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The Infernos

February 09, 2021 • *BOOKFORUM TALKS WITH ANDREAS MALM ABOUT HIS NEW BOOK, HOW TO BLOW UP A PIPELINE: LEARNING TO FIGHT IN A WORLD ON FIRE* • BY R. H. LOSSIN

HOW TO BLOW UP A PIPELINE: LEARNING TO FIGHT IN A WORLD ON FIRE BY ANDREAS MALM.
BROOKLYN, NY: VERSO. 208 PAGES. \$20.



In his new book, How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire, Andreas Malm questions a central tenet of activist orthodoxy: strategic pacifism is always preferable to violence no matter the situation, the stakes, the actors, or the consequences. Malm, a lecturer in the

human ecology division at Lund University in Sweden, has written several books on fossil fuels, climate change, and political economy. Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming (2016) presents a detailed historic account of the role played by coal in the industrial revolution. Over the past couple of years, he has turned his attention to the present and immediate future, writing several urgent and convincing polemics including The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World (2018) and Corona, Climate,

Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century (2020; all Verso). How to Blow Up a Pipeline, which came out in January, is the latest and most literal of Malm's calls to arms. Bookforum talked with Malm about property destruction, the condescension of historical revision, Extinction Rebellion, and the inertia of infrastructure.

Before we talk about your new book, I thought it might be useful to briefly revisit the argument that you made in *Fossil Capital*.

Fossil Capital is a historical inquiry into the origins of capitalist dependence on large-scale fossil-fuel combustion, and the shift from water power to steam power in the cotton industry—the spearhead of the industrial revolution. Why did manufacturers abandon water power and switch to steam power, based on the first fossil-fuel, coal? I argued that this did not happen because water was exhausted or more expensive. Water was in fact cheaper than steam all the way through the transition. But the steam engine could be located anywhere. And the advantage of this for capitalists was that you could put steam engines—and the factories propelled by them—wherever there was a plentiful supply of cheap and disciplined labor, and steam power was also independent of weather cycles. Unlike my new book, *Fossil Capital* was almost exclusively focused on the demand side. But in the past few years, the climate movement has made a very concerted move towards focusing on the supply side—the companies that actually produce fossil fuels. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* is primarily focused on what tactics the movement should deploy in its fight against those who produce and sell fossil fuels. This includes the oil and gas companies, but there's also a discussion of potentially targeting certain forms of consumption—even private consumption.

That book points out how people make assumptions (often without realizing it) about the logic of the profit motive—that everything is a rational decision based on cost. You make it clear that this infrastructure is not following a kind of natural evolution, and it's not a matter of efficiency versus idealism.

That's crucially important. And now renewables are cheaper than ever. Solar power, in many parts of the world, is now producing electricity at the lowest cost in history. Still, we don't see a shift away from fossil fuels and towards solar power and wind. There is an inertia in the

infrastructure. Once these investments in fossil fuels have been made, there's a vested interest in keeping that infrastructure going. Even in supposedly enlightened countries in Europe, like Germany, which has been the powerhouse for the European climate movement for a number of years, you've seen the inauguration of a massive airport. They opened a new coal-fired power plant this summer, which is supposed to run for something like twenty years. They're expanding the autobahn, tearing through an old-growth forest with the initial approval of the Greens in that province.

What inspired you to write a book with a title that endorses property destruction in some limited—or maybe unlimited—fashion?

In the spring of 2018, I was completely obsessed with ancient Egypt. But then during the summer of that year, I felt I couldn't spend my time on that research anymore, because it's not relevant enough for a world that is literally catching fire. We had a totally unprecedented summer in Northern Europe with heat waves and wildfires and droughts, like we've never seen before. At that point, I was in total despair mode. Greta Thunberg, like many other people, also had precisely those feelings and started her protests, which ignited the whole "Fridays for Future" movement. 2018 also triggered Extinction Rebellion. And in 2019, we had the peak of climate camps in Germany, and they spread around Europe. So the book became very different from what I had originally envisaged. I thought that I would be deploring the absence of climate activism. Instead, what we had was the highest tide so far of climate mobilization. Having been in the movement for quite some years, I felt elated and encouraged by the wave of activism. At the same time, I was frustrated. Although there were more of us on the streets, we were still behaving extremely politely. And we were doubling down—"we," meaning the main spokespersons of the movement and with the addition of Extinction Rebellion—on a strict commitment to absolute nonviolence. Given the urgency of the situation, I felt there was something amiss in this commitment. I find pacifism in general to be a problematic doctrine, but when it's pushed this hard by the climate movement at this stage in history, it's more problematic than usual. That's what drove me to write this book, the feeling that we need to escalate. It's a common feeling in the European climate movement. But the escalation can happen in many ways, and going towards property destruction and forms of violence is not the

only way.

