Climate Change and the New Politics of Violence

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ABSTRACT
Climate change complicates political violence while producing new forms and scales of it. This has led the climate movement to fail to come to terms with both the violence of climate change and nonviolence as a tactic of resistance. The article begins by counterposing the violence of climate change to the consensus for nonviolence as the only tactic for achieving systemic political change. It then moves beyond that consensus by drawing on Andreas Malm’s Marxist response, Bruno Latour’s claim that climate change puts us in a situation of war, and a critique of the linkages between consumption, carbon, and imperialism. The article concludes that climate change makes the choice between violence and nonviolence a false one, necessitating new hybrid strategies of violence and nonviolence.

Climate change is remaking the politics of violence, complicating existing strategies for mitigating it and opening new arenas for struggle. Yet even as the situation has become more complex, the climate movement has simplified it through a consensus for nonviolence as the only path to change. Kevin O’Brien takes the exclusion of violence to be given in his book The Violence of Climate Change: “Few privileged people have been tempted to use violence in response to a changing climate… Because there is little chance of widespread violent activism against climate change, this book does not focus on the importance of avoiding violence in the course of our protests.”

One need not argue against violence since its incorrectness is already accepted. Yet this becomes suspect if we question the presumptive legitimacy of O’Brien’s division between the actions of the privileged and the less privileged. Though he does not address it, the logic seems to be that those who are not insulated from climate change by wealth will have recourse to violence. If such a division between the political tactics of the privileged and the poor is illegitimate, then which side is correct, those who retain violence as a tactic or those who do not?
Extinction Rebellion (XR) takes a different approach, insisting on nonviolence as a matter of strategy rather than principle. "The social science is totally clear on this: violence does not optimize the chance of successful, progressive outcomes. In fact, it almost always leads to fascism and authoritarianism. The alternative, then, is nonviolence. From all the studies, the message is clear: if you practise non-violence, you are more likely to succeed."\(^2\) They do not deny that there are legitimate reasons for wanting to pursue political violence, but prioritize success of the movement’s political goals. From a theoretical angle, William E. Connolly advocates a strategic “cross-country, nonviolent general strike.”\(^3\) He gives a more nuanced reading, pointing out that, for example, when confronting fascism, nonviolence is unlikely to be effective. But Andreas Malm goes to lengths to disprove the claim that “strategic pacifism” and “absolute non-violence” are strategically the most effective.\(^4\) His rebuttal includes an extensive refutation of *Why Civil Resistance Works* by Chenoweth and Stephan, which is the main study behind the claim by XR that nonviolence makes movements twice as likely to succeed.\(^5\) Malm’s critical historical appraisal of their case selection and interpretation of events leads him to reject their thesis and ask “whether it is possible to locate even one minimally relevant analogue to the climate struggle that has not contained some violence.”\(^6\) As he points out, the logic that adherents to non-violence must embrace if they are honest about history, is in fact the opposite of what they ground their argument on, for it would entail them saying that “admittedly, violence occurred in the struggle against slavery, against male monopoly on the vote, against British and other colonial occupations, against apartheid, against the poll tax, but the struggle against fossil fuels is of a wholly different character and will succeed only on condition of utter peacefulness.”\(^7\) Malm persuasively makes the case that there should be some strategic space for violence in the climate movement, leading to the question of what form it might take.

This question is difficult to answer but urgent, since even as the consensus around nonviolence has emerged, the net is tightening around environmental activists: a pin-cer tactic is being deployed that consists on one side of the official presumption that environmental activism is violent and on the other of an increased use of violence against environmental journalists and activists. There has been an extensive campaign in the United States to criminalize nonviolent environmental activists as terrorists.\(^8\) This is a global trend and includes counter-terrorism police in the UK treating XR as extremists and terrorists.\(^9\) At the same time, attacks on and murders of environmental

\(^2\)Roger Hallam, “The Civil Resistance Model,” in *This is Not a Drill* (London: Penguin, 2019), 100.
\(^3\)William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 188.
\(^4\)Andreas Malm, *How to Blow up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (New York: Verso, 2021), e-book.
\(^5\)Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
\(^6\)Malm, *How to Blow up a Pipeline*.
\(^7\)Ibid.
\(^8\)Rebecca K. Smith, “Ecoterrorism’? A Critical Analysis of the Vilification of Radical Environmental Activists as Terrorists,” *Environmental Law* 38, no. 2 (2008): 537–76; If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front, DVD, directed by Marshall Curry (New York, NY: Oscilloscope Laboratories, 2011).
\(^9\)Marc Hudson, “Extinction Rebellion: ‘Terror Threat’ Is a Wake-up Call for How the State Treats Environmental Activism,” *The Conversation*, January 13, 2020, https://theconversation.com/extinction-rebellion-terror-threat-is-a-wake-up-call-for-how-the-state-treats-environmental-activism-129804; Letta Tayler and Cara Shulte, “Targeting
activists and journalists across the globe are on the rise. Thus in embracing the tactic of nonviolence, climate activists may not have understood either the nature of climate change, the nature of the conflict around it, and their position within it.

