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**From efficacy to legitimacy. The difficult assessment of the outcomes of sabotage.**

In 2024, 52 years after the Club of Rome's Meadows report and 36 years after the creation of the IPCC, hopes for the fight against global warming seem low. Still largely dependent on fossil fuels, the combustion of which makes a major contribution to global warming, our societies see an increasing number of heatwaves, fires and floods every year, illustrating the scale of this catastrophe for almost all living beings on our planet. Against this backdrop, Andreas Malm denounces our inability to face up to the climate emergency, entangled as we are in an incomprehensible business-as-usual. Having been involved in the fight against global warming for several decades, environmental activists are the main targets of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (Malm, 2021). An environmental activist since COP1 in 1995, Andreas Malm describes the failure of a climate movement to break away from its moral and strategic pacifism. In this influential essay, the author draws on the history of social movements, political science and political theory to answer the "Lanchester’s paradox": given the urgency of climate change and the failure of non-violent strategies, why haven't environmental activists yet turned their attention to actions against the infrastructures responsible for global warming, in order to push governments to impose a definitive ecological and energy transition? After describing the limitations of campaign-level statistical analysis in the study of causality between non-violent (as well as violent) action strategy and mobilization outcomes, we discuss the role of mobilization framing in legitimizing (or delegitimizing) mobilizations. Finally, we question the profile of the public whose support the climate movement should seek, according to Malm, and whose potential criticism could thus justify a change of strategy.

1. **How to measure effectiveness?**

In this book, sabotage is presented as an effective strategy, representative of that revolutionary ideal that the liberal civil disobedience of the climate movement seems to have lost. An eternal subject of debate within mobilizations, the effectiveness of methods of action has also gradually developed within the research community. In their now famous book *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict* (2011), Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan analyzed 323 mobilization campaigns conducted between 1900 and 2006. After categorizing these campaigns according to their violent or non-violent character, the researchers showed that nonviolence is twice as likely to succeed as violence. Inspired by this book, other researchers proved the superior effectiveness of nonviolence in toppling authoritarian regimes (Celestino and Gleditsch, 2013) or mobilizing large sections of the population in mobilizations (Başer, 2019).

Over time, however, Chenoweth and Stephan's work became the subject of a number of criticisms, calling into question their findings. Anisin (2020) questioned Chenoweth and Stephan's choice to categorize as nonviolent campaigns relying "primarily" (but not exclusively) on nonviolent methods. Campaigns including stone-throwing and the use of Molotov cocktails were therefore considered non-violent. Criticizing the binary categorization of methods of action into only two categories, Anisin proposed a more precise analysis based on the intermediate category of "unarmed violence" proposed by Kadivar and Ketchley (2018). Using an expanded version of Chenoweth and Stephan's NAVCO database, he demonstrated that "unarmed violence," formerly categorized as nonviolent, was more effective than strictly nonviolent actions.

This argument couldn't have come at a better time for Malm, who seeks to critique the effectiveness of non-violence. Confronting the "sanitized history, bereft of realistic appraisals of what has happened and what hasn’t" (p61) put forward by strategic pacifism advocates, Malm defends the role of police car destruction and arson of police stations in the victory of protests during the Iranian Revolution or the Arab Springs. According to him, many victories of social mobilizations could never have occurred without violence.

These criticisms are part of a broader debate about the difficult categorization of methods of action in campaign-level analysis. Faced with the dichotomy that distinguishes only between violence and non-violence, the choice to diversify the categories of analysis is undoubtedly relevant. However these analysis still struggles to grasp the diversity of methods used in the context of mobilization. By reducing a campaign consisting of numerous, potentially different actions to a single categorization, the researcher demonstrates simplification. As Onken et al. (2021) remind us, this is indeed a limitation inherent in studies examining complex campaigns and seeking to draw conclusions about their effectiveness. Observing the limitations of campaign-level analysis, Chenoweth recommends organization-level, and event-level analysis that offer more precise, localized, and nuanced understandings of strategies and tactical changes.

Beyond categorization, work on the effectiveness of methods of action also raises the difficult question of causality between action strategy and mobilization outcomes (Giugni 1998). Statistical analysis inform us about the predominance of a certain action method within a set of considered successful (or unsuccessful) mobilizations and usually only observe a correlation between a method of action and an outcome of a mobilization. As Chenoweth (2023) points out, these campaign-level statistical analyses struggle to account for the potentially diverse consequences of resorting to an action method. In parallel with achieving the objectives of a campaign in the long term, she assumes that a method can also have negative impacts in the short or medium term. Like Onken et al. (2021) responding to Anisin (2020), Chenoweth also advises the use of mixed methods to study, through qualitative analyses, the mechanisms of resorting to violence (or non-violence) and their reception by the various actors involved in the mobilizations (protesters, media, police, state, etc.).

