

BREAK AWAY

FROM

BREAK FREE

A cautionary rant - using Break Free 2016 to illustrate the deeply-embedded problems with the current model of environmental non-for-profit (NFP) direct action organising.

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Content warning: Swear language and references to racialised police violence.

This was written on stolen and unceded Wurundjeri and Awabakal land. The writer is young, white, educated and middle-class and lives in Narm (Melbourne).

This 'movement' is not as strong as it could be, or claims to be. The nature of it is being misconstrued and the impact overblown. I argue that these factors could be eliciting self-congratulation and self-interested involvement from some members. There are several crucial internal issues not being addressed, and a dangerous pattern of dependency being formed. Most of all, I see it as a missed opportunity to fully galvanise the human resources at hand, towards what *could* really be something powerful.

Two minutes after getting on a minibus headed for Newcastle, the person seated next to me tugged at their friend's arm in mild distress.

"Noo, I forgot the selfie stick!"

Without putting any blame on this individual, this brief interaction had already captured the essence of this protest for me. Truthfully, I already had an idea of what it was going to be like - from past involvement in actions run by groups such as Direct Action Melbourne and 350.org, as well as from the communications hype in the lead-up. But I had gone on this trip to find out if my suspicions were warranted.

We were going to take part in a mass flotilla of kayaks which would block a shipping channel in Newcastle, home to the world's largest coal port, preventing coal ships from leaving and entering. Signups happened online when the invitation was initially shared through 350.org's email list and facebook promotions. Since then we had been kept in constant contact about logistics, shown inspirational videos and excitedly told about the well-known musicians and politicians who would be there on the day.

As we headed towards the Hume, the driver tried to break the ice by gauging everyone's spirits onboard. "How are we all feeling this morning?"

"So happy!", "Excited!", came the replies.

"Yes... We're creating history in a lot of ways this weekend, this is a world-wide movement..."

For many who went, Break Free was their first exposure to non-violent direct action (NVDA), and from what I gained, they came away with overwhelmingly positive impressions, keen to do it again. There was an incredible response. TOO many people wanted to be a part. There weren't nearly enough kayaks to go around, even with extra reinforcements! It's clear that there is a lot of energy, particularly amongst young people, for environmental protest beyond your average city rally. To illustrate this: it would have taken only a handful of people to block a train line; 70 people got arrested and charged anyway to make a point.

And what an incredible logistical feat it was. I want to highlight the amount of hard work that went into this, much of it unpaid. There is *so* much to organise, and those who did so should

be proud. Just think about it: Transport. Insurance. Catering. Equipment. Media. Marquees. Accommodation. Press releases. Role co-ordinating. Local and international communication. Slideshows. Videography. Sourcing hundreds of kayaks. Legal consultation. Water safety. Artist bookings. Stage setup. Police liaisons. The list goes on.

But I still went away with a bad taste in my mouth. Now, I am not criticising what went on, per se. I am critiquing the movement from a structural point of view, attempting to illuminate a culture that revealed itself in various symptomatic phenomena and encounters I had over the weekend. Because we haven't done enough of that self-critique, and organisations like 350.org are fast running away with the ball, becoming seen as the only vehicle through which to protest rampant environmental destruction. I want to challenge this notion, while pointing out many of the worrying trends I observed that weekend.

Some background: I have participated in NGO-organised direct actions on numerous occasions, having been involved in environmental activism for about three years. Recent experiences that informed this piece include the Direct Action Melbourne-organised 'Connect the Dots' blocking of Collins Street, Melbourne in December 2015, involvement in campus divestment, and most of all, the Break Free from Fossil Fuels kayak flotilla in Newcastle in May 2016.

rhetoric vs reality: the problems with a misleading discourse

What is revolution and what is it not?

Smoke stacks, footage of protesting crowds, politicians in impassioned debate. Dramatic music. 100-ton trucks and coal loaders groan and pivot. Oil spills, activists shouting into megaphones. Ghandi marching, MLK giving his renowned speech. More crowds. The Berlin Wall being torn down.

So went the general vibe of the promotional material in the lead-up to Break Free. It was seriously professional and effective. I got goosebumps, despite myself. It's amazing what you can evoke from viewers with the right ingredients.

But alarm bells were already ringing. I couldn't help interpreting it as a straight-up appeal to 'be a part of something'. Could you really Hollywood-ify a global political, economic and environmental issue and turn it into a recruitment opportunity? Apparently.