This article argues for a hybrid strategy that combines and reworks violence and nonviolence. It begins by tracing the intensification of structural violence and new kinds of violence entailed by climate change. It then critically analyzes Malm’s Marxist approach which succeeds in breaking through the nonviolence consensus, only to limit acceptable violence to property destruction. While Latour’s Schmittean approach can help more concretely engage climate violence, it requires forging political bonds with natural entities and pays insufficient attention to whether people are capable of doing so at this historical juncture. Finally, this essay turns to argue that nonviolence is untenable because of the structural violence of climate change built upon colonial legacies. Combining these lessons and shortcomings, the essay concludes with several starting points for moving beyond the violence/nonviolence division in the face of climate change.

Climate Change Is Violence

Climate change intensifies many existing modes of violence while introducing elements that produce new forms of violence. It will directly cause human deaths through, for example, heatwaves, unexpected deep freezes, intensified hurricanes, and flooding. These events become more deadly when tipping points are crossed. Another layer of climate violence occurs at a speed and scale outside of normal perception, meaning that it will not be recognized as violence. Death at this scale often appears natural, for example through the lack of nutrition that accumulates over years of slowly worsening growing conditions or the development of fatal chronic kidney disease as slight increases in heat in some regions make work impossible without also producing dehydration that damages the body.

Most climate-induced human death and suffering will result from how natural and social systems interact. At one level, this is a matter of how extreme weather events environmental activists with counterterrorism measures is an abuse of the law,” Euronews, November 28, 2019, https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/28/targeting-environmental-activists-with-counterterrorism-measures-is-an-abuse-view.

10Peter Schwartzstein, “The Authoritarian War on Environmental Journalism,” Report for The Century Foundation, July 7, 2020, https://tcf.org/content/report/authoritarian-war-environmental-journalism/?agree=1; Jeanette Cwienk, “Environmental justice reporters face deadly threats, intimidation,” Deutsche Welle, November 13, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/environmental-justice-reporters-face-deadly-threats-intimidation/a-55593140; Juliette Garside and Jonathan Watts, ”Environment Reporters Facing Harassment and Murder, Study Finds,” The Guardian, June 17, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/17/environment-reporters-facing-harassment-murder-study; Jonathan Watts, “Environmental Activist Murders Double in 15 years,” The Guardian, August 5, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/05/environmental-activist-murders-double; “Global Witness Records the Highest Number of Land and Environmental Activists Murdered in One Year – With the Link to Accelerating Climate Change of Increasing Concern,” Global Witness, July 29, 2020, https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/global-witness-records-the-highest-number-of-land-and-environmental-activists-murdered-in-one-year-with-the-link-to-accelerating-climate-change-of-increasing-concern/; Fred Pearce, With Speed and Violence: Why Scientists Fear Tipping Points in Climate Change (Boston: Beacon, 2007).

12Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

13David Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019).
build upon social systems of exclusion, poor infrastructure, etc. At another level, Harald Welzer shows how shifts in natural systems will drive increases in social tension and killing.\(^{14}\) Initially, climate-driven food and water scarcity results in violence as a way of surviving by controlling access to these resources. This increases levels of migration, spreading tensions to other areas, often feeding into ethnic and religious conflicts, and leading to more violence. On top of this, destination countries that have extensive security apparatuses seek new ways of limiting migrants when not excluding them outright, resulting in further deaths. Thus, new forms of violence become systematic: whereas previously local conflicts might have erupted around a particular problem or shortage, now they will become organized and “never-ending.” At the same time, wealthy regions like the United States and Europe are engineering new forms of killing, as when border control is organized in such a way that migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea or in the desert of the Mexico-United States border are viewed as natural rather than state organized.

Here, existing systems of privilege and exclusion become more deadly and unjust. While some populations are exposed directly to natural dangers, the fact that others need not even think about such precarity is a critical factor in how climate change will intensify existing social systems of injustice and violence.\(^{15}\) Yet some well-insulated individuals do attend to these possibilities, as when wealthy individuals seek to consolidate economic advantages into survival advantages in the face of climate change.\(^{16}\) States play this out at the national level when they pursue the “politics of the armed lifeboat.”\(^{17}\) These forms of exclusion and violence build upon and extend a history that entangles climate change with imperialism.\(^{18}\) This results in progressive responses like the Green New Deal perpetuating colonial violence, for example when the transition to electric vehicles relies on the dispossession and destruction of indigenous Andean lands and people to acquire the necessary lithium.\(^{19}\) “Even husbanding trees supposedly to counteract emissions can be violence.”\(^{20}\) All of this leaves out the new scale of violence that may ensue upon upsetting the “boundary parameters of human existence,”\(^{21}\) as well as the destruction of ecosystems, other species, and the potential for a mass extinction event. Yet the complexity of the feedbacks between social and natural systems driving climate change risks a complete loss of responsibility, as Bauman’s notion of adiaphorization is pushed to new extremes.\(^{22}\)

Thus, the need to think more carefully and honestly about the topology of climate violence and the existing political orientations toward it.