In the United States, the conventional wisdom is that social change only comes from nonviolent action—although this has been called into question more widely lately. In the book, you refute this idea, providing a capsule history of militant action across a number of movements. Can you talk about “strategic pacifism” and how it’s produced this alternate, nonviolent history of social struggle?

Strategic pacifism is distinct from the moral variety in that it doesn’t necessarily say that it’s always ethically wrong to use violence. But it does contend that it’s counterproductive for social movements. For virtually all strategic pacifists that includes property destruction. The argument is that as soon as a movement engages in violent activities, the movements become fringe phenomenon. Extinction Rebellion explains its origins as coming from a group of people who found the 2011 book *Why Civil Resistance Works* by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. It makes the case for strategic pacifism by building up a data set of conflicts of the past—since the end of the Second World War, basically. Their analysis shows that violence always leads to failure for social movements, using cases like the Iranian Revolution, the First Palestinian Intifada, and various struggles against dictatorships.

This version of history is very easy to disprove because it’s dishonest and inaccurate in virtually every case. Probably the craziest example used by strategic pacifists in the climate movement is slavery: you’ve heard climate activists and climate intellectuals say, “We’re going to defeat fossil fuels in a nonviolent fashion just as slavery was abolished.” But seriously, have you ever opened a history book? Do you know that there was something called the Civil War in the United States that wasn’t an entirely peaceful war? Or the Haitian Revolution: the first instance of an actual abolition of slavery was not exactly a bloodless affair. And it’s just so sanitized and whitewashed, and, frankly, condescending towards the enslaved Africans, who fought to free themselves, to pretend that slavery was abolished by peaceful abolitionists. I don’t understand how strategic pacifists make sense of the uprising for Black lives in the wake of the George Floyd murder. If their thesis had been true, people would have gone home after the storming and burning of the police station in Minneapolis, which would have ended the

movement. But exactly the opposite happened.

Maybe the relevant question isn't what is violent or nonviolent, but what a certain type of property destruction might politically accomplish.

The initial confrontations with the police forces and their property in Minneapolis, and in other cities, gave a lot of people a sense of empowerment that we can actually challenge this system. This obviously translated predominantly into nonviolent action. That's exactly what the strategic pacifists got wrong, because they think that militant action is always in absolute opposition to a nonviolent mass action. Whereas here, as in so many other instances, it worked in a dialectical fashion—not without tension or friction, but one stimulated the other. The climate movement needs something similar. The problem with the climate crisis is that we are stuck in a sense of absolute paralysis and a feeling that those coal-fired power plants, pipelines, and newly built airports—this entire infrastructure—is beyond our control. Intelligent sabotage or property destruction can show how false this is by physically breaking apart the infrastructure and demonstrating that it's not beyond our influence. But you need to be precise—the word “intention” is important.

When my book was published in France, a group called La Ronce was inspired to conduct certain kinds of sabotage. They incited people to deflate SUV tires and tinker with Total gas stations, but also to open Coca-Cola bottles in grocery stores so that the fizz would leave. They wanted to target the sugar industry, because they connected it to the collapse of bee populations and things like this. But if you have indiscriminate sabotage, you miss the point that you can only get across with precisely targeted operations, ones with communiqués and political declarations saying *why* we are doing this.

It reminds me of Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism. We now have a popular discourse around capitalism, but it's abstract, like the weather. Blowing up a pipeline is a way to momentarily puncture that sense of overwhelming inevitability.

What the climate movement needs to do is find moments when that action is most urgently needed. When you have actual wildfires or hurricanes or drought, no one, as far as I know, has

yet gone to target the kind of infrastructure that is the cause of those crises. Instead, people suffer those extreme weather events as moments of emergency, where everyone tries to save their own skin. We should strike when the iron is hot and try to make people realize that unless we go after the drivers of these disasters, we'll just end up with more of them again and again, until who knows when . . .

We need to stop treating the weather like the weather.

Yes, exactly. Because it's totally political, but from one side only. There is no counter struggle. For instance, imagine that during the Australian wildfire inferno, some activists had sabotaged or destroyed part of the coal-mine infrastructure. Then they would explain to the public that Australia, by going up in flames, is suffering the impact of the combustion of coal and other fossil fuels—and that the Australian government is expanding that combustion. If the government keeps at it, we'll just get more infernos. The only alternative is to take the infrastructure out. If the state is not prepared to do it, we have to show that it still can be done. In such a moment, those activists would potentially have been able to get that message across to a significant audience.

R. H. Lossin is a writer whose work has appeared in *The Nation*, the *New Left Review*, *Jacobin* and other publications.

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