

Andreas Malm: “Sabotage has to be precise”

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In 2021, Andrea Malm wrote *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, arguing that the activists would be justified to sabotage fossil fuel infrastructure. We spoke with him following a conference in Berlin to talk about Nord Stream 2, art vandalism and our climate future.

You wrote a book, *How to blow up a pipeline*. Since then, with the attack on Nord Stream 2, we’ve seen a pipeline get blown up. What was your reaction?

Well, I certainly don’t know more than anyone else about this Nord Stream incident, but it seems these explosions had absolutely nothing to do with climate politics – rather they have some still unclear relation to the war in Ukraine. I’m not up to date, have there been any new revelations?

Not really.

Right, it’s murky. And, obviously, it has caused an environmental disaster due to the enormous amount of methane that was released. So, it’s about as far as you can come from the kind of sabotage that we would envision as part of a climate campaign, where sabotage would have to be executed in a way that doesn’t further exacerbate the problem. And where there should be some kind of political communication addressed to the public clearly explaining why you’re doing what you’re doing. None of that exists here.

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If there is any takeaway from the incident, it’s perhaps that fossil fuel infrastructure can be destroyed – and some analyses that I’ve read have claimed you can do it without very advanced military technology. The absurdity here is that it’s done for the wrong reasons. It was the same in the U.S. where hackers shut down the Continental Pipeline by hacking into the software, but they did it for some kind of extortion. So yeah, technically it can be done if you have the right skills, but the examples so far are doing it for the wrong reasons, which is a bit frustrating.

In your book, you give the example of letting down of the tyres of SUVs. This has since actually been taken up by groups like the Tyre Extinguishers who’ve even been active here in Berlin. Do you think that’s appropriate? It hasn’t led to the end of SUVs...

Of course they need to go further, to proliferate, expand and multiply. If you’re going to have a real impact with this kind of action, it needs to be repeated and widespread. You can’t accomplish any kind of political action if you have just three workers going on strike. Only when you have 3,000 or 300,000 then you might be able to accomplish something. It’s all about numbers.

The great promise of the Tyre Extinguishers campaign is that it’s extremely easy for people to do. It has spread very rapidly to something like 13 countries, deflating something like 10,000 SUVs in half

a year. If you continue to extrapolate that, then it might establish a real disincentive against SUV consumption in urban areas – and rich parts of urban areas in particular.

Recently, just outside Berlin, activists threw mashed potatoes at a painting by Monet. You recently wrote a piece in the New York Times defending a similar action in London where activists chucked soup at a Van Gogh. What do you say to the criticism that this sort of action only alienates people?

Yeah, so, I have to say that I'm extremely ambivalent about this kind of action. That piece in the New York Times changed a lot during the editing process. My initial reaction to the Van Gogh thing was "Oh no. Why are they doing this?" I mean, what's the link between an oil painting – a Monet or whatever – and the problem of the climate? Even the Just Stop Oil people were explicit about this. They had nothing against Van Gogh. It was exclusively a matter of drawing attention.

With this kind of nihilistic instrumentalism, you can pick any item so long as it is scandalous enough. And I'm very uncertain about whether this is a good tactic, a good vision of tactics. There's something flippant about the idea that you can do anything if it gets you media attention. You could imagine, I don't know, organising a big orgy in Trafalgar Square. That would also presumably attract the media, but it has no organic relation to the problem.

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My ideas of sabotage have always been to inflict some kind of material costs on fossil capital. To make a risk for investors and make it clear that if they keep pouring their money into coal mines or oil derricks or gas terminals, they risk losing this capital because people might go in and destroy these installations.

Sabotage has to be precise. It has to target the actual source of the problem. The climate movement that I have identified with for the past seven years or so is Ende Gelände, which has always had that very precise targeting.

So, that was my initial reaction, but then I spoke with the organisers of Last Generation and they said they'd actually carried out something like 30 pipeline cuttings in Germany. There was a report about it in Open Democracy. It got no media attention. That's when they resorted to blocking highways. It pissed a lot of people off, but it also allowed them to break through the media silence. So, I'm torn.

Extinction Rebellion make it a point of pride to get arrested in order to display the sort of moral accountability their opponents lack, but you disagree with this approach...

The political tradition that I come from has a completely different view of these things – and that view is that any arrest is a failure. You want to accomplish as much as possible while evading the cops. I don't subscribe to the idea that you can only save your moral high ground by letting yourself be arrested. I don't see the logic of that whatsoever.

Firstly, it presumes that the existing repressive state apparatus and the legal system behind it is some epitome of ethics – as if that is where you have to be present to show that you're an ethical agent. This is the same repressive state apparatus that defends the status quo. Which is completely catastrophic. So that state apparatus has no legitimacy, no validity. I don't see why we would submit ourselves to it, or even you know, leap into their arms and see it as some kind of virtue to end up

under that control. If you want to escalate the struggle and do radical things such as sabotage, you expose yourself to the risk of higher, longer sentences. You can't really ask people to step up and do more criminal actions while telling them that they have to subject themselves to arrest?

The other aspect is the racial dimension. How does this look to non-white activists? When XR came up with this idea, they made the assumption that we can be relatively safe in the confidence that if we're arrested, we won't be badly treated by the cops: that's based on a certain kind of white privilege in the UK. Non-white people can't assume that - they have a completely different experience of the police system, where the whole notion of getting arrested is much more uncomfortable than it is for white middle class people.