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\(^{14}\)Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: Why People Will be Killed in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012).

\(^{15}\)Kari Marie Norgaard, “Climate Denial and the Construction of Innocence: Reproducing Transnational Environmental Privilege in the Face of Climate Change,” *Race, Gender & Class* 19, no. 1–2 (2012): 80–103.

\(^{16}\)Douglas Rushkoff, “Survival of the Richest,” in *This Is Not a Drill* (London: Penguin, 2019), 58–64.

\(^{17}\)Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), 11.

\(^{18}\)Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

\(^{19}\)Marlene Brito-Millán and others, “No Comemos Baterías: Solidarity Science Against False Climate Change Solutions,” *Science for the People* 22, no. 1 (2019).

\(^{20}\)China Miéville, “The Limits of Utopia,” *Salvage* 1 (2015), 180.

\(^{21}\)Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, Winter 2009, 218.

\(^{22}\)Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 208–21.
Climate change produces novel violence, on unprecedented scales, and in confounding complexity such that the attempt to do well may do ill. Yet any accurate depiction that traces the extensive complexities through which climate change feeds into violence will necessarily lose some of the main point, the fact that climate change is violent. This is why Rebecca Solnit is right to short-circuit the analysis of the chains of connection when she insists that “climate change is violence.” This highlights the moral urgency of climate change for a public that may not think about it in these terms and thereby downplay its significance. It is important to find a way of skipping the extended explanations necessary to follow the linkages supporting the equation of climate change and violence. Nonetheless, the underlying linkages in Solnit’s claim are worth closer examination for the kinds of political outcomes entailed by how it is understood.

Solnit begins by criticizing the view that the violence of climate change is limited to what she calls “artisanal violence… by hands, by knife, by club, or maybe modern hands-on violence, by gun or by car.” In the context of climate change, this means that warmer weather and food scarcity will lead to more violence on the part of those experiencing those effects. This line of argument, taken up in a variety of places including the Nature article that Solnit criticizes, has a limiting political implication: “ordinary people will behave badly in an era of intensified climate change.” Here, climate change will increase violence, but the responsible agents are the poor and marginalized who lack resources to do anything but continue trying to get by under increasingly difficult conditions. To this, Solnit adds a second layer of “industrial-scale violence” practiced by heads of state and corporations, including the “carbon barons.” The point is that the more relevant and devastating climate violence comes from above through the practices of the wealthy and powerful.

At the same time, Solnit sidesteps a couple other levels of violence. The first is that in the generalized effects of climate change such as flooding, intensified storms, drought, and crop failure, almost everyone is likely to be affected in some way and almost everyone contributes to the problem in some way. Though she nods in this direction when she points to the anthropogenic origins of climate change, she leaves this generalized level unexamined. A more general approach is both more complex and softens the dichotomous model of violence she builds between the wealthy and the common. This is a problem if it leads us to miss something, for example a significant level of violence perpetrated by the global but primarily Western middle classes that needs to be accounted for. The second kind of violence that she downplays is the reaction by common people who are suffering against the injustices of climate change. “I suspect people will be revolting in the coming future against what they revolted against in the past: the injustices of the system. They should revolt, and we should be glad they do, if not so glad that they need to. (Though one can hope they’ll recognize that violence is not necessarily where their power lies.)” Here, she comes
back to “common” violence but does not dwell on whether it becomes a different kind of violence when directed against an unjust system rather than being a necessary tool for survival. Further, she accepts O’Brien’s division by being “glad” that commoners will be risking themselves even as the privileged refuse to pursue it. Indeed, her parenthetical comment dismisses the violence of revolt as ineffective, placing her with XR’s nonviolent approach. Elided is any discussion of whether revolt against an unjust system might not only yield some success, but be just as well.

For Solnit, we should focus on the violence committed by the wealthy. “Exxon has decided to bet that we can’t make the corporation keep its reserves in the ground, and the company is reassuring its investors that it will continue to profit off the rapid, violent and intentional destruction of the Earth.”27 This point is more thoroughly developed by a group of thinkers extending a broadly socialist tradition to climate change.28 While it is not true that this is a necessarily violent tradition, it has also not historically insisted on nonviolence. Thus, the approach is complicated. For example, though adherents argue that “only class war can stop climate change,” they do not really mean war against the wealthy, but “actively dismantling the economic structures that facilitate their wealth accumulation.”29 So it is worth closer examination to see to what extent they engage the violence of climate change and violence as a means of resistance.

A New Front in an Old War?

