



Ecological Leninism

Adam Tooze on Andreas Malm's post-pandemic climate politics

THE CARBON CLOCK is ticking. Governments and official agencies assure us that all will be well, that they can balance the risks. Some insist that technology will save us. We have achieved the impossible before, we will do it again. But why believe them? Progress towards decarbonisation has been limited. Fossil fuel interests remain stitched into global networks of power directly descended from the age of imperialism. Their political outriders may be cynical hacks, but public support for the fossil fuel status quo is all too real. The carbon coalition seems death-driven, defiant of expert advice. Centrist liberals are loud in expressing outrage, but shrink away when push comes to shove. There are periodic waves of protest. Children boycott school. There are demands for a new social contract and a just transition. A minority, tiny as yet, calls for rebellion.

With only minor alterations, this could be the portrait of a nation sliding towards defeat in a major war: relentless time pressure; limited resources rapidly running down; over-confident technocrats; promises of wonder weapons; pro and anti-war factions at loggerheads; desperate young people calling for a halt to the madness. War remains a crucial way of thinking about collective peril and about agency in the face of that peril; in climate politics, the rhetoric of war and wartime mobilisation is commonplace. American advocates of the Green New Deal called for a repeat of the staggering industrial production achieved during the Second World War. In the UK, memories of the postwar welfare state persist. There is talk of the Marshall Plan.

But isn't this all rather too convenient? A 'good war', fought by democracies, ending in spectacular victory and inaugurating a golden age of economic growth and the advent of the welfare state. One way of reading the recent burst of publications – three books in the space of a year – from the historian and climate activist Andreas Malm is as a sustained challenge to this complacent historical framing of our present condition. The historical analogy he prefers to draw is with the First World War and its aftermath, a world defined by the upheaval of revolution and the violence of fascism – the beginning, not the end of an age of crisis.

To have in mind the Second World War and the birth of the modern interventionist welfare state is to take your bearings from such thinkers as Maynard Keynes, with his promise that 'anything we can actually do, we can afford.' The First World War and the years after it evoke a different cast of characters. Malm's own political background is in Trotskyism, and he now declares himself an ecological Leninist. His co-authors in *White Skin, Black Fuel* named themselves the Zetkin Collective after the German communist and feminist Clara Zetkin, whose interpretation of fascism they draw on and whose ashes were interred in 1933 beside the Kremlin Wall.

Some will accuse Malm of cosplaying revolution while the planet burns. But his position is actually one of tragic realism. As he and his colleagues argue in *White Skin, Black Fuel*, the defining fact about climate change is that it is ‘a revolutionary problem without a revolutionary subject’. The environmental movement may have aligned itself with social justice activism, but it hasn’t been ‘able to challenge capitalism with anything like the power once evinced by the Third International or the national liberation movements, or even the social democratic parties of the Second International; a lame successor, it won no Vietnam War and built no equivalent of the welfare state.’

The bridge between our reality and that of the revolutionaries of a century ago is the awareness of looming disaster. The revolutionaries of the early 1900s had come to regard the 19th-century promise of inevitable progress as empty or, as Walter Benjamin saw it, catastrophic. Facing total war, they insisted that action was essential to forestall disaster. As Marx and Engels had warned in the *Communist Manifesto*, the fight between the oppressor and the oppressed would end ‘either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes’ – ‘socialism or barbarism’, as Rosa Luxemburg put it. A century later, what is our predicament? Though the ruling classes talk of climate crisis, Malm says, their actions betray them:

They are not perturbed by the smell from the blazing trees. They do not worry at the sight of islands sinking; they do not run from the roar of the approaching hurricanes; their fingers never need to touch the stalks from withered harvests; their mouths do not become sticky and dry after a day with nothing to drink ... After the past three decades, there can be no doubt that the ruling classes are constitutionally incapable of responding to the catastrophe in any other way than by expediting it; of their own accord, under their inner compulsion, they can do nothing but burn their way to the end.

