

A Case for Extreme Climate Action

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Anyone interested in learning how to blow up a pipeline will be disappointed by Andreas Malm's latest book, which offers little in the way of technical advice. For insight into setting explosives, wielding a cutting torch, and avoiding detection, such readers will continue to rely on older works like William Powell's classic *The Anarchist Cookbook*, or *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, a detailed how-to manual for enterprising saboteurs edited by Dave Foreman and the pseudonymous Bill Haywood.

How to Blow Up a Pipeline
Andreas Malm
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Few people are actually contemplating clandestine attacks on major infrastructure, which is why Malm doesn't concern himself with matters of technique and instead thinks through the political, moral, and strategic questions raised by sabotage and property destruction. Those wrestling with the applied ethics of sabotage will be richly rewarded by this short and pointed book, but so will anyone in the larger audience at which Malm aims: people who consider climate change a rapidly unfolding catastrophe that demands an immediate response. The first group makes up only a fragment of the second, and Malm has no illusions about the transformative potential of pipeline demolition. Whatever power such isolated acts of destruction might hold lies only in catalyzing large-scale political change.

At the heart of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* are two questions, one concerned with justification and the other with attribution. The first is whether sabotage and violence—in the form of property destruction—are useful tactics for climate activists. The second is about where to lay blame for the climate crisis.

MEANS AND ENDS

The first question is likely to divide any sizable set of environmentally minded respondents. Some

will immediately say either “Definitely” or “Absolutely not,” and many will equivocate. The book's answer is made fairly clear by its title and much more so by its content. Malm is not one to equivocate. His goal is less to weigh the relative merits of different arguments than to establish what strikes him as patently true, and the stridency of his writing is seductive and often convincing.

In his 2017 book *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*, in some ways a more theoretical companion to *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, Malm argues against the sort of scholarly fixation on hybridity that seeks to blur the lines between human society and nature. He favors drawing sharp if complex distinctions in order to “clarify the stakes and gather the forces.” *The Progress of This Storm* spends many of its pages navigating abstruse academic debates, but its aim is to hack through that dense foliage in order to clear a path for decisive action so that those so inclined might “let go of everything else and physically cut off fossil fuel combustion, deflate the tyres, block the runways, lay siege to the platforms, invade the mines.”

According to Malm, the current crisis makes mass action absolutely essential, and sabotage by small groups and resolute individuals increasingly necessary. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* presents this view methodically and insistently. It quickly reminds us of the stakes: massive forest fires, searing droughts, floods and mudslides, hurricanes (and typhoons and cyclones), and much worse to come—all of these disasters engendering social strife and falling disproportionately on the most vulnerable and least culpable communities. It characterizes the political response so far as not only insufficient but counterproductive: the agreements reached at the various United Nations climate summits since 1995 have been anemic, while many nations continue to wantonly extract fossil fuels and build associated infrastructure. And it attacks the various arguments against the use of

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violence, saving particular scorn for the theory of strategic pacifism.

Malm is not only a scholar and activist but something of a protest camp philosopher of the climate movement. He doesn't speak from a lectern to an audience of moderates and skeptics; he shouts through a megaphone to an already impassioned crowd. He argues most vehemently with peaceful climate activists because they are the ones he most hopes to convert.

Extinction Rebellion, the direct-action climate group that emerged in Britain in 2018, occupying intersections and offices and blockading bridges and railroads, is one of Malm's favorite foils. The readiness of Extinction Rebellion activists to engage in civil disobedience makes them rowdy compared with, say, the Environmental Defense Fund, while their commitment to nonviolence makes them straitlaced compared with the Earth Liberation Front. This is a familiar position along the spectrum of environmental activism, traditionally occupied by groups like Greenpeace and Rainforest Action Network.

Greenpeace, which pioneered the art of attracting public attention to environmental causes through bold direct actions—most famously, steering inflatable motorboats between whales and harpoon guns—has never tolerated violence of any sort. In 1977 Greenpeace expelled Paul Watson, one of its original members, for his flexible interpretation of nonviolence, and he went on to found the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. Watson judged Greenpeace tactics incommensurate with the acute threat posed by whaling; whereas Greenpeace vessels simply bore witness to the slaughter, Sea Shepherd's ships slammed their hulls against whalers to make clear they meant business.

Malm has a bit of Watson in him. He sees in Extinction Rebellion a group of passionate activists pursuing an outdated strategy for all the wrong reasons, most naïvely a dedication to pacifism as the most effective means of achieving political goals. Extinction Rebellion claims that violence is antidemocratic and has historically worked against progressive change by alienating the public. To refute this claim, Malm rehearses analogy after analogy, citing abolitionists, suffragettes, civil rights activists, and the fight against South African apartheid, arguing that in each instance violence was not just an acceptable but

an essential tactic. Malm insists that in most cases it has been the existence of a “radical flank” ready to use confrontational and even violent methods that has cast nonviolent protesters and their demands in a comparatively favorable light.

