Reviews

Climate struggle on a radicalized track

- Reviews section -

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What should we do when airy political promises amount to little more than excuses for business as usual and when the friendly climate protests have not prevented the world from heading towards a burning inferno? Submissively accept doom or take the climate struggle to a new level? That Andreas Malm does not preach resignation in his latest book will come as no surprise to those who have ever been in contact with the author - activist and socialist since childhood and today a rising star within the radical section of international academia. For those who are unfamiliar with him, the book's title, "How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire", should dispel all doubt. To stoically wait for doom is not an option for most of us, even if some claim to have drawn that conclusion. The book's final section is a reckoning with intellectuals such as Roy Scranton and Jonathan Franzen who flirt with that standpoint and make a name for themselves.

For the rest of us, who either try to do something or wish we knew how to do something, the question is: what do we do now? It is this question to which Malm devotes most of his book.

The attention that has already been given to the book ahead of publication has mostly concerned the question of sabotage as a method in the climate struggle. Despite the book's provocative title, this is far from an anarchist cookbook but a thought-through - albeit impatient - contribution to the debate about strategy and tactics in the climate movement. Malm raises a question posed by the British author John Lanchester: Why has the climate movement not resorted to violence? Given what is at stake is humanity's survival, it is strange that nobody has started blowing up petrol stations or at least started scratching the paint on city jeeps, Lanchester states, in what Malm refers to as Lanchester's paradox. In the latter the effort is very small and would make these gas guzzling monster cars almost impossible to own in a city like London. Malm himself has a past as an SUV-saboteur of the milder kind, when the group The Indians of the Concrete Jungle in the early 2000's let the air out of gas guzzling luxury cars in upper class neighbourhoods. He takes this paradox - that the climate movement, despite knowing what is at stake, continues to be peaceful and well behaved - as the starting point for his argument on the question of strategy and tactics for the climate movement.

**Extinction Rebellion**

At the centre of the book is a critique of the theoretical basis of the British based activist group Extinction Rebellion, XR, whose hour-glass symbol has spread around the world through spectacular actions, above all its various attempts to block traffic in big cities. For XR the question of non-violence is central, not just because they, like most of us, are against violence but because the ideologues of XR claim history shows us that only strictly non-violent movements have succeeded in changing the world for the better. Malm completely demolishes the historical arguments for a strict adherence to non-violence. On the contrary, he says, there has been a readiness to use violence or armed self-defence even in the best-known non-violent movements, from Gandhi's backing of the British war machine when directed towards places other than India to the fact that Martin Luther King Jr had a gun at home for self-defence.

For Malm, violence is a question of tactics, in other words which methods are appropriate in a given situation. To
exclude, like XR, all tactics that could be denoted as violent, even against inanimate objects, is to do away with potentially useful methods. However, he has no illusions that neither small groups nor mass movements could on their own tear down the massive power stations that keep on burning fossil fuels. A reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to the level that a unanimous scientific community say is necessary demands dramatic, rapid, and large-scale interventions of a kind only states can make. The question then becomes how today's states can be made to carry out such an intervention into the economic structure, deeply intertwined as they are with capital. With a 40-year depreciation period, capital practically demands that nothing is done to emissions for decades to come. Every such investment is as ceremonious a promise of increased emissions as the international agreements and conventions that promise to reduce them. The big difference is that the investors are determined to keep their promises.

If it is impossible for the climate movement on its own to physically stop the burning of fossil fuels, it is even more unthinkable that it would be possible to make a fundamental shift in production and mass consumption without transforming society as a whole. In Malm's book, climate transition is only possible through bigger and bolder mass actions, to make the movements as strong as possible in order to put pressure on all those in various power positions, where even direct attacks on the physical structures of fossil fuel society have a role to play in increasing the costs, economically and politically, for new fossil investments.