The question that Malm poses in his pamphlet *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency* is whether the pandemic has changed anything.* For many on the left, last year’s crisis was bewildering but, at least at first, encouraging. On climate there seemed no possibility of progress, but in the face of the pandemic the state seemed to have uncoupled from the interests it usually serves. ‘Covid-19 came as an instantaneous and total saturation of everything,’ Malm writes. ‘Like a gust blowing out the tinted windows in a skyscraper, it stripped the state down to its barest relative autonomy.’ Suddenly, the state was free to act independently of big business.

Governments in the North were in a rare position to sacrifice the well-being of their capitalist economies for the lives of their elderly and potentially younger cohorts too. One may regard this moment as bringing out the best in modern bourgeois democracies, the respect for life trumping the respect for property, a victory for the egalitarian premise to which democracy is sworn.

Malm briefly indulges the idea that a dramatic intervention might resolve the climate crisis, but promptly dismisses it: ‘The contrast between coronavirus vigilance and climate complacency is illusory. The writing has been on the wall about zoonotic spillover for years, and states have done as much to address it as they have done to tackle anthropogenic climate change: nothing.’ When the crisis struck, Malm might have added, government action was in large part directed towards shoring up existing property relations and the existing distribution of wealth and income. The interventions were gigantic but overwhelmingly conservative in their intentions and effects.

What kind of government machinery might produce better results? The left calls for a Green New Deal, or what Daniela Gabor has called the ‘big green state’, but there is no guarantee that a more ambitious version of state intervention would drive change. We should hardly find it encouraging that the Green New Dealers take the Second World War as their model. Keynesian

macroeconomics may have come to the fore during the war, but the machinery of government itself was at the time increasingly occupied by business interests. Plans for an interventionist industrial policy and intense regulation were shelved. So where might we look for alternative models of emergency government? What if, Malm suggests, the proper model for a climate activist state is not the New Deal, but a wartime regime that was far more desperate, and more austere? What if the model we need is War Communism?

It's an audacious proposition. The brief period of War Communism between 1920 and 1921 is one of the most contentious in Russian revolutionary history. Opinions differ as to whether it was a desperate improvisation or a genuine effort at radical change. There is no disagreement, however, that it was a period of terrible violence. For historians such as Sheila Fitzpatrick and Ronald Suny, broadly sympathetic to the revolution, it is the phase when the regime hardened into an authoritarian and, where necessary, terroristic dictatorship. War Communism is the very last thing you would propose as a model of economic transformation. The economy of the former tsarist empire was on its knees; society was deindustrialising; there was a disastrous sundering of exchange between the countryside and what was left of the cities. The famine that followed pushed the Bolsheviks close to surrender.

Malm is aware of all this, but remains undaunted:

Let it be said, then, that invoking War Communism is not to suggest that we should have summary executions, send food detachments into the countryside or militarise labour, just as no one who looks at the Second World War as a model for climate mobilisation wants to drop another atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Many of the perceived necessities the Bolsheviks turned into virtues, we can readily recognise as vices. But, conversely, some of what they saw as their weaknesses we may regard as strengths.

What fascinates Malm about War Communism is the sharp corrective it offers to any cornucopian vision of the future. In Trotsky's own words, the position of the revolution in 1920 was 'in the highest degree tragic'. Radical innovation was forced by harsh necessity. The Bolshevik zone, confined to a rump of the Russian empire, was desperately short of food, coal and oil. A harsh requisitioning system made it possible to feed the army, but a more innovative solution was needed to address the desperate shortage of coal. Cut off from fossil fuels, Trotsky turned to wood. The Red Army's armoured trains were fired with logs. By 1921, according to Malm, an improvised organic energy regime had triumphed over the combined fossil-fuel forces of reaction. What Malm is challenging us to imagine is a movement against fossil capitalism in which an embattled group of energy revolutionaries breaks away from the global empire of oil and gas, as the Bolsheviks did between 1917 and 1922, to forge a new politics, a new economy and a new energy regime. As Malm points out, at least today's War Communists will have solar and wind power.