Political change, for Malm, arises from this sort of triangulation: militants present such a bitter extreme that policymakers develop a taste for negotiating with reformers. Government action is the eventual goal—“At the end of the day,” Malm writes, “it will be states that ram through the transition or no one will”—but policymakers are so beholden to proper-tied interests that they cannot be trusted to act on their own. It is the job of activists to prod those in power, and nonviolent demonstrations are often too blunt a tool. Even Robert Hunter, who helped found Greenpeace, began to doubt nonviolent activism by the 1980s. “So far,” he admitted, “history has not shown much evidence that the strategy is inevitably going to triumph.”

Historical analogies aside, is there any evidence that property destruction can advance the climate movement? That's difficult to say, given the variety

of tactics activists have simultaneously employed. The politics of pipelines offers, at best, an ambiguous record. Arguably the most decisive pipeline conflict so far has been the fight over the Key-

stone XL extension from Alberta to Nebraska, which the Canadian company TC Energy canceled in June 2021. That fight involved little in the way of sabotage; instead, the coalition of groups that opposed Keystone XL relied on legal challenges and nonviolent civil disobedience. The ongoing struggles against other North American projects, from Dakota Access to Enbridge Inc.'s Lines 3 and 5, have been pursued with vigor and moral force by a coalition of groups and interests arguing that these pipelines violate environmental regulations, Indigenous treaty rights, and common sense.

As Malm rightly points out, the Dakota Access fight has also featured property destruction: Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya of the Des Moines Catholic Worker community set fire to heavy machinery and cut through the pipeline itself in a series of attacks in 2016 and 2017. This was a daring undertaking—Reznicek has been sentenced to eight years in prison and Montoya is awaiting sentencing—but it's unclear whether it advanced broader opposition to the pipeline. The elevation of Dakota Access to an international

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cause is probably due most of all to the involvement of Indigenous activists and their commitment to nonviolent protest.

It seems clear, though, that pipelines are vulnerable and that strikes against them can be consequential. Reznicek and Montoya temporarily prevented millions of barrels of oil from flowing through Dakota Access. A recent cyberattack against the Colonial Pipeline in the southeastern United States—not the work of environmentalists, as far as we know—knocked that conduit offline for nearly a week. If general disruption is the goal, pipelines are a tempting target. But should that be the goal?

CASTING BLAME

Against whom or what should sabotage and property destruction be used, and why? The question of target selection—and, by extension, of culpability—is the second conundrum Malm confronts. What is the climate movement fighting against? Who is to blame?

Malm is both explicit and cagey about finding fault. He is explicit in that he points again and again to “the ruling classes” as the primary cause of climate change and the major obstacle to its amelioration. He is less clear about who constitutes this rarefied group.

Climate activists tend to lay blame somewhere along a spectrum running from a handful of corporations to all of humanity. Sticking to either end of that spectrum is simplistic, but determining where to come down between them is confounding. Despite the title of his book, Malm spends a lot of time discussing the merits of targeting SUVs and other “CO₂-emitting property.” The production of fossil fuels is not the only problem, he sensibly points out; consumption matters as well. Some consumption is clearly necessary, however, so activists should focus on “luxury emissions” from sources like private jets and superyachts—playthings of the rich.

It’s hard to argue against directing a great deal of scorn and maybe some creative monkeywrenching at jets and yachts, but it’s harder still to actually reach them. SUVs are closer at hand. Still, is someone who drives a Ford Explorer necessarily a member of the ruling class? Does it matter whether a vehicle is used primarily for work or pleasure? Should activists also target minivans and pickup trucks, given their relative cost and poor fuel efficiency? Consumption matters, but attacking the property of private individuals about whom activists know next to nothing seems like a recipe for misjudgment and backlash.

Another option is to assume that mere participation in industrial civilization comes with a degree of liability, an assumption that expands the range of acceptable targets considerably. Malm rejects this position. He has no truck with those who place undifferentiated blame for environmental harms on humanity as a whole, a tendency that he associates with the ideologies of deep ecology and animal liberation, and so with groups like Earth First!, the Earth Liberation Front, and the Animal Liberation Front. These groups engaged in sabotage and property destruction, but Malm judges them theoretically unsophisticated because they condemned human activity in sweeping and misanthropic terms, as well as strategically ineffective since they failed to coordinate their clandestine actions with a mass movement.