Sabotage as tactics

If there is any conclusion to be drawn from the enormous attention around Greta Thunberg's well-articulated appearances in front of the world's rulers, it is that it is impossible to turn around the disastrous course we are currently on using only wise words. Change will require different forms of power where capital is either stripped of its power or faced with such credible threats that it is forced to adapt, similar to when the right to vote was won or when Europe's welfare states came into being with the threats of revolution still echoing on the continent. Malm argues that if the politicians responsible hesitate or refuse to get rid of the fossil fuel plants, the movement must take the lead. As a heroic example he takes two Christian activists, Reznicek and Montoya, who in 2017 sabotaged the Dakota Access Pipeline with firebombs and a soldering unit, and who at the time of writing await sentencing, possibly facing decade-long prison terms.

Of course, no one believes that a few devoted activists can stop a climate catastrophe, either by using cutting torches against pipelines or rusty nails on SUVs. Malm warns sharply against methods that could risk even unintentionally causing personal injury, something that in one blow would destroy the moral capital the climate movement has so painstakingly built up. However, he contends that it is wrong to exclude from the outset sabotage and other illegal methods directed at the material assets of fossil society. If, when and how direct attacks should take place is a question of tactics, timing and having one's fingers on the pulse - not a principled decision that applies once and for all. As a historic example of militant non-peaceful methods, Malm highlights the suffragettes, the British women's movement who in the beginning of the last century added sabotage and vandalism to its arsenal of mass protests to put pressure on the rulers to introduce female suffrage, without the loss of human life.

It is difficult to argue against this principled approach to physical resistance unless you think that laws must always be obeyed or that private property is sacred, a position that would not have taken the labour movement far. Radical pacifism that also relinquishes the right to self defence can even be harmful. Physical self defence against fascist attacks is literally a matter of survival for the organisations of the labour movement, and they have paid dearly those times when they have not been prepared.

When it comes to the question of tactics today, Malm realises that it would not be a good idea to smash up petrol stations, and in practice does not end up so far from the methods used by the very same XR that he polemicizes
against: blockades and civil disobedience, possibly taken a step further. One of the most important mobilizations of
the European climate movement, Ende Gelände in Germany, has caused very temporary stops in lignite and
coal-fired power plants through civil mass obedience. In Gothenburg, the same thing was done peacefully and on a
very small scale in the autumn of 2019 when the entrances to the planned Swedgas terminal in Gothenburg harbour
were blocked for a day. The step from that to physically attacking such installations is quite far, and if it had been
done, it would still have been a symbolic act in order to create political pressure (which would probably have
backfired on the movement through reduced support in broader circles) and would not in itself reduce emissions.

Malm envisages, however, that support for physical attacks on fossil fuel plants will increase as the manifestations of
climate catastrophe become increasingly troublesome. In a situation where a large part of the population begins to
truly realize that their and their children's futures are literally being set on fire due to the hunger for profit of a handful
of big corporations, it is unlikely that they will be content with words and well-behaved symbolic actions. It is not
unthinkable that riots will be directed against petrol stations, coal transportation or oil company offices - popular
anger rarely lets itself be controlled by well-formulated programs and principles. For example, spontaneous and
disorganized riots in a number of US cities in 1967-68, often triggered by police provocations, played a major role in
winning the demands of the civil rights movement. The looting and destruction that took place was insignificant
compared to the oppression, violence and terror black people have been subjected to for hundreds of years. But then
we are talking about explosions of popular anger, not theoretically conceived actions by small groups.

There are many compelling reasons for rejecting sabotage as a method - at least the kind mentioned in the book's
title - including the fact that, in reality, it is not possible to make the qualification that Malm is so careful to make: that
it must only target inanimate objects and not people. In a very critical review of the book, the British veteran socialist
Alan Thornett recalls that the IRA attack in Northern Ireland that claimed the most lives in the 1970s was not intended
to harm anyone but did so due to unforeseen circumstances - something that can never be ignored for those who
advocate similar methods.

The radical flank

If he does not directly speak in favour of using sabotage today, Malm posits the need for a "radical flank" of the
climate movement, where by "radical" he means methods that the rest of the movement are not prepared to use. The
idea of the radical flank was formulated in the 1970s in discussions about the role that small but militant groups like
the Black Panthers should have in relation to the broader black civil rights movement. However, the Panthers were
not founded as an organization that used violence to militantly pursue political goals, but as the Black Panther Party
for Self-Defence, in other words as a self-defence organization.