Let's assume that Malm isn't making a proposal for action so much as undertaking a radical thought experiment. If we were to translate his historical analogy into regular policy talk, the point would presumably be that any serious attempt at energy transition will involve, along with pricing and negotiation, a combination of nationalisation, regulation and prohibition enforced not just according to the letter of the law, but with militant energy. The question is, what kind of political formation would be required to pull this off? War Communism was administered by a revolutionary party locked in a life and death struggle for survival. That is not our situation, at least not yet.

A far more promising route is suggested in *White Skin, Black Fuel*. One of the organising distinctions of this massive collective work is between sectors of the economy that are irreducibly dependent on fossil fuel extraction and those that use fossil energy but aren't existentially entangled with it. With the former there can be no compromise: survival depends on shutting them down. The latter, by contrast, are the actors that must be recruited if any Green New Deal strategy is to succeed. The worry for any putative 'big green state' is what kind of fight the extractive fossil fuel sector will put up.

The surge of far-right parties across Europe and the presidencies of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro have triggered a wave of debate about a second coming of fascism. Trump and Bolsonaro are also climate deniers. Malm and his co-authors in *White Skin, Black Fuel* argue that this is not a coincidence. First, they note that over the last twenty years the defenders of fossil fuel extraction have shifted tactics. Climate denialism in the 1990s was an overt and clearly self-interested lie, a conspiracy against science; the emphasis today is on broad-based movements that aggressively defend the fossil fuel way of life. Even with considerable funding from business, the big lie became hard to uphold; Exxon and BP now acknowledge the existence of climate change. In response, climate resistance has adopted the more indirect mechanisms of hegemony. Trump and Bolsonaro back coal, oil and gas, but rather than attempting to engage in scientific argument, they simply spray soundbites. To appeal to their constituencies, they need only evoke anti-elite prejudice, and the reverberation of old climate-sceptic memes will do the rest.

This is not to say that climate is explicitly at the core of their agenda; it is a corollary of their appeal to anti-elite, working-class nationalism. *White Skin, Black Fuel* attempts to set out the ways in which gas-guzzling consumerism, fossil fuel addiction, settler colonialism and structures of racial power are historically entwined. There is a similar link between fossil fuels and historical fascism. The fascists in Germany were in a better position than the War Communists. They had coal. But they also had to find a way to break the grip of oil, the commodity basis of Anglo-American power. In the event, the chemicals conglomerate IG Farben devised a way of making oil and rubber out of Central European coal. Not by accident, a huge synthetic chemical factory was at the heart of the Auschwitz camp complex.

In addition to its historical and ideological dimensions, the nexus between authoritarianism and fossil fuels operates, according to Malm and the Zetkin Collective, at a deeper psychological level. Echoing what Herbert Marcuse, in his reading of fascist mass psychology, described as the desire to attack, split and pulverise, Trump praised the labourers who 'break through rock walls, mine the depths of the earth, and reach through the ocean floor, to bring every ounce of energy into our homes and commerce and into our lives'. It isn't just 'Drill, baby, drill' that cements the link. The cognitive dissonance of the liberal mainstream is a key component in the psychogram of a dying fossil fuel civilisation sketched by Malm and the collective. In an echo of Clara Zetkin's argument that fascism is history's revenge for the failure to make a socialist revolution, they see the hypocrisy and inconsistency of mainstream climate policy as driving voters towards the far right. To harp on the climate crisis while doing nothing about it is, in the long run, intolerable. Liberals' failures make Trump look honest. He may deny the science, but at least he's true to himself.

It is against the backdrop of this portrait of societies in deadlock that we should read Malm's latest provocation, *How to Blow up a Pipeline*. Though the book makes a general argument for militant action it is best understood as an intervention at a specific conjuncture. The German movement *Ende Gelände*, whose protests Malm participated in, had remarkable success between 2015 and 2018 in mobilising direct action against Germany's brown coal mines and smoke-belching power stations. But the movement suffered a serious setback when the Merkel government stitched up a deal with the coal industry and trade unions to delay the exit from coal until 2038, a ridiculous

horizon entirely out of line even with the modest commitments of the Paris Agreement. This was a turning point for the climate movement in Germany.