This is a common appraisal, but not at all a fair one. Some deep ecologists delved into misanthropy (Paul Watson was notable in this regard) and some did not; for most of them, the basic relationship between people and nonhuman nature remained an open question. It is true that Earth First! never limited its denunciations to the ruling classes or the fossil fuel industry, and Malm chides deep ecologists for assailing all industrial development, whether fueled by coal or by wind. But while climate change is the greatest environmental threat it is not the only one, and if the age of fossil fuels is replaced by an age of extracting lithium and paving over deserts to build massive solar arrays, we may end up trading one set of social and environmental costs for another.

Earth First! did tend to cast blame too widely, finding fault with loggers as easily as with timber industry CEOs. But its acts of sabotage were never the sort of wild volleys at a ubiquitous enemy that Malm suggests; they were instead careful and strategic gambits. Earth First! members constantly debated how they should position their own campaigns—whether overt or covert—relative to the mainstream environmental movement.

Many Earth First! activists had spent years working for established advocacy organizations or public agencies before blockading logging roads or spiking trees, and some continued to do so. Most of them recognized, as Malm does, that shaping policy was the best means of achieving long-term goals. In its early years, Earth First! maintained a secret council with representatives from major environmental groups in order to avoid working at cross purposes.

Malm's claim that Earth First! monkeywrenching achieved "no lasting gains" is a questionable assessment. The group's tactics never inspired a mass political movement, but some of the positions it advocated in defiance of mainstream environmental opinion—including dam removal, a moratorium on cutting trees in national forests, and the protection of all roadless lands—soon became mainstream talking points and even official policy.

In other words, Earth First! is a valuable study in the sort of three-pronged structure that Malm advocates, in which saboteurs, mainstream activists, and governments operate in tension with one another in a way that ends up advancing an overall agenda. In one sense, Earth First! offers a cautionary tale about the precarity of this set of relationships—in particular, how quickly and forcefully governments can crack down on illicit activism.

In the 1980s, the group's most notorious tactic was tree spiking, which involved inserting metal or ceramic spikes into trees marked for timber sales. The idea was to prevent tree cutting by threatening the safety of loggers. Congress soon made tree spiking a felony, and politicians began using terms like "environmental terrorism." In 2006, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Robert Mueller said overt environmental and animal rights activism had become one of the FBI's "highest domestic terrorism priorities." Courts began applying "terrorism enhancements" that extended sentences for convicted environmental and especially animal rights activists.

Malm believes that the general public's tolerance for radical action will grow as the planet warms, but he also acknowledges the political consequences of being labeled a "terrorist" and advises strict avoidance of anything that might provoke that accusation. In simple terms this means never endangering any lives. In the end, though, activists have little control over how such terms are deployed. Prosecutors have accused Reznicek and Montoya of "terrorism," despite what Malm rightly describes as the absurdity of that characterization. Meanwhile, Republicans on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee have accused Joe Biden's nominee to head the Bureau of Land Management of association with "an eco-terrorist cell" because of her peripheral involvement in an Earth First! tree-spiking incident in Idaho more than 30 years ago.

THE USES OF IMPATIENCE

In another sense, the example of Earth First! points toward what is most valuable about Malm's book. Earth First! treated the unrestrained transformation of the nonhuman world with the sort of exigency that few other environmental groups could muster. At a time when many organizations warned of an emerging environmental crisis and yet responded with a politics of gradualism, Earth First! acted with urgency and persistence.

A similar and useful sense of impatience and consternation animates *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. This is a book to read for questions and incitements as much as for answers. If climate change is as great a cataclysm as climate activists insist, Malm asks, how can the movement continue to rely on conventional methods like civil disobedience? Doesn't an extraordinary crisis demand an extraordinary response? How should we understand one without the other? In climate activism, the question of proportionality is inescapable, and this lends Malm's book both strategic relevance and moral weight.

Malm ends by castigating writers like Roy Scranton and Jonathan Franzen for their climate fatalism. To whatever degree Scranton and Franzen actually counsel resignation, their position is a difficult one to defend, and, as Malm

notes, a luxury few can afford. But Malm also points out that imagination is a "pivotal faculty" when it comes to what might be done about climate change. This can work both ways—desperation may be as provocative as inspiration, and instilling a sense of foreboding as galvanizing as providing a sense of hope.

The environmental movement has long struck a tenuous balance between ringing an alarm and shining a beacon, and the climate movement must negotiate a similar tension. Malm's book operates in both registers, lamenting the tribulations that climate change will inevitably bring about while also insisting that the worst can still be avoided if the climate movement takes off its gloves. It is only that combination of destiny and possibility that might justify lighting a fuse under cover of darkness. Blowing up a pipeline is an extreme act born of an extreme situation; whatever you might think about the implications of either, Malm makes a strong case for their relatedness. His pressing questions deserve a hearing. ■

*Doesn't an extraordinary
crisis demand an
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