The most prominent thinker in the approach that sees climate change as an extension of the violence of class struggle is Andreas Malm. In How to Blow up a Pipeline, he pushes back against the consensus around nonviolence in the climate movement to make a case for property destruction as an important tool for overcoming fossil capital. He argues that “we must accept that property destruction is violence,” while also insisting that there is an important distinction between violence against property and violence against life.30 But here his case may falter. On one hand, his justification largely has to do with public opinion: he finds it unlikely that the public will see protesters who destroy property as nonviolent. Yet despite being aware of the Earth Liberation Front and that there are those on the right in countries like Norway, Sweden, and Denmark that would like to label property destruction as terrorism, he seems unaware that in the United States and Canada, which are critical sites for climate protest, there is already a history of prosecuting property destruction in connection with ecological causes as terrorism. He further treats the sabotage actions of groups like the Earth Liberation Front as failures because of their connection to deep ecology and his view that their actions were not connected to a broader movement,

27Ibid.
28See for example Naomi Klein’s On Fire (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019) and This Changes Everything (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), and Matt Huber, “Rich People Are Fueling Climate Catastrophe — But Not Mostly Because of Their Consumption,” Jacobin, May 2, 2021, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/05/rich-people-climate-change-consumption.
29Paris Marx, “Only Class War Can Stop Climate Change,” Jacobin, October 19, 2020, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/10/class-war-climate-change-overpopulation-carbon
30Malm, How to Blow up a Pipeline.
while ignoring the chilling effect that being prosecuted as terrorists no doubt had in the suppression of that movement. So, it may be strategically unwise to concede this ground to the state and fossil capital. Rather, the case should be made that property destruction is nonviolent. Then, Malm could more forcefully take the side of Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya who carried out an extensive campaign of sabotage against the Dakota Access Pipeline and argued that it is, in fact, the extraction of petroleum that is violence, not sabotage.

Alternatively, Malm could extend George Monbiot’s response to XR being listed as terrorists: “If defending life on Earth is extremist, we must own that label.” But this is not the path he takes, finding it necessary that the climate movement rejects any action that can be construed as terrorism because of how unpopular it will be. “It would be catastrophic for the [climate] movement if any part of it used terrorism. The same could go for unintended casualties and injuries.” Malm further excludes harassment and intimidation. So though unintended injuries that occur in the process of sabotage are not technically terrorism, the climate movement should strategically treat them as such and thus avoid any action that could possibly do harm to other humans. Thus, Malm seeks to carve out space for property destruction as “the fine art … of controlled political violence.” It is controlled in that it exists between absolute pacifism and any action that would cause any harm to other humans. This seems to contradict his critique of the “absolute nonviolence” position that they ignore the fact that all major political struggle has entailed some degree of violence. If Bill McKibben and XR deploy a pure form of nonviolence, Malm’s violence is equally purified. This tactic does not stand on its own, but is linked to a broader reorientation and radicalization of the climate movement in which “climate militancy would have to be articulated to a wider anti-capitalist groundswell.” In this way, Malm frames this form of “violence” to resist climate change as part of a larger movement of resistance against capitalism.

Perhaps this understanding of climate change is not as radical as it sounds. The Financial Times has come to the conclusion that climate change is a battle of the rich against the poor with increasing political instability and conflict on the way. True, their call for the wealthiest to voluntarily and extensively curb their consumption is very different than the call to expropriate and decarbonize the means of production. But as mentioned above, the wealthiest already expect violence directed against them in the face of climate collapse, which goes beyond the infrastructure sabotage envisioned by Malm. Malm’s intervention is important both for his critique of strategic pacifism and his case for adding sabotage to the climate movement’s tactics as a strategic political act. The question remains, however, whether violence needs to receive the same strategic attention as well.

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31 George Monbiot, “If Defending Life on Earth is Extremist, We Must Own That Label,” The Guardian, January 22, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/22/defending-life-earth-extremist-police-extinction-rebellion.

32 Malm, How to Blow up a Pipeline.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Stefan Wagstyl, Steven Bernard and Chelsea Bruce-Lockhart, “Climate Change Is Becoming Less a Battle of Nations That Rich vs Poor.” The Financial Times, May 20, 2021. https://www.ft.com/content/4788beae-9035-4449-b5cd-200dc7b6ea9d#comments-anchor.
Who Is Your Real Ally and Who Is Really Trying to Kill You?

Bruno Latour escapes the nonviolence consensus by following the complexities of climate change, which he sees as creating a novel situation in which “the political order now includes everything that previously belonged to nature.”37 But bringing nature into politics is heavily contested, forming the dividing line in what Latour sees as a state of war. “We shall never be able to repoliticize ecology without first agreeing to recognize that there is indeed a state of war… thanks to the disputes over the climate and how to govern it, we are asking the political question again in terms of life and death. What am I ready to defend? Whom am I ready to sacrifice?”38 The question is not whether you believe in climate change or not. Rather, it is whether climate change leads you to enter into political relations with parts of nature to jointly defend a way of life, or whether nature remains a background object to be managed, occupied, or used as a resource. Are you negotiating mutual ways of life with the coastline to stake out a position in opposition to the humans and rising seas that threaten it? Or are you negotiating with other humans about how much of the coastline can be sacrificed? This defines his distinction between the two sides fighting this war: Latour calls the former the “Earthbound” and the latter, the “Humans.”39