1. **Framing mobilizations**

Furthermore, the question of effectiveness contributes to a broader question raised by Malm: that of the legitimacy of a mobilization. While proof of the effectiveness of an action method can convince external actors of the value of a mobilization, it is not necessarily a sufficient (or even necessary) argument. In this sense, Malm attempts to defend the moral justification of sabotage. Although advocated by several environmental activists, Malm refuses to categorize this method as non-violence, arguing that this effort constitutes "more than a conceptual strecht, a waste of rhetorical effort" (p102). Believing that public opinion in Northern countries considers the destruction of property as violence, the author proposes accepting this categorization while presenting this violence as "*different in kind* from the violence that hits a human (or an animal)" (p102). Not affecting subsistence goods but luxury goods or infrastructure contributing to climate change, this violence would thus be less severe than violence against people. But would it be legitimate? According to William Smith (2018) cited by Malm, sabotage could indeed be justified in an emergency context to disrupt practices that could lead to irreversible effects, if gentler tactics have yielded no results and if the targeted wrongdoers violate a convention or charter (p105).

Despite this argument, the rhetorical battle is not won. By embracing violence, activists risk being labeled as terrorists. Described as a catastrophe by Malm, this rhetoric would would erase "the moral capital the climate movement has amassed" (p111). Highlighting the role of collective actions frames (Snow et al., 1986; Benford & Snow, 2012) and their perception by external actors, Malm poses an interesting question: how do we perceive the action methods employed in social movements? While statistical studies defend clear categorizations of methods of action, these are the subject of discussion within activist circles and are therefore far from being consensual, universal and fixed. Although some studies seem to believe in the existence of a perfectly "objective" qualification of action methods, these can be considered, according to Onken et al. (2021), as social constructions, the result of negotiations that are never fully stabilized.

Knowing this, the complex question of framing tasks arises. Malm proposes presenting the violence used by environmentalists as of a different nature, always "constrained, proportionate, and discriminating" (Smith, 2018, p18-19, cited by Malm, 2021, p111) and targeting infrastructures responsible for an imminent catastrophe for living beings.

As they are not the sole actors involved in framing tasks concerning mobilizations, activists face other interpretations of reality and perceptions of action methods. These framing tasks are thus part of a conflictual process opposing, notably, the framing of militants to that of opponents of the movement, audiences, and the media (Benford & Snow, 2000). Alongside the legitimization effort inherent in the framing tasks of militants, other frames can lead to the delegitimization of a mobilization. Presenting a demonstration as a threat and as the work of groups of individuals of different political affiliation or nationality can thus increase support for repression among readers (Edwards & Arnon, 2020), confirming Malm's desire to avoid as much as possible the label of terrorist.

Playing a major role in the perception that external actors have of mobilizations, the framing of collective actions results from several tasks. These are carried out by a multitude of actors directly or indirectly involved in the mobilizations and sharing different opinions. The activists and opponents of the movement are, of course, the primary actors involved, each attempting to legitimize or delegitimize the mobilizations based on their cause, the profiles of the activists, or the action methods employed. In turn, the media also participate in these framing tasks. Interviewing certain activists, police officers, politicians, observers, presenting the context of the mobilization in a certain way, or showing or telling certain actions rather than others can influence the perception that viewers will have of this mobilization. Through their statements, politicians also fully participate in framing mobilizations (see, for example, the statements of the French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin regarding environmental activists opposed to mega reservoirs, whom he described as eco-terrorists). Finally, it should be noted that sociologists studying social movements themselves participate in framing reality, as Howard Becker (2007) had noticed. As illustrated by books like *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* and *Why Civil Resistance Works*, research on the effectiveness of violence or non-violence is taken up and cited by activists to justify the use of certain action methods. The relationships and influences between social movements and researchers are thus much more numerous and diverse than this neutral image of research might suggest.

1. **Who to convince?**

Aware of the framing struggles regarding the methods of action of social movements, of which he is also a significant actor, as evidenced by the sales and comments on his book, Malm nevertheless remains vague about the targets of his argumentation and the responses to criticisms of his strategy. Presented as the main culprits of climate change, the wealthiest are certainly not the ones Malm aims to convince. The same goes for the ruling classes leading the most polluting states, of which there would be as much chance of seeing them "implementing compulsory restrictions on the consumption of the rich – on themselves, that is – is about the same as them donning leather jackets and proclaiming war communism" (Malm, 2021, p93). Therefore, knowing that not everyone can be convinced, the question arises of which members of this "community of opinion" (p121) to persuade. If, as we have seen, Malm takes a stance against "perfectly civil disobedience" seeking naïvely the support of all and thus failing to exert a sufficiently significant pressure to compel states to impose transitions, he does not completely overlook the question of legitimacy and the "dint of the numbers" (p17). “Actions should be undertaken if plan, goal and execution can be explained and garner support in an intimate relation to the existing consciousness, to be pushed up a notch” (p119). In Gramscian terms, Malm argues that actions should not only conform to common sense; they should transform it. Malm thus mentions the harmful risk of the radical flank, the disaster that would represent a loss of legitimacy. It is necessary, he says, to avoid "tactics that would put off too many people" (p119). So finally, the following question arises: at what point should reproaches be listened to and actions adjusted accordingly? Far from being trivial, this balancing between legitimacy and radicalism is crucial. Beyond the questions of violence and non-violence, debates about effectiveness and ineffectiveness, the main issue of the climate movement is and will remain that of its legitimacy.

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