Big uppercase banners flash across the screen:

THE MOVEMENT

TO KEEP FOSSIL FUELS

IN THE GROUND

PEACEFUL

DIRECT

ACTION

JOIN US

I was very concerned about what the images I was viewing were suggesting. There were two main reasons for this.

Firstly, I all but knew how this action was going to unfold, and it wasn't anywhere near as badass as all of those incredibly tense and monumental events were. The suggestion was that there is a popular revolution going on, and YOU can be a part of it.

Let's be clear - a revolution is a total overthrow of government or social order and replacing it with a new one. A complete reorganising of the structure of society with pervasive and lasting change. Now, Break Free never claimed to be this. *But that's how media discourse works.* You don't have to say something explicitly to strongly suggest it through your choice of words and images. "The movement is rising"? "Join a wave of resistance"? That doesn't sound like a minor, isolated action. That sounds revolutionary.

So the danger with this kind of rhetoric, and my first concern, was that it is untrue, hyperbolic and misleading. There is no heroism in this kind of involvement, when for most (non-Indigenous, non-Pacific Islander, wealthy) attendees, the stakes and risk are so low. Additionally, heightened self-importance and selfish forms of involvement may appear in this 'movement' symptomatically, if this kind of rhetoric continues. It's affecting how young activists view themselves.

Another GIF, posted 30 April 2016:

OBEDIENCE

LED US HERE

(smoke stacks)

LED US HERE

(bleached coral)

LED US HERE

(cracked earth)

DISOBEDIENCE

IS

REQUIRED

THE MOVEMENT IS RISING

And if that isn't enough to convince you that people might have just been going because they wanted a part of the action, this:

"We've got exciting news. Six time ARIA nominee Ash Grunwald, Nattali Rize from Blue King Brown, Rob Hirst from Midnight Oil and Mirning elder Uncle Bunna Lawrie of Coloured Stone fame are all going to be joining us at the Break Free flotilla to pump out some of the biggest songs as hundreds of us kayak out into the harbour!"

*"Can you help spread the word on social media **to get even more people along** to Break Free? Share the news on Facebook now."*

[my emphasis]

It's great that high-profile people support the ending of the fossil fuel era, but in my books no revolution should need celebrity appearances as bait to get people onboard.

Problems with comparing this climate movement to the history of Civil Rights direct action

My second concern was to do with the history that the organisers were attempting to locate themselves as a part of. 350.org were explicit about using MLK and Ghandi as their NVDA historical muses. I think this is a dangerous appropriation. I think this because they are claiming to be a part of a lineage that does not belong to them.

These moments in time were fundamentally different - they were uprisings against overt systems of oppression which benefited (and still benefit) one group to the detriment of another. The 'us' and 'them' in this case has implications that are less appealing than simply 'the people' and 'the fossil fuel industry'. It was (and still is) racial groups, for whom to reach equal status required an upset of the power balance. Now *this* is more what I would call 'revolutionary'. These revolutionary thinkers attacked discriminatory laws and were trying to carve a space in dominant society. Their actions (not yet seen through to completion) fought against their own oppression. These movements were about, and belonged to, people of colour.

Now, some readers might agree with me that the climate change situation we have on our hands *is* a form and product of social oppression, and yes, it is. *But I don't think the movement has truly grasped that.* I think it is fighting under the banner of 'all humanity' - oh, those lovely words - fighting for the right to clean air and for our grandchildren to have a future et cetera, when climate change is actually a race, colonialism and capitalism issue that affects people very unequally. If this were recognized and articulated, and we acted in accordance, then I wouldn't have a problem with the call for a revolution. (In fact, I do call for a social revolution, but that's beside the point). Until then, let's quit appropriating that kind of talk. NGOs are acting well within a white comfort zone. We are not fighting oppressor groups with this. No social order is being overthrown. **Is 350.org and Break Free cultivating a revolutionary movement? No.**

So if you're going to use it, you need to match your revolutionary rhetoric with actual revolutionary politics and action. Because for the moment, it's just too easy for white and other coloniser folk to lend themselves to the cause and feel good about doing so, without actually working to rid ourselves of a system that gives them/us comforts that people whose homes are already sinking *don't* have - comforts that are the very reason for climate change.