Two aspects of the inclusion of nature in politics are critical for thinking about violence. First, the generalization of violence and loss of security is not just a matter of human action, but of other beings as well. Even for those who want to seal themselves up with walls, state militaries, private security forces, and wealth, none of those will be sufficient to protect them from the unpredictable results of sea level rise, the spread of disease, drought, fire, and so on. “The very notion of soil is changing” and those who think they have secure territories actually do not.40 This multiplies “the sites in which radically foreign entities practice mutual ‘existential negation.’”41 Second, politics must now engage these other entities. The political task comes back to the basic question of safety and security, especially for the migrants who are forced to the road by migrating natures.42 This means that the task of defining territory needs to be taken up anew. “The territory of an agent is the series of other agents with which it has come to terms and that it cannot get along without if they are to survive in the long run.”43 Latour argues that we need to take into account other natural entities in defining our existential territory and that this will likely involve “breaking the ‘unanimity’ of the human race.” This break is between Earthbound who are willing to work nature into their new political communities and Humans who continue to treat it as background matter. Malm firmly stakes his ground with the Humans.44 Though he opposes many aspects of Latour’s thought and even sees it as an ally of fossil

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37 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Medford, MA: Polity, 2017), 3.
38 Ibid, 227.
39 Ibid, 251.
40 Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018).
41 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 238, 244.
42 Latour, *Down to Earth*, 10–1.
43 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 252.
44 Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm* (New York: Verso, 2018).
capital, he does not engage it on this question of war. Indeed, though Malm argues that we are at war and for “war communism” as a response, the term “war” is a “metaphor” for him, encompassing expropriation of the fossil fuel infrastructure and other extensive policies but no actual fighting.\textsuperscript{45} Beyond metaphors, to be at war is “to have to decide, without any pre-established rules, which side we’re going to have to be on.”\textsuperscript{46} This does not necessarily entail fighting, but “you have to do politics, which means you have to have enemies and friends. Not because of any sort of war-like attitude… but because… you have no referee.”\textsuperscript{47} War means not having a judge who can declare which side is right and so the solution will result from political struggle. Latour takes the idea from Carl Schmitt, who dangerously emphasizes the bellicose possibility of this situation.\textsuperscript{48} Latour acknowledges that possibility, but puts more emphasis on diplomacy, which cannot be carried out if war is not declared: one must acknowledge that this division really does exist. Indeed, ignoring that there is a war underway may amount to appeasement of climate denialists since the stakes are vital: what is being decided is the nature and future of the earth, the populations—present and future, human and non-human—that may live and die, the relevant interests on each side, the resources that will be mobilized, and so on.\textsuperscript{49}

Despite the dangers, there are a number of good reasons to invoke Schmitt when it comes to climate change. On one hand, there is the problem of the state of emergency, which can take a number of forms from the Pentagon’s plans for how to quell domestic unrest as a result of climate change to the increasing tendency of the US government to define environmental protesters as terrorists, to the increasingly common declaration of a state of emergency to deal with climate change driven weather events. Even more, Mann and Wainwright persuasively argue that not only does Schmitt’s theory help us think through the climate crisis, but that conservative versions of it that they dub Climate Leviathan are likely to define the future as the crisis deepens, unless a movement they call Climate X arises to prevent such consolidations of power.\textsuperscript{50} While they are all too aware of the violence that the Climate Leviathan will carry out, they ultimately reject the friend/enemy distinction while remaining silent on the possibility of violence as a tactic. This silence is insufficient since as Latour points out, again drawing on Schmitt, much of the current state-led climate violence, for example by border agencies against climate refugees, is conducted as a police operation against criminals rather than as a war against enemies. The problem with police operations is that they are violent, but treated as legitimate.

Is it realistic to invoke Schmitt and declare war along friend/enemy lines while also limiting the potential of physical violence? Schmitt is clear that “to the enemy concept

\textsuperscript{45}Andreas Malm, \textit{Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century} (New York: Verso, 2021), e-book.
\textsuperscript{46}Latour, \textit{Facing Gaia}, 31.
\textsuperscript{47}Bruno Latour, Interview by Mark B. Salter and William Walters, “Bruno Latour Encounters International Relations: An Interview,” \textit{Millenium} 44 (2016), 6.
\textsuperscript{48}For a more detailed analysis of Latour’s engagement with Schmitt, see chapter four of Kellan Anfinson, \textit{The Ethos of the Climate Event: Ethical Transformations and Political Subjectivities} (New York: Routledge, 2021).
\textsuperscript{49}Latour, \textit{Facing Gaia}, 152–3.
\textsuperscript{50}Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, \textit{Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of our Planetary Future} (New York: Verso, 2020). They also chart two other possibilities.
belongs the ever present possibility of combat… The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing."\textsuperscript{51} Latour suggests that everyone might prefer to minimize the possibility of violence in this situation, since “when there is no referee, then you need other tools, such as diplomacy, because violence might lurk everywhere.”\textsuperscript{52} But the obdurate fact remains that in declaring enemies, it is necessary to accept the possibility of violence. Because to declare the war, to stake out territory, requires answering Schmitt’s and Latour’s questions: Do you feel yourself and your way of life to be under the threat? Do you feel that those you care about and need are under the threat? Are you ready to potentially have to defend them? So, it might be necessary to discuss to what extent violence might be pursued, when it is an option, how to make it a last resort, and so on. This is a discussion that Malm will not engage in, since for him there is no case for “harming human bodies.”\textsuperscript{53}