If a section of a movement begins using more drastic methods, it can give two conflicting results. Either it pushes
people away from the movement, directly because people do not share its standpoint or indirectly through the
repression provoked by such actions. Or it can strengthen the movement, by showing that the opponent is not
invulnerable or by being a threat that can be useful to the broader movement in its relations with the powers that be:
"If you do not make peace with us, people will turn to more extreme forces." And sometimes both at the same time:
the riots of 1967-68 in the United States forced reforms but at the same time became a theme in Nixon's successful
law-and-order campaign in the coming election.

The term "radical flank" can cover widely differing phenomena. Everything from the ideal type Malm imagines, groups
that have good political instinct, deeply rooted in society and a movement that can assess exactly what tactics
currently benefit the cause, to self-proclaimed "vanguards" who out of frustration or a need to be seen as the most
radical group pursue adventurist politics regardless of the consequences for others. Or for that matter, spontaneous
mass revolts where anger boils over. The difference between these various phenomena makes the concept so broad.
that its usefulness becomes doubtful. Nevertheless, it can describe how inner breadth in a movement can affect its impact, for better or worse.

For most of my life, I have probably been considered part of a radical flank of sorts within the union at my workplace and have probably been of some use in that way. The union leadership has - at least during periods when we have had some influence - been able to use us to pressure the company to make concessions: “If we do not get a better offer, you have to deal with worse troublemakers.” But if we have been a radical flank, it has not been through spectacular actions or rhetoric. We have been a threat because of our focus on winning the majority. We have also spoken to the least interested workers, not just to the most angry or those we perceived as politically the “most conscious” and definitely not by trying to win over small groups so as to do with them what we think the union should do. Our threat lay in our mass orientation.

And here lies my main critique of Malm’s book. The choice between a world that is heating up beyond what is bearable and a few scratched SUVs, broken bank windows or even the occasional ruined pipeline is simple. If only that was the question! But Malm never really deals with the alleged paradox that is his starting point, the climate movement’s reluctance to use violence. It is hardly because of XR’s slick theories that most climate activists refrain from violence; they simply do not think it would lead us forward. That I am opposed to sabotage as a tactic in the climate struggle is not due to an exaggerated respect for private property or a principled pacifism. My issue with these methods is that they do not solve the problem. The question of the choice between well-behaved protests and sabotage is incorrectly posed.

The choice is not between pacifists’ appeals to deaf rulers and small groups of activists “going it alone” to destroy the harmful infrastructure of fossil society. Precisely because the task is so vast, a fundamental change of the whole of society, there are no ways around winning the majority, neither XR’s 3.5 percent, nor hoping that radical minorities will kick-start the mass movement or replace it. Which methods the organized movement uses or accepts, just as Malm says, needs to be decided in each situation. In some situations, it may be right or even necessary to go beyond what is legal or what today is perceived as reasonable. It is all a question of which means lead to the goal and which are ineffective or do harm.

**Critique and debate**

Here, Malm also touches on what is usually called diversity of tactics, the idea that many different types of activities and methods can be used by different parts of a movement and that no one should be criticized for their choice of tactics. That different situations require different tactics is uncontroversial. In the South African apartheid state other methods were required than would be in a bourgeois democracy such as today’s Sweden. It becomes more problematic when this idea is used to argue that it is wrong to criticize someone else’s choice of tactics, even when this damages the movement and its alleged common goals. There are several methods that are harmful in and of themselves and for that very reason do not lead towards the goal but instead create obstacles that lead the movement astray. When Malcolm X uttered his famous words “by any means necessary”, it was precisely “any means necessary”, not “any conceivable means”.

