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Climate movement

Andreas Malm: "Targeting SUVs or private jets can help struggles »

- Features -

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Mobilization against megabasins, pension reform... For Andreas Malm, author and climate activist, it is necessary to rethink the tactics of struggles, even if it means integrating sabotage. He stayed less than a week in France, but was able to observe the demonstration against the pension reform on March 23 in Paris, and the one against the megabasins on March 25 in Sainte-Soline (Deux-Sèvres).

The Swede Andreas Malm, lecturer in human geography, author of *Comment saboteur un pipeline* (La Fabrique, 2020), is one of the contemporary thinkers who study the place of violence in the environmental struggle. After more than 200 demonstrators had been injured in Deux-Sèvres, Andreas Malm returns to the current environmental struggle and the strategies that the climate movement must follow.

Reporterre — You were present at the mobilization against the megabasins in Sainte-Soline on March 25 and 26. What is your feeling about it?

Andreas Malm — I was very impressed both by the level of militancy displayed by the demonstrators, and by the violence used by the police. This is an event of historic importance: it is the first major social conflict that is unfolding around a project whose purpose is adaptation to climate change – that is, in any case, how its promoters present it. These struggles are set to intensify as climate change increases.

This mobilization and the number of demonstrators taking part [30,000 according to the organizers] highlight the fact that such projects are not natural and normal responses to climate change: they are measures designed for the private sector, which does not plan to share the resource, and are therefore profoundly brutal.

Admittedly, the demonstrators did not manage to enter the construction site in large numbers. But a success of the activists was to propose a variety of tactics during the demonstration: the participants in the black bloc and contact groups dressed in blue, supported by the demonstrators who remained farther behind [who warned when grenades were fired, or coordinated to bring the medics on the spot, for example]. I must also say that the French police use much more violent methods than the German police, which I have observed well.

On the megabasins as on the pension reform, the demonstrators are up against an inflexible government. What can happen now?

I'm an outside observer — I don't even speak French, I taught my four-year-old son to sing "Everyone hates the police," but those are the only words I know. However, what I see is a president who no longer responds to the demands of the protests, no matter how many people are on the streets. The same frustration has been shared on the climate front since 2019 and the beginning of the climate movement. In Germany, where the mobilization was particularly strong and where there is a Green Party in the government coalition, the state has gone so far as to reopen a coal mine and build liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals. Faced with this feeling that we are going through a historic moment where mass mobilizations are powerless, we say to ourselves that we must go further.

Going further, does it mean resorting to sabotage?...

If we look at the major mobilizations that have taken place since 2019, almost all those that have made a difference have incorporated a component of violence. The Chilean revolution in 2019 began when protesters entered the

subway and destroyed the automatons. In Iran, in the crisis triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, there was talk of schoolgirls removing their hijab or women cutting their hair; but there have also been confrontations with the armed forces and destruction of their vehicles or of posters glorifying the regime.

"SUVs or private jets offer potential for others to join the fight"

The idea that the only way to win the struggle would be through non-violence has been constructed by academics. And, very interestingly, even Erica Chenoweth, who is at the origin of theories on non-violence, concedes in her latest articles that this theory no longer applies to the current circumstances, since Covid, lockdowns and the repressive turns taken by many regimes.

That's not to say that you just start destroying stuff to win: every conflict is a complex mix of a multitude of factors. On the other hand, we must accept that there is no evidence that non-violence is the sure path to victory.

"Left" violence would be acceptable, and "right-wing" violence would not: isn't that simplistic?

A distinction must be made, not just for violence, but for any political activity: voting, writing books, putting up posters or destroying windows. The political act as such may seem identical (a fascist sticking a sticker or an antifascist sticking a sticker are doing the same thing), but they have opposite political and ethical motivations. The questions to ask are: are these actions about reducing inequalities between people, or increasing them? Do they oppose the causes of the climate crisis or make it worse?

Isn't sabotage likely to be counterproductive if it is not supported by public opinion?

If you attack private property, you will make enemies: those who own it. This is also true for civil disobedience: blocking the ring road [as the Last Renovation does] creates anger among drivers, who are trapped in a system that forces them to use their cars to go to work. Such untargeted actions can, in my view, sometimes be counterproductive. If our action raises a lot of anger among the people we want to see joining us, perhaps we need to change our method. More precisely chosen targets, such as the SUVs of the richest whose tyres are deflated, a private jet airport or a cement factory, offer greater potential for others to join the fight.

Violence against objects (basins, cement plant, airport) often involves violence against people (police forces). Yet they are also workers...

The police, as an institution in our society, have always served two functions. First, it is the armed wing of the state apparatus responsible for protecting private property. Any conflict against property must take into account the police as a force for defending private property. Of course, the best method would be to bypass the police, as was the case with the "disarmament" of the Lafarge plant. Second, its function is to maintain the status quo. In every conflict, the police were there to defend the order of things: Jim Crow laws and white supremacy in the United States, the apartheid system in South Africa...

If environmental actions become more violent, won't that deter new people from joining the movement?

It is a calculation to be made: there is always a risk of alienating new militants by choosing confrontational strategies. You never know in advance to which side the balance will tip, so you have to constantly evaluate losses and profits. If you lose more than you gain, you have to rethink your tactics. But there is no general law saying that as soon as you start using more violent modes of confrontation, the movement dies.

It depends on each context. In Sweden, the slightest spark of violence attracts widespread condemnation. But France is a country that stands out for its social history and political culture. The Yellow Vests were quite violent very early on in the movement, that did not exhaust them. In France, the presence of mass mobilizations is correlated with violent actions; in Sweden, there is neither.

The climate movement has so far been largely peaceful: is that a strength or a weakness?

The degree of militancy of social movements is a sign of their social depth. By this I mean the fact that climate protests become articulated to a social struggle: it starts from the moment we understand that we are not all in the same boat, which was the common analysis in 2019. Until now, most of the climate movement and school strikes have remained at a relatively superficial analysis in terms of social relations. Ecological struggles are now gaining depth in analysis. The Earth Uprisings are therefore extremely interesting from this point of view, because they denounce the way in which water is monopolized, and the whole economic model that results from it.

The climate movement seems to have run out of steam since Covid-19. How can it get going again? With fewer activists, but more radical actions?

Above all, we need a broader movement. You can't imagine a more powerful movement with fewer people. Hopefully, there will be a wave of protests with more people on the streets than in 2019, with massive protests, and a fringe that has learned to be sharper in its actions.

The challenge is to transform climatic disasters (scorching summers, etc.) into moments of political organization. There's one more thing: in 2019, the climate movement got attention because it had new tactics — the Fridays for Future school strikes, or the peaceful and spectacular blockades of XR [Extinction Rebellion]. To get its second wind, the climate movement will have to invent, once again, new forms of mobilization. In France, the Earth Uprisings are one of the groups that manage to develop original and powerful knowledge and tactics for future environmental struggles.

Interview conducted by Nicolas Celnik, for the French ecological media *Reporterre* 28 mars 2023

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