What advantage does taking up Latour’s call bring? First, it solves the extended debates around the reality of climate change. It pushes you to align yourself behind the science without debating it and behind the political programs that you connect to that science. Discussions about climate science will recede and diplomacy about the politics of it will come to the fore. Second, it may help energize environmentalism, which, despite the tireless work of some organizers, has stalled.\textsuperscript{54} Finally, the nonmetaphorical discussion of war is provocative and may help shake people up, reconsider the urgency of the situation, and redefine their relation to climate politics. Yet I should note that I have taught this idea to students a number of times and at the end of those class discussions, it is usually just a couple who find it compelling. Most remain unwilling to see themselves in a situation of war, with real enemies who need to be engaged at a political level beyond pressuring legislative bodies to take the IPCC report seriously.

This raises a deeper problem: whether those most likely to join the Earthbound are capable of doing so. When Latour tells people to stake out the territories on which they rely for survival, many might not know what those are. To take an extreme and reductive example: How is an educated city-dweller who is aligned behind the climate science supposed to delineate the kind of territory that that science is concerned with? Perhaps Hurricane Sandy and heat waves are enough to connect a New Yorker to a sense of territory that they would defend. But they would still fall far short of the connection forged by Dakota Access Pipeline protesters. For as Latour well knows, “no one sees the Earth globally and no one sees an ecological system from Nowhere, the scientist no more than the citizen, the farmer or the ecologist—or, lest we forget, the earthworm.”\textsuperscript{55} To him, this sets up the task of assembly: we need to compose the institutional, political, and social connections that commensurately attach themselves to and incorporate the nature that our network of scientific instruments has begun

\textsuperscript{51}Carl Schmitt, \textit{The Concept of the Political}, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 32–3.
\textsuperscript{52}Latour, Interview, 18.
\textsuperscript{53}Andreas Malm, “The Moral Case for Destroying Fossil Fuel Infrastructure,” \textit{The Guardian}, November 18, 2021, \url{https://www.2021theguardian.com/commentisfree/nov/18/moral-case-destroying-fossil-fuel-infrastructure}.
\textsuperscript{54}Malm argues that this is the case and that sabotage is a useful source of this energy.
\textsuperscript{55}Bruno Latour, “Waiting for Gaia. Composing the Common World Through Art and Politics,” \textit{French Institute Lecture}, London, November 6–7, 2011, \url{http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/124-GAIA-LONDON-SPEAP_0.pdf}.
composing. But we do not build out of nowhere; we start from where we stand. What if most of our existing institutions and practices are still trying to compose the modernist fantasy of nature, complete with mastery, exploitation, and progress?

Latour draws on a similar politicization to the one that motivates the Marxist approach to climate change, arguing that much of the problem has been driven by elites who have invented a new way to break with solidarity in their attempts to create an entirely different world that has no space for the survival of others.\(^{56}\) This may give people something to attach themselves to politically, even as he tries to take away the left/right political divide as itself a problematic orientation.\(^{57}\) Then, to help us find our territory, he proposes a mapping project that will not only help us break out of the Human frame of reference, but define the territories we rely on and thus would fight for. To do so, he reworks our notions of the global and local so that we can welcome human and nonhuman migrants while resisting nationalist reterritorializations.\(^{58}\)

But even if it can be mapped, this does not quite forge the existential connection through which one feels oneself at war, feels they need to risk themselves defending something, and perhaps harm others in the process. Because while Latour generally pushes for diplomacy and against the idea that the Earthbound might need to take violent action, ultimately, he admits that “diplomacy and violence are the same thing … It is true that I am not interested in violence per se, because we have plenty of it, and most of it is actually understood as a police operation. I am more interested in asking, ‘OK, what is this fight? What are the lines of conflict?’ … So – don’t talk about rationality – talk about war. And then we can begin to discuss!”\(^{59}\) Though Latour never says it, the implication in the context of the rest of his argument is clear: this may well mean siding politically with a forest, an aquifer, or a people on the other side of the world against the firm that employs half of my community, those I share a nationality with, or even members of my own family and that I may have to eliminate the opposing way of life, if not the lives that support it, if I still want to be able to live in a world with that forest, that people, that water and my own life as it is supported by those things. Even if Latour’s position seems extreme, at least two things can be drawn from it. First, that Latour, in addressing the issue in this manner, is more honest than many on the climate left, who can point to the violence of climate change and the possibility of revolt by the marginalized, but remain moralistically above that possibility themselves. This reality demands an honest discussion, rather than foreclosing on it through commitments to pure nonviolence or pure sabotage. Such a discussion may itself build the existential connection to the issue that seems to be lacking. Second, according to Latour, the character and objects of that violence have changed. Climate change enmeshes our interests with other nonhuman agents so tightly that no viable future politics can succeed without accounting for them. And conflicts arising within that enmeshment cannot fail to carry those linkages with them. But if one

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\(^{56}\)Latour, *Down to Earth*, chapter five.