Terrorist acts can fit into an Islamist or fascist strategy to create tension and damage people’s unity and solidarity, but never in a socialist strategy based on conscious actions and mass organization. If we start emphasizing minority actions, it goes with the territory that there is a danger that groups of frustrated activists get tired of just talking and instead try to take matters into their own hands without understanding the consequences for the broader movement, or because they hope to inspire or lead the movement through “exemplary actions”. Or perhaps, like the self-proclaimed vanguard of the 1970s, they intend to “awaken the sluggish masses” by “forcing the state to show its true face”, a line that not only led these groups into a political desert, but also hit the broader labour movement hard.
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The anarchist ideas of the "propaganda of the deed" in which a self-proclaimed vanguard resorts to "radical" means are straightforwardly harmful and stand in opposition to building a mass movement. There is no such suggestion in Malm's book - it is the broad climate movement that is the agent and certainly this movement needs to get more leverage than just polite protest meetings. That Malm devotes an entire book to polemicizing against those in the climate movement who advocate strategic pacifism is in itself an example of the importance of debate and criticism, not least when it comes to choosing tactics and methods within the movement.

There is another problem with Malm's historical parallels. The struggle for women's suffrage, the civil rights movement in the United States, and the struggle for national independence all had clearly defined demands that were easy to see and identify with for those involved - an end to discrimination where the status quo could only be maintained through state-sanctioned violence, and it was this violence that the struggle was opposed to. Not least, the enemy was obvious, which is not the case when it comes to climate change, where the solution also questions the functioning of society on a deeper level. At least as important is that these are all historical situations where the opponent had no democratic legitimacy and where the struggle mainly concerned democratic rights. On the climate issue, at least those of us in the rich countries are facing governments with a democratic legitimacy, to a greater or lesser extent, even if the companies and mechanisms that drive global warming exist for the most part outside the democratic arena. No referendums have been held on either mass motoring or fossil fuel emissions.

We are starting from a situation with opponents who are both democratically legitimate and at the same time illegitimate. Neither XR's idea of civic assemblies nor a movement carrying out violent actions can solve this. This leads us to the connection between the movements and institutional politics, something that Malm does not address. A reasonable way forward is to give the movements political expression in forms that can affect state policy. Malm does not go deeper into how the process of change should take place other than imagining a negotiating situation where a broad climate movement - with millions backing it and threats from the radical flank up its sleeve - drives reluctant politicians in front of it. It is hardly possible to request a mapped route from here to a fossil-free world from a small pamphlet, but the questions about state power and politics need to be asked, not least because the left and the labour movement have often stumbled up on them. "Politics" in our society is almost synonymous with handing over the issues at hand to bureaucratically controlled parties that conduct their activities in elected congregations. The relationship between the stable - and at its core bourgeois - state and popular but fleeting movements is complicated. In the book A New Politics From the Left (2018), Hilary Wainwright made an attempt to solve this dilemma, distinguishing between "power over" or 'power-as-domination' - i.e. the state power that the labour movement often aimed to conquer - and the "power to", or 'power-as-transformative-capacity' that exists in strong popular movements, those that are always the real driving force behind major societal transformations. The problem with popular power is its temporary nature - strikes and demonstrations are outbreaks that subside and are difficult to make permanent. The machineries of the state and politics, on the other hand, tend to make activists adapt themselves and their organizations to the society these institutions have been built to preserve. There are countless examples of parties and activists brought forward by popular movements but quickly integrated into the existing machinery and then becoming part of the problem.

The road forward outlined by Wainwright is a collaboration between political movements in elected assemblies and popular movements that need the backing of institutions to develop their power. This is something that must be based on strong movements with a high level of political confidence, internal democracy, and their own ability to produce and exchange knowledge. And, I would like to add, an understanding of the problems and mechanisms of bureaucratization, including the experience gained by previous movements to keep this in check.

