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## HOW TO BLOW UP A PIPELINE

Learning to Fight in a World on Fire

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a counteraction could, logically, in principle, negate that action and turn the switch off. If the collective supplying the counterforce were to try and not give up, it might succeed (logically speaking, still). This must have held throughout the history of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. But maybe it is now too late? What if we have reached, say, 666 on the switch panel and the machine is so constructed that there is no going back from this point, only forward towards maximum pain? This is the putatively scientific case for climate fatalism: because so much has been already emitted, what cuts we make now and henceforth will make too little difference to justify the herculean effort involved. Problem is that this case has no basis in the science. 'It is not a question of whether we can limit warming but whether we choose to do so', runs a standard phrase from the peer-reviewed literature on the state of the climate as we enter the 2020s ('we' here meaning humanity, which divides itself into antagonistic blocs). 'The precise level of future warming', Tong and his colleagues make clear, 'depends largely on infrastructure that has not yet been built.' It *could* be blocked.

The alpha and omega of the science of the cumulative character of climate change run contrary to the axioms of fatalism. *Every gigaton matters*, every single plant and terminal and pipeline and SUV and superyacht makes a difference to the aggregate damage done, and this is just as true above 400 ppm and 1°C as it is below. It won't lose its truth at 500 ppm or 2°C or higher still. The totality of global heating will always be a function of the totality of

emissions – less of the latter, less of the former. Positive feedback mechanisms do not cancel out this function, only beef it up. Wallace-Wells has the science behind him when he writes: 'The fight is, definitely, not yet lost – in fact will never be lost, so long as we avoid extinction, because however warm the planet gets, it will always be the case that the decade that follows could contain more suffering or less.' If fatalists think that mitigation is meaningful only at a time when damage is yet to be done, they have misunderstood the basics of both climate science and movement.

Nowhere is the latter so naïve as to think that global heating as such could still be averted. It gets its urgency and rage from the knowledge that it is happening, that too much damage has already been done already – as expressed in the very names of the groups: 350.org, Extinction Rebellion, Ende Gelände – and that no efforts should now be spared in preventing even more of it. The movement knows that it faces a giant salvaging operation: safeguarding as much space as possible on this scarred planet for human and other life to survive and maybe thrive and, in the best case, healing some of the wounds from the past centuries. A demand such as the prohibition of all new CO<sub>2</sub>-emitting devices loses none of its relevance at higher concentrations and temperatures, but precisely the opposite; the later in the day, the more imperative to enforce it by any means necessary. Overshoot of targets for climate mitigation calls for more, not less, resistance. This extends to geoengineering scenarios – the onset of solar radiation

management, the roll-out of negative emissions technologies – which would rapidly fall apart without concomitant closure of CO<sub>2</sub> sources. Until business-as-usual is a distant memory, as long as humans are around, resistance is the path to survival in all weathers; it didn't become passé in 2009 and it won't do so in 2029.

No one knows exactly how this crisis will end. No scientist, no activist, no novelist, no modeller or soothsayer knows it, because too many variables of human action determine the outcome. If collectives throw themselves against the switches with sufficient force, there will be no more flipping towards peak torture; the pain might be ameliorated. Within these parameters, one acts or one does not. Like each grain of sand in the pile, an individual joining the counter-collective could boost its capacity on the margin, and the counter-collective could get the better of the enemy. No more is required to maintain a minimum of hope: success is neither certain nor probable, but possible. The context for hope is radical uncertainty, writes McKinnon; 'anything could happen, and whether we act or not has everything to do with it', Rebecca Solnit. 'Hope is not a door, but a sense that there might be a door somewhere.' Or, more poignantly still, 'hope is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency.'

People wielding that axe have always been told that we're fucked, we're doomed, we should just try to scrape by, nothing will ever change for the better; from the slave barracks to the Judenräte and onwards, every revolt has been discouraged by the elders of defeatism. But what of

the revolts that actually failed? Did they not validate the naysayers? What was the point of Nat Turner or the Warsaw ghetto uprising? Fatalism of the present holds defeated struggles of the past in contempt, and so does strategic pacifism: if someone raised a weapon and lost, it was because she raised that weapon. She shouldn't have. Chenoweth and Stephan chide the Palestinians for using rocks and petrol bombs in the first intifada; had they only managed to stay peaceful – had the leadership been able to 'convince youths to stop throwing rocks' – they would have won the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Such arrogance may be bred from within the ivory and concrete towers of the empire. (Adding to the ironies of pacifism, Maria Stephan composed her portion of *Why Civil Resistance Works* from the US embassy in Kabul. She was a lead officer in the state department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, whose mission is 'to anticipate, prevent, and respond to conflict that undermines U.S. national interests'. As of this writing, the Bureau's website displays the picture of masked youth building barricades and throwing Molotov cocktails.)