The militant activists of Ende Gelände had been trained in the direct action techniques of the anti-nuclear movement, but now it was the mobilisation of schoolchildren, inspired by Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future, that led the way. A school strike 1.4 million strong – the largest co-ordinated youth protest in history – took place on 15 March 2019. This was closely followed by a series of protests across the UK by Extinction Rebellion. By September 2019, the Friday strike movement numbered four million protesters worldwide, a third of them in Germany. But to the frustration of Malm and many in the Ende Gelände movement, Fridays for Future showed no interest in direct action. The protesting schoolchildren stuck to the tradition of noisy street demonstrations. In the UK, as Malm observes, XR followed recent mobilisations in the US by positioning itself against violent action.

THE QUESTION that drives *How to Blow up a Pipeline* is why the new movements of protest in 2019, despite their scale and dynamism, refused to adopt the techniques of physical obstruction and disruption successfully modelled by Ende Gelände. Part of the answer is moral. The US movement, in particular, has imbibed a commitment to non-violent methods. Some argued that attacks on property would only produce a painful and repressive backlash, and indeed, this summer, Jessica Reznicek, who with Ruby Montoya mounted a sabotage campaign against the Dakota Access pipeline, was sentenced to eight years in federal prison. But, as Malm argues, these familiar tactical concerns have been reinforced in the current phase of the climate movement by a peculiar reading of history, in which the power of self-control and non-violence is fetishised. The new movements, he writes, look to ‘historical precedents – people winning against hopeless odds, great evil suddenly put to an end – that can break the hold of apathy’:

If they could prevail, the reasoning goes, so can we. If they changed the world by all means but violent ones, so we shall save it. Analogism has become a prime mode of argumentation and the main source of strategic thinking, most visibly in XR, the rare organisation that defines itself as a result of historical study. Note that the argument is not that violence would be bad at this particular moment – say, because the level of class struggle is so low in the global North that adventurist actions would only rebound and suppress it further: words that would never pass XR lips – nor that it might be expedient only under conditions of severe repression. Instead, analogist strategic pacifism holds that violence is bad in all settings, because this is what history shows. Success belongs to the peaceful. The roster of historical analogies begins with slavery.

But, as Malm points out, the climate movement’s appropriation of history has been one-sided. How can one treat the suffragette movement seriously without emphasising its use of direct action and sabotage? Even more grotesque is the representation of the abolition of slavery as if it were achieved through the high moralism of Quaker ‘NGOs’, rather than slave rebellion or the radical example of militant abolitionists.

By ruling out direct action, the climate movement robs itself, in Malm’s view, of its only serious means of leverage. What’s needed, he argues, is not the slow shift of public opinion and electoral results, but a more encompassing ‘theory of change’:

Here is what this movement of millions should do, for a start: announce and enforce the prohibition. Damage and destroy new CO₂-emitting devices. Put them out of commission, pick them apart, demolish them, burn them, blow them up. Let the capitalists who keep on investing in the fire know that their properties will be trashed. 'We are the investment risk,' runs a slogan from Ende Gelände, but the risk clearly needs to be higher than one or two days of interrupted production per year. 'If we can't get a serious carbon tax from a corrupted Congress, we can impose a de facto one with our bodies,' Bill McKibben has argued, but a carbon tax is so 2004. If we can't get a prohibition, we can impose a de facto one with our bodies and any other means necessary.

Malm is aware that such tactics risk alienating support, inviting media denunciation and provoking massive repression. As he admits, 'climate militancy would have to be articulated to a wider anti-capitalist groundswell, much as in earlier shifts of modes of production, when physical attacks on ruling classes formed only minor parts of society-wide reorganisation. How could that happen? This cannot be known beforehand. It can be found only through immersion in practice.' These are the words of a revolutionary cadre hedging his bets.