The agent

The climate movement of today is what, without implying any value judgment, could be called an "unrooted"
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movement made up of people who come together around a single issue based on their own conviction without having much in common beforehand. There are strengths in such movements, precisely in their ability to draw together people from different sections of society, but also weaknesses, above all that they have no means of exercising power beyond possibly their size and ability to exert political pressure. The opposite would be a “rooted” movement which arises from common interests that already exist, where the typical example is trade unions. The “rooted” parts of the climate movement have mainly been those that have a common relationship to certain places: indigenous peoples, farmers, residents who end up on a collision course with states or large companies and so on. Based on these shared interests, they have fought to defend their lives and lands, often by extra-parliamentary means, the movements that Naomi Klein in This Changes Everything, calls “Blockadia”.

What is missing in Malm's book is a strong agent who could develop the climate movement into becoming more rooted within an existing potential power, an agent whose power is based on its very existence - what he is seeking to find in the radical flank's physical attacks on fossil fuels. I am referring, of course, to the working class in the broadest sense, the class that keeps production going and produces the value that is the driving force of the economy. It is hardly the author's fault that working class power is missing from the book. It is not only here that the working class is not present as a class - it has been missing from the climate movement, with some brilliant exceptions, and for several decades to a large extent also from society at large.

Yet it is in this direction we must look to find a counterforce. No matter how much the capitalists dislike people who smash bank windows, sabotage pipelines or damage their luxury cars, there is nothing that can harm them as much as the organized working class. The youthful Fridays For Future have with their climate strikes raised the issue to a higher level, and merely the fact that someone put together the words "strike" and "climate" is a step in the right direction. But it is not a real strike, where employees collectively leave their jobs. A strike means a direct blow against capital when workers collectively pull their value-creating work out from their grasp. This is exactly the kind of exercise of power that is needed.

Real climate strikes and political manifestations where unions join climate demonstrations would be an incredible step forward if it were to happen on a larger scale. But they are still symbolic acts. The power of the working class lies in production, both in terms of the knowledge of how to run it, something we do in practice daily, albeit under the command of capital, and in the ability to stop it. "Alle Räder stehen still, wenn dein starker Arm es will", as the old German battle song typical of its time put it. No one can stop fossil fuel burning more effectively than those who work with it. The problem, of course, are the consequences - no one is going to strike to make themselves unemployed. A strike is not something that is taken lightly, whether it is over traditional trade union issues or political demands. It is difficult to imagine "we will strike until we win" strikes around the climate. It is more reasonable to see such strikes as pressure, similar to the warning strikes that German unions sometimes use to "warm up" before contract negotiations - but also as a permanent threat, politically and financially, of what awaits if the requirements for change are not met.

In the historical arsenal of the labour movement there are also more far-reaching methods of struggle which the capitalists fear even more, such as when the workers do not leave the factories but remain and take physical ownership of them. Like the famous sit-down strikes in the US car industry in the 1930s which forced companies to recognize the car workers' union or the waves of factory occupations in France and Italy in 1968-70 and in Argentina in the early 2000s.

Is a labour movement on the warpath for the climate a realistic idea, or just a Marxist pipe dream? So far, we don't have many examples to go on. In a handful of countries - the United Kingdom, South Africa, Denmark - trade unions have developed ambitious plans for climate adaptation and jobs. Most of these plans, however, have remained on paper and not become part of any union struggle. The trade union movement needs to be challenged on all levels, from within by those of us who are involved in the issue and from the outside by the climate movement.
I have long argued that the adaptation of production can become the link between the workplace and the climate movement. If we can make this adaptation into a way of saving threatened jobs, for example, it would create a strong and immediate reason for unions to get involved in climate issues in an age of permanent mass unemployment. The climate issue could be transformed from something enormous, where both the problems and the "solutions" are things going on over our heads, to something that both affects and can be affected by what we do in our everyday lives, not least what we do collectively in our workplaces. Today, consumption is at the forefront of the climate debate, but it is only between the covers of fundamentalist liberal textbooks that consumers are in control. The root of the problem lies in production, the one driven by the never-ending pursuit of profit. A focus on climate transition would put the spotlight on this.