What these things demonstrate is that - in their race and class dimensions - the climate movement in its XR iterations is some distance away from other social movements in the global north like Black Lives Matter or even the Yellow Vests, which have their own race and class sources.

Germany has its own history of left-wing terrorism with the Red Army Faction. Would you be in favour of a Green Army Faction, of people resorting to that level of violence to fight for our climate future?

I don't advocate - and I don't know of anyone who advocates - that climate activists should get arms. The whole premise of the Red Army faction was armed struggle. As in using guns and lethal weapons to kill people. I think it would be absolutely disastrous for the climate movement if anyone were to do that at this moment in history. We don't know what the situation will be like in 50 years. If everything is up in flames and you have mass death on a on a totally different scale then some of these things might change. But for the foreseeable future, armed struggle of that kind is out of the question.

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But the history of the Red Army Faction is complicated and fascinating. Some of what they did is understandable, notably their attacks on NATO installations and U.S. Army camps that were directly implicated in the war in Vietnam. But they got bogged down in a vendetta with the repressive state apparatus where they would shoot judges and kill people to get their own comrades out of jail, which led to a spiral of self-propelling violence. That just has to be avoided.

Also, the RAF or the other revolutionary cells came out of a whole landscape of leftist politics that just doesn't exist anymore. The climate movement operates from a fundamental position of extreme weakness. Organising any kind of underground or militant force is extremely difficult compared to what it was in the 1970s, because the whole infrastructure is missing. It's been destroyed.

Capitalists are already preparing for climate change: building bunkers, constructing levies against rising water levels. Would you consider these as targets for sabotage? Or, rather, should there be a grassroots movement to build infrastructure aimed to help regular people adapt to a changing planet?

You saw a little bit of that kind of sabotage in France last summer where when you had climate activists going onto golf courses and pouring concrete into the holes to protest their exemption from watering bans in the middle of the drought. Another group in France, *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*, saw radical farmers together with the Black Bloc destroy big water tanks operated by private companies. These tanks collect rainwater in huge centralised structures instead of letting it run off into the fields. I think we'll see more of that, where people get angry with the rich imposing artificial

scarcity.

As for whether we should build other kinds of adaptive structures to adapt better? Sure, I mean, if we're going to have a chance to survive and weather the storms that are inevitable, we need to prepare better and in a more socially just fashion protect those most vulnerable.

Do you think the left has an exclusive claim to green politics? After all, the German green party isn't particularly left wing. Conservation and conservatism could be natural bed-fellows.

The French case with Marine Le Pen is perhaps the best case of the far right reinventing itself as ecological. So yes, green nationalism is a possible political position. They would argue that yes, the climate crisis is real and the solution is to close the borders and isolate ourselves economically and stop all immigration. This is the kind of stuff that has come out *Front National* in France. So, of course, you can have environmentalist positions on the right and even on the far right.

When the police came, the activists had made sure to destroy all the video surveillance cameras. There was no evidence.

And then you have the ecofascist terrorists who have conducted massacres, like the Christchurch killer, the killer in El Paso and most recently, in Buffalo, the guy who went in and killed 10 or 12 African Americans in a Buffalo supermarket. They all stated reasons which were partly influenced by climate politics, because supposedly the overpopulation of non-white people is destroying the planet. The argument we made with the Zetkin Collective in our book *White Skin, Black Fuel* was that this is not only a recipe for violence against non-white people, it's also very bad politics. You don't deal with the actual problem of CO₂ emissions by killing black people in a supermarket.

You get lot of the criticism saying that your ideas alienate people. Even if they agree with your diagnosis, they find the idea of militant action off-putting.

I don't think that there is an iron law that people are always opposed to every kind of militant action or sabotage. It depends completely on the circumstances: where you are in the world, the mood of the times, how it is implemented in relation to the crisis. I think you need to be careful to select your targets wisely. You need to be able to explain what you're doing to people to gain support and attract more people to the cause.

Can you give any specific examples of well-executed sabotage?

We're still in the early phase. The experiments so far take place on a spectrum, from spectacular and substantial to very gentle mild types of sabotage, which is where I would put the Tyre Extinguishers. They aren't not even destroying or damaging anything, they're just temporarily disabling SUVs. On the other end, you have what happened in British Columbia in late February against the Coastal GasLink Pipeline.

Twenty activists swarmed a construction site for this pipeline in the Wet'suwet'en Nation territory in British Columbia. This pipeline had been the subject of widespread protest for several years. In 2020 there was a series of blockades in Canada that shut down almost half of the country's railway system, largely sparked by the conflict around this pipeline.

In late February, twenty activists came to the construction site and chased away the security guards, took over the site and used the bulldozers and trucks to smash the equipment. They caused millions of dollars of financial damage to the company. When the police came, the activists had made sure to destroy all the video surveillance cameras. There was no evidence. The only pictures of the activists

are from the phones of the security guards in the very first moment of confrontation. You see them coming in in their white overalls with various tools and open the gates. No one was arrested. In that respect, it was the opposite of the XR protests.

And do you know what was said afterwards? Liberal politicians explicitly said that this was dangerous because it would have a deterrent effect on investment in fossil fuels in British Columbia - which is exactly what you want to achieve! To me that's a very inspiring action.

You've got to remember. We're in the very early stages and it is only going to get worse. Unlike other social problems, global warming is hardwired to deteriorate. It will get worse, worse, worse, worse. Eventually, we're going to have to adapt and radicalise that we can't stay with the tactics of the very early phase.

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