Likewise, Chenoweth and Stephan castigate the Fedaiyan for continuing the fight against Ayatollah Khomeini: the post-1979 guerrilla campaigns merely served the regime with a pretext for purging Iranian society of unwanted elements. In the universe of strategic pacifism, only the winners deserve praise. (But I should perhaps acknowledge a personal bias of my own here: a close family member was a leading militant of the

Fedaiyan. She was tortured as a teenager in the dungeons of the Shah, smuggled weapons and coordinated underground cells under the Ayatollah and, after the final defeat, washed up in Sweden a wreck.)

Disengagement of the defeated can be reframed in terms of just war theory: resistance, including armed self-defence, is justified only if it is *likely* to stave off the threat. A victim has no right to fight back if she is doomed in advance. But this 'success condition' has objectionable consequences, regarding, for instance, the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The Jews who scraped together what guns they could find knew for certain that they would be crushed by the Nazis and, just as expected, achieved nothing in military terms. So should they have let themselves be supinely ferried off to Treblinka and Auschwitz? The case can, *mutatis mutandis*, be transposed to the climate. Imagine that it *really is* too late. We're over the cliff. Apocalyptic heating is a done deal, no matter what. Scranton and Franzen have no scientific substantiation for the claim that this is the case now, and it would probably take some time for it to come to pass, but it cannot be ruled out entirely: one can imagine a hothouse Earth scenario, where positive feedback mechanisms drive the planet into an orbit of uncontrollable heating. Surely it must then be pointless to resist?

Imagine that diminished human populations eke out an existence near the poles. They will be around for a couple of more decades. Some of their offspring might have a chance to hold on a little longer. What would we

want to tell them? 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?

In the ghettos, as in the extermination camps to which they were the antechamber, the *résistants* embarked on a race against death. To struggle and resist was the only lucid choice, but this most often meant for the fighters no more than choosing the time and manner of their death. Beyond the immediate outcome of the struggle, which most often was inevitable, their combat was for history, for memory... *This affirmation of life by way of a sacrifice and combat with no prospect of victory* is a tragic paradox that can only be understood as an act of faith in history,

Alain Brossat and Sylvie Klingberg write in *Revolutionary Yiddishland*. Precisely the hopelessness of the situation constituted the nobility of this resistance. The rebels affirmed life so extraordinarily robustly because death was certain and *still* they fought on. It can never, ever be too late for that gesture. 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. To make that statement would require some forceful type of action. This is the moment for the cliché from Emiliano Zapata:

*It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees* – better to die blowing up a pipeline than to burn impas-sively – but we shall hope, of course, that it never comes to this. If we resist fatalism, it might not. The research that does suggest that some tipping points might have already been crossed – such as, notably, the melting of the West Antarctic ice sheet – only underscores the need for emergency tactics; if more points are crossed, that need rises further still, until, in the worst case, the time comes for Warsaw.

*dark death of human kind*  
In the less eschatological conjuncture we still live in, we would be better served by honouring past struggles – including those defeated – than sneering at them, because it would prime us for staying on their path. Defeat also has a pedagogical function, including for the climate movement: without COP15 and the disappointments of early Obama, there might have been no turn towards mass action. Climate fatalism is for the jaded and the deflated; it is a 'bourgeois luxury', in the plain language of one Swedish critic. In a memorable section of *We're Doomed*, Scranton enjoys a conversation with Timothy Morton, another acclaimed writer and compulsive luxury emitter. Morton illuminates for Scranton how the climate catastrophe is an epiphany of 'OMG, I am the destruction. I'm part of it and I'm in it and I'm on it. It's an aesthetic experience, I'm inside it, I'm involved, I'm implicated.' The trick is to find enjoyment in this moment. 'I think that's how we get to smile, eventually, by fully inhabiting catas-trophe space, in the same way that eventually a nightmare

can become so horrible that you start laughing.' You won't hear anything like this in Dominica. You won't hear poor people who today *actually* are at risk of dying in the catastrophe – in the Philippines, in Mozambique, in Peru – say, 'I am the destruction. It's an aesthetic experience. I may as well laugh at it.' Where climate death is a reality, not philosophical chic, programmatic fatalism of the Scranton–Franzen school has zero traction (religious fatalism is another matter). Nor can the guilt that animates it be found on the vulnerable peripheries. Nor can the trust in self-reliant adaptation.

Climate fatalism is for those on top; its sole contribution is spoilage. The most religiously Gandhian climate activist, the most starry-eyed renewable energy entrepreneur, the most self-righteous believer in veganism as panacea, the most compromise-prone parliamentarian is infinitely preferable to the white man of the North who says, 'We're doomed – fall in peace.' Within the range of positions this side of climate denial, none is more despicable.

A reader well versed in the history of Northern environmentalism will by now have asked: then what about the ecologists who practised sabotage on some scale from the 1980s to the early 2000s? Those were the days of Earth First!, Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front. Their campaigns of 'monkeywreaking' or 'ecotage' prospered in a certain subculture that reached its apogee in the 1990s, mingling punk and hardcore with dumpster