Focusing climate actions on the very richest is a theme in Malm's book that demands attention, partly because their consumption accounts for such an absurd proportion of CO2 emissions - their luxury yachts, helicopters, private planes and so on. Malm cites a report from Oxfam which states that the richest one percent is responsible for 175 times more emissions than the poorest 10 percent of humanity. But since it is these people who also own a large part of the assets that are the physical cause of the emissions, we can link the owners and their ownership to the system. In Malm's apt words, their consumption is "crime marketed as a lifestyle ideal". By targeting the luxury consumption of the rich, the climate movement can also make it a matter of justice, the extreme emissions of the rich following from the equally skewed distribution of wealth and assets, both internationally and within every country. This skewed distribution has its roots in who controls production and capital. A fair redistribution that drastically cuts the consumption of the rich is necessary to win support for a climate transition. Conversely, a neoliberal climate policy that blames the people while the rich can buy their way out is a guarantee of right-wing populist counter-reactions.

Time

What speaks against my traditional mass movement argument is the difficult question of time that Malm emphasizes. The time factor is crucial in the climate issue, and this distinguishes it from many others. That women (and men, for that matter) had been without the right to vote since the dawn of history, that black people in the United States had been oppressed since being transported there in slave ships, and that black people in South Africa had been enslaved since they were colonized could rightly be used as an argument that it was high time for change by the suffragettes, the civil rights activists and liberation movements. But no matter how impatient they were, there was no time limit. They could think that history was on their side - if they lose today, they will win tomorrow, and every battle, even those that end in defeat, is just a skirmish before the coming victory. With the climate it is different. Methods that today would repel people could be perceived as legitimate in a world that is boiling after six degrees of warming. But by then it is too late. The time horizon is narrower and a defeat - a lack of radical change - risks destroying any hope for the future. It is therefore not surprising that there is a great deal of desperation among everyone who takes the issue seriously, not least among activists in the movement. Desperation is understandable, only the completely aloof can avoid feeling despair when an unfettered capitalism is allowed to push humanity towards the abyss. It is certainly true that this is an urgent matter. There seems to be no time to build popular movements with decades- or centuries-long perspectives as the labour movement once did. Movements that step by step, almost by the force of a natural law, built themselves up and acquired positions of strength in all areas of life to be able to revolutionize society. Instead, the development is going at a horrific speed in the wrong direction, every day more greenhouse gases are emitted and we are driven ever closer to the abyss. Time is too short not to use all the methods at hand.

But the risk of this understandable sense of urgency is that we see the situation as exceptional and do not think it is possible to use some of the experiences of the labour movement and other popular movements over the past 200 years. Every event and social situation is unique and must be analysed concretely, we can never just repeat what someone else has done. But some experiences have proven to hold up so well over time that it would take a lot for them not to be valid even today.

If we are to have any prospect of winning and not just fighting heroically, the climate movement needs to be a
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popular movement of a kind rarely seen. A movement that has allies in and is a part of other movements and which, through some points of strong support in the state, drives structural changes in the economy, changes the driving forces, expropriates the fossil fuel sector and reorganizes the economy on a sustainable basis.

I do not advocate any "first / then" strategy, where we first win a majority for a socialist transformation and then deal with the climate. On the contrary, the climate needs to be both the single most important political issue and at the same time take its place within other battles and movements. Symbolic actions can, properly chosen and used, be part of creating political pressure that builds that movement, even if they are confrontational and illegal. For example, blocking the private luxury yachts that occasionally anchor at Masthuggskajen in Gothenburg could be such an idea. It would link fossil emissions from billionaires' luxury consumption with the power over production from which their fortunes flow. The impact on emissions would be non-existent in the short term, but it would make it a little harder to continue with that type of conspicuous consumption, and it is this layer of billionaires that sets the norm for those directly beneath them of what to dream of and strive for. But above all, it links the rich with emissions. It could also for example receive the broad support that a blockade of oil tankers would perhaps not get today, not to mention the reaction to a blown-up pipeline in a local oil terminal.

Such actions against the rich would chime well with a class-oriented climate movement. With unions and workplace groups as with the radical flank, this would be significantly more of a threat than broken windows or sabotaged pipelines. Such a movement could question and challenge the power of capital at its productive and destructive roots.

Source: Rodarummet

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