by climate change. Largely situated in the global South, this area hosts around forty per cent of the entire world population. Hurricanes, heatwaves and prolonged droughts are not part of the foreseeable future but are already part of the present for these multitudes of people. In this respect, the narrative of 'we are all in the same boat' leaves space for 'a boat large enough to host a plurality and diversity of tactics' to fight climate change.

As proof of the need for the climate movement to engage with anticapitalistic and anti-racist groups and thinkers to enact this tactical shift, Malm presents the failure of XR 2019 blockade of the London metro system, which largely affected working-class, racialised and subaltern groups instead of rich possessors of high-polluting SUVs or private jets.

In Chapter 3 – 'Fighting Despair', the Swede fiercely combats the 'we're doomed' and 'embrace death' narrative which gets a lot of space in the press and the media, following the writing of wealthy white North American and European intellectuals such as Jonathan Franzen, the Dark Mountain Project, Timothy Morton and Roy Scranton. By acknowledging the very privileged position of the aforementioned authors, Malm categorically rejects their 'climate fatalism' as a privilege of the wealthy ones, which only 'contributes to plundering' the many. Finally, Malm argues that climate activism needs to go back to the style of the early 1990s movements and be clearly grounded in anticapitalism and linked to the struggle to change the system. As a slogan for such a shift, he goes back to a famous quote by Frantz Fanon, where he wrote that violence for the colonised can be cathartic and allow the colonised to finally free themselves 'from [their] inferiority complex and from [their] despair and inaction; it makes [them] fearless and restores [their] self-respect.'²

² F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) pp. 42–45.

To conclude, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* is not a book for scholars. Neither is it a handbook for phony or self-proclaimed climate terrorists, as has been written of it – and no, you do not actually learn how to blow up a pipeline. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* is a book for climate activists and speaks to the climate movement of today. Whether we agree with Malm or not, we must deal with those problems as much as we need to change the business-as-usual impasse in which we daily live.

Daniele Valisena has a Ph.D. in history of science, technology and the environment. Since October 2021, he has been working as a post-doctoral researcher in environmental history at the University of Liège, Belgium and as a part-time lecturer in history of migration and the environment at NYU Florence. His background is in modern history, but his scholarly work touches on history of science and technology, oral history, environmental humanities, STS and political ecology. Through his research, he focuses on the interplay between migration and environmental history, touching also upon themes such as walking as method, ruderality and more-than-human storying, post-industrialisation, urban political ecology and critical heritage studies. His ongoing research explores the links between zootechnics, Italian colonialism and Fascist politics of science and nature.

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