\(^{57}\)Ibid, chapters 10 and 11.

\(^{58}\)This is the project of *Down to Earth*, which concludes with Latour’s own map as a starting place for diplomacy.

\(^{59}\)Latour, Interview, 18–9.
still cannot find their way to this side, can one safely retreat to nonviolence, even if it might be less honest, less effective?

**The Violence Beneath Nonviolent Protest**

There is another way of mapping violence that is oriented toward nonviolence rather than the possibility of violence. Like Latour, Vinay Gupta argues that there is a war going on. “The war has already begun and you did not notice because your side won.” By this he does not mean that the war is over, but that the power imbalance is so great that it is unlikely to be upset. This power imbalance is the product of colonialism, which has resulted in part of the world’s population living on “militarized islands of prosperity” while other parts live in the poverty that is already responsible for about one third of human deaths every year. The lines of privilege and violence are so well established that those who are already benefitting will continue to do so even as others suffer, often without realizing it. By calling on us to recognize the war, Gupta calls on us to recognize the violence we are already part of.

One way to map this is to think about collapse. Climate change is often imagined as an impending collapse. But as Gupta argues, the collapse is not something in the future. Rather, it is already present for most of humanity. He tries to make this clear by pointing out that what people living a relatively wealthy western lifestyle mean by collapse is “living in the same conditions as the people who grow your coffee.” To experience collapse is to become part of the mass of humanity that dies of poverty. This reveals that the violence of an imagined collapse is in fact already underway but not recognized as such. The very act of violence produces a blindness to it because the production of poverty that kills is also the production of wealth that insulates.

Another way of mapping the war is “identifying what violence looks like.” Gupta helps us think about how the perpetuation of violence can become tied to the very act of staying alive, from when we directly harm others in desperate situations to when we cut down trees to build a house for shelter. The point is not to get rid of shelter, but to draw our attention to the different ways in which we live from violence. Once we start thinking about the ways Western lifestyles are built upon violence, then we can try to “stop living by violence towards other people or towards other species.” Here, he turns to a couple of cases to suggest what this might look like. For example, Kerala has a high life expectancy, high literacy rate, an average income of one dollar a day, and an ecological footprint that is one third below what they could still use in order for the environment to renew the necessary resources for life. Drawing a link between violence and consumption, Gupta argues that “you’re each individually responsible for identifying where the violence is in your life right through the supply chains, right through the energy grids, and right through your government, to figure out what it means to live as a responsible human being who takes no more than their

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60 Vinay Gupta, “Time to Stop Pretending,” Talk given at Uncivilization Dark Mountain Festival, Llangollen, Wales, May 29, 2010. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkQCy-UrLyw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkQCy-UrLyw).
61 Ibid. For more on climate change and colonialism, see Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, chapter two.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
fair share and oppresses no other by your very existence.” Everyone has a concrete task to identify and reduce the violence they commit in their own lives.

There are good reasons to be wary of this kind of individualizing task, which done poorly does let corporations, governments, and social structures off the hook. This is why Gupta pairs it to a larger mode of collective engagement entailing new degrees of resource sharing and cooperation. Furthermore, his vision of extracting ourselves from violence is itself a mode of engagement with the social, since we discover our enmeshment in various modes of destructive sociality through it. Some Marxist engagements ignore this dimension, arguing that carbon emissions need to be located at the level of class. But focusing on eliminating wealthy emissions, either from consumption or production, will not solve the problem since the Western lifestyle is built on carbon from top to bottom, requiring systemic changes that go beyond the lives of the wealthy. Such analyses need to be supplemented with a history of imperial domination that ties together climate change, class suppression, and the Western industrialized way of life. So, while the Marxist climate critics are right in pointing to a major source of the climate crisis, to the extent that they limit their critique to a class-based one, they miss both the scope of the violence and the degree of change necessary in the worker-consumer class.

Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty help map the scale of this problem in their analysis of consumption-based emissions. Inequalities in global carbon production look very different when goods manufactured in China or South Asia count toward the carbon emissions of North America and Western Europe, where they are consumed. They put this in relation to different income levels within regions. On one hand, this diversifies and localizes the worst emitters, which are the top 1% of the United States, Luxembourg, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Canada. But on the other hand, it also shows the depths of carbon consumption across class in North America. Almost 60% of North Americans belong to the top 10% of global emitters with the region as a whole having per capita emissions of 22.5 tCO\(_2\)e. For comparison, West Europeans have an average of 13.1 tCO\(_2\)e, and poor Germans (the second decile of income earners) are around the global average with 7.1 tCO\(_2\)e. The sustainable level of emissions is 1.3 tCO\(_2\)e. Once one starts tracing the lines, one finds that carbon emissions are not primarily a matter of class divisions, but of the carbon-intensive infrastructure from which all Western lifestyle classes live.

The solution should involve a massive redistribution of resources from the wealthiest, but there is also a lot of work to do valuing the standards of living that working classes living carbon intensive lives identify with. Otherwise, that wealth transfer may do more to change who is emitting than the emission levels themselves. This may sound like austerity and judged by the consumption standards of advanced capitalism, it is. As the Salvage Editorial Collective points out, the tragedy of the worker is that if the proletariat came to power at this historical juncture, they would “inherit

64Ibid.
65Malm, How to Blow up a Pipeline; Marx, “Only Class War Can Stop Climate Change”; Huber, “Rich People Are Fueling Climate Catastrophe.”
66See for example Timothy Mitchell, Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil (Brooklyn: Verso, 2011).
67Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty, “Carbon and Inequality: From Kyoto to Paris,” Paris School of Economics, November 3, 2015. http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/ChancelPiketty2015.pdf.
productive forces inextricable from mass, trans-species destruction."\(^68\) The point is not lost on Malm, who stands out from many other Marxists when he argues that those on the left who say that "there will be no sacrifices or discomforts for ordinary people, are not being honest."\(^69\) Not everything will be loss: we can expect less stress, more time, better food, more freedom, and more fulfilling modes of sociality even as we pursue massive reductions in carbon emissions.

What does this mean for violence? The equation between carbon emitted and violence committed is no doubt a crude one. Nonetheless, it cannot be dismissed. What it certainly means, is that many of the climate activists who are committed to nonviolence are still committing violence. It would be better to focus on violence reduction rather than nonviolence. But this also intensifies a point made by a variety of environmentalists. George Monbiot, for example, argues that “the campaign against climate change ... is a campaign not just against other people, but also against ourselves,” and David Orr sharpens this to “the enemy is us.”\(^70\) One need not take this as far as David Buckel’s self-immolation to highlight and resist the violence of carbon-heavy ways of life. And the point is not that nonviolent climate activists are hypocrites, but that it is much more difficult to be nonviolent than is often imagined. Latour’s external war has another front in the self. This is what Amitav Ghosh calls “the Great Derangement: our lives and our choices are enframed in a pattern of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but toward our self-annihilation.”\(^71\) Though the tendency is to read this as a pathway toward social collapse and extinction, we can also read it as a task to annihilate our current selves that rely on carbon intensive ways of living. We cannot transform the organization of society to respond to climate change without also transforming the habits, aspirations, assumptions, and life patterns that define us and yet are built on carbon.

Ultimately, the division between violence and nonviolence in the fight against climate change is a false one. A new approach is called for, requiring hybrid strategies of both violence and nonviolence. This piece can only suggest some starting points for such an approach. First, the consensus around nonviolence as the only path for the climate movement needs to be broken. Second, the use of nonviolent protests needs to be supplemented with violence reduction for those living privileged carbon-intensive lives, which may also be a kind of self-violence as they extricate themselves from the comforts of such positions and their identifications with them. Third, the climate movement should recognize that there is a kind of war underway. Even if it takes a diffuse form, it is not metaphorical. Fourth, this recognition could serve as a foundation for the essential task of defining territory: what do we need to preserve the lives we want and what threatens that possibility? Fifth, the movement could recognize that natural agents play an important and sometimes greater role than other humans in defining the societies we are trying to shape in the face of climate change. It is no more absurd to find a way to formalize that importance in the political process

\(^{68}\) The Salvage Editorial Collective, “The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene,” Salvage, January 31, 2020, https://salvage.zone/editorials/the-tragedy-of-the-worker-towards-the-proletarocene/.

\(^{69}\) Malm, Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency.

\(^{70}\) George Monbiot, Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning (Cambridge: South End Press, 2009), 215; David W. Orr, Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

\(^{71}\) Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 111.
than it is to have a Biden campaign donor be appointed to an ambassadorship and represent a small-town mechanic to the people of a country that neither of them speaks the language of. Sixth, many in the climate movement already recognize the inevitability if not legitimacy of violence used by the marginalized in desperate and unjust situations. There should be a discussion of what kinds of violence might be strategically used by the broader movement to achieve its goals. The idea of taking up violence is off-putting to many on the left as well as the broader society. But as Malm, Welzer, and the climate science show, even more violence is likely to result otherwise. If strategic violence were successful in maintaining a largely habitable world for people and other species, it might be considered a kind of violence prevention.

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