Given how remote the goal of comprehensive decarbonisation is, it is less the aim than the manner of politics that matters. Given the reality of the underlying conflict, division and strife are not to be regretted, but embraced – an essential Leninist lesson. To adopt an antagonistic stance is to do no more than respond adequately to the situation. As Malm and the collective conclude in *White Skin, Black Fuel*, 'if nothing else, the anti-climate politics of the far right should shatter any remaining illusion that fossil fuels can be relinquished through some kind of smooth, reasoned transition ... A transition will happen through intense polarisation and confrontation, or it will not happen at all.' From this point of view, the question isn't whether liberal activists do or don't want to engage in sabotage. If we keep to our current course, sabotage is coming. If it isn't directed from the top, it will bubble up from below. The question is whether the mainstream climate movement can ready itself for the agonising dilemmas to come. Can it sustain its coherence and momentum in the face of crisis, violence, division and, quite likely, defeat?

It is at this point that the dramas of 20th-century European history return to haunt Malm's vision of the future – not as an inspiration to revolution, but as a way of giving meaning to resistance that may ultimately be in vain. Imagine that we are no longer in the world of school strikes and UN conferences. Imagine that, after the melting of the ice caps and a dramatic civilisational collapse, a huddle of people are eking out an existence in northern latitudes. What will they tell their children about the disaster? Will they say that 'humanity brought about the end of the world in perfect harmony? That everyone willingly queued up for the furnaces? Or that some people fought like Jews who knew they would be killed?'

The 'Jews' Malm evokes are the resistance fighters of the Warsaw ghetto and the camps who engaged in heroic but doomed uprisings against the Nazis. And he means this extraordinary analogy seriously: 'If it is too late for resistance to be waged within a calculus of immediate utility, the time has come for it to vindicate the fundamental values of life, even if it only means crying out to the heavens.' He cites Alain Brossat and Sylvie Klingberg's *Revolutionary Yiddishland*: 'Their combat was for history, for memory ... This affirmation of life by way of sacrifice and combat with no prospect of victory is a tragic paradox that can only be understood as an act of faith in history.' 'Better to die blowing up a pipeline,' Malm concludes, 'than to burn impassively.' Thus the image of blowing up a pipeline returns, not now as an act of sabotage but one of self-sacrifice. At this intersection of a monumental past and a dark future, we reach a dead end.

Earlier in *How to Blow up a Pipeline*, Malm gestures at an alternative. Imagine, he writes, that the mass mobilisations of the latest cycle of protest become impossible to ignore.

The ruling classes feel themselves under such heat – perhaps their hearts even melting somewhat at the sight of all these kids with handwritten placards – that their obduracy wanes. New politicians are voted into office, notably from green parties in Europe, who live up to their election promises. The pressure is kept up from below. Moratoriums on fresh fossil fuel infrastructure are instituted. Germany initiates immediate phase-out of coal production, the Netherlands likewise for gas, Norway for oil, the US for all of the above; legislation and planning are put in place for cutting emissions by at least 10 per cent per year; renewable energy and public transport are scaled up, plant-based diets promoted, blanket bans on fossil fuels prepared.

If this were to transpire, Malm concedes, ‘the movement should be given the chance to see this scenario through.’

The majority of climate activists put their hope in this reformist vision: we should indeed hold on to it. But let us also admit that although those lines were printed only months ago, they already seem out of date. And Malm soon provides us with a vision much closer to the way the world looks today. Imagine that ‘a few years down the road, the kids of the Thunberg generation and the rest of us wake up one morning and realise that business-as-usual is still on, regardless of all the strikes, the science, the pleas, the millions with colourful outfits and banners ... What do we do then?’

The centrist will counsel patience. Anything we can actually do, we can afford, Keynes said. By the same token, he added in a radio talk delivered in the spring of 1942, we can afford anything we can actually do, provided we remain patient and take the necessary time. That is a telling qualification. As Malm remarks, it is a fundamental assumption of social democracy that it has history and time on its side. But to imagine that is still the case, to talk as if we can safely distinguish between the short, medium and long term, is one of the most insidious forms of soft denial at work today. We should no longer indulge in it.

As Malm points out, neoliberalism has repeatedly found ways of jumping over its own shadow to meet a crisis at the scale and pace demanded by the situation. The response to the pandemic has provided just such a demonstration of flexibility. But trusting to that kind of politics when it comes to climate change is a recipe for planetary disaster. Malm forces us to face a crucial question: what are the social democratic politics of emergency? If his version of ecological Leninism is to be refused, what is our logic of action in the face of disaster? What are our political options when there is every reason to think that we have very little time left? As Daniel Bensaïd reminds us, in an essay quoted by Malm, in 1914 Lenin made a note in the margins of Hegel’s *The Science of Logic*: ‘Breaks in gradualness ... Gradualness explains nothing without leaps. Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!’

Footnotes

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Letters

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The two pieces on Andreas Malm by James Butler and Adam Tooze raise a question that often puzzles me, namely why so few movements for environmental justice are willing to consider direct action or armed struggle, when these strategies were certainly seen as options in 20th-century anti-colonial and anti-fascist movements (LRB, 18 November). Where indeed are all the eco-terrorists? Malm believes that direct action against polluting infrastructure has so far been both a morally legitimate and practically successful strategy, in that it actually stops pollution and produces a powerful incentive against continued investment (if you blow up a fracking installation twice, who will insure it a third time?). In the global South, movements for environmental justice are often in essence a continuation of anti-colonial resistance, and are subject to the same kinds of extreme violence and repression. Yet mainstream climate movements in the West persist in family-friendly demonstrations, pitifully anaemic politics and well-mannered civil disobedience, rather than, say, organising a revolutionary cadre of saboteurs or turning out in their thousands to participate in mass direct actions which, if properly carried out, would be very difficult to prevent.

Historical anti-colonial movements are instructive here, not least because they too often held out against the use of violence. When Malm suggests that violence is coming, organised or not, it reminds me of the final discussions among the ANC leadership before the turn to armed struggle in 1961. These took place in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre, when at least 69 people were killed following a peaceful protest whose short-term aim was, in accordance with non-violent tradition, the mass arrest of demonstrators. The ensuing declaration of a state of emergency forced the ANC leadership's hand, but it should be borne in mind that Hendrik Verwoerd's 'Grand Apartheid' had been under construction since 1948, coupling a staggering weight of oppressive legislation with the militarisation of the state security apparatus. Even so, armed struggle had been kept off the table. Younger cadres (including Nelson Mandela) had been raising the possibility since the early 1950s, but non-violence was taken to be an inviolable ANC principle. Even after Sharpeville, Albert Luthuli and many of the leadership still expressed a preference for non-violent means. But Mandela argued that there was now no alternative: there would be violence whether the ANC liked it or not – the revolts in Pondoland in preceding years had shown as much. At the meeting, he said,

I argued that the state had given us no alternative to violence. I said it was wrong and immoral to subject our people to armed attacks by the state without offering them some kind of alternative. I mentioned again that people on their own had taken up arms. Violence would begin whether we initiated it or not. Would it not be better to guide this violence ourselves, according to principles where we saved lives by attacking symbols of oppression, and not people? If we did not take the lead now, I said, we would soon be latecomers and followers to a movement we did not control.

Luthuli was reluctantly persuaded ('If anyone thinks I am pacifist, let him try to take my chickens'), and the foundation of uMkhonto we Sizwe followed. Its initial brief was the sabotage of state infrastructure, with no loss of life to be tolerated. Malm laments the widely held view that all direct action is illegitimate, but one day soon the environmental movement may find its Mandelas, and its Luthulis. And anyone with an interest in a decarbonised future, or a protected Amazon, or a living ocean, might do well to consider the thrust of Mandela's argument in those crucial hours of debate and decision: 'The attacks of the wild beast cannot be averted with only bare hands.'

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