Revolution = societal change = dismantling of power structures = what Black Power/Civil Rights was pushing for \neq Break Free.

We've got two different narratives happening here. One revolutionary, one not. **These NGO-directed contemporary actions reek of sapping the potential energy of a generation and funnelling it into sterilised, media-focused, yet not actually system-changing action.**

They lack spontaneity and real passion and need. They are P.R.-focused, but don't hand down the organising reins to the people. This preserves existing power structures. Nothing is left to chance or imagination. Genuine movements, on the other hand, are unpredictable. But here, the actors are not the victims, and more importantly, they are not the heroes or the changemakers, either. This 'movement' isn't giving them the chance to be.

a culture of dependency - are we activists or sheep?

Closely related to why Break Free is not revolutionary is the way in which it perpetuates dependency on NGOs to organise demonstrations. They say 'the movement is rising' - but could the people making up the sheer mass of the action then go and replicate it? Or are they just sheep? Is this just cosmetic damage?

I am writing this now because the state of things are heating up, and 350.org et al seem to have cornered a market, for want of a better way to express it. (The whole thing did bear a scary resemblance to a business, in the way you registered through an online form, then got a ticket with a message saying, "Card processing successful. You're going to Break Free 2016!"). It's optional resistance, and had the strange feel of booking a holiday.

Where it was once (and still is) done by individuals or very small affinity groups, Direct Action is now a phenomenon supposedly in need of centralised co-ordination. 350.org are making it easier for people to get their bodies involved, but simultaneously dictating the way in which this will unfold. And *this* is the culture that worries me.

They need to follow through on the 'to change everything we need everyone' chant favoured at their protests. I don't believe that this is really what resistance should look like, **especially** if it is to be undertaken by anyone and everyone. They never suggest at these briefings, "these skills are applicable anywhere." Why? Why are they using it to keep the people's energy just with things *they* organise? Why do we have to wait for an organisation to do the thinking for us?

If their aim was explicitly, "We are providing a gateway for would-be allies in the environmentalist community to learn how they can make a tangible difference rather than clicking on online petitions; we are teaching people organising skills, security measures, legal know-how, so they won't need us next time." then I'd feel better about this whole thing. But no.

We had to sign a participant's agreement and were explicitly instructed to stay peaceful and calm, as well as what to say to police. At one point someone said, "This is a massive opportunity to teach each other and share skills, so next time we can get 5000 people shutting down a coal port." Except I still have no clue how to stage my own action. And if the grand

aim of their existence is to get more and more people going out in kayaks once per year, what is the point?

So, I don't like the tone of groups taking charge like this. I would prefer a culture of do-it-yourself to spring from the community that they are tapping into to make these protests succeed. People who let their own politics and choices guide them. They are breeding people who are happy to let others do the thinking for them. They have a lot of potential energy available to them, and they are not using it in a way that I agree with or think is useful in the long-term. They had *so* many people in the one place and dispersed little know-how, and zero encouragement. **You have to question what interest that served.** I would argue that they are trying to control the tone and style of what goes down, in these critical decades, between 'the people' and 'the enemy'.

romanticising arrest

I want to talk a bit here about how being arrested is romanticised by the activist community, and the need to give a global race and class context to our activist actions.

Getting arrested was portrayed as *the* hallmark of dedication, and there was no recognition of the privilege operating to give most middle-class white activists a mere slap on the wrist in comparison to their foreign or racialised counterparts.

During the legal briefing on the Saturday, we were introduced to NSW law, who to look to for legal advice, what our rights were, and what consequences, if any, we could potentially face. For the most part, it was to ease our concerns. There wasn't much risk involved; the police had been notified, no coal ships were going to attempt to pass, and it was unlikely that any arrests were going to be made for such a peaceful, family-friendly event, especially in such numbers. Rather out of step with the footage we'd been baited with in the lead-up.

As part of easing people's concerns about the consequences of arrest, the MC asked the crowd, "Is there anyone here who got arrested at the Leard blockade?" [an ongoing protest and blockade site in New South Wales, defending sacred forest against coal giant

Whitehaven]. About eight people stood up to rapturous applause and cheering. A couple testified as to how it hadn't affected their professional life whatsoever. Unfortunately, someone also said: "getting arrested is not like, I saw it in the movies, getting dragged down the street or anything like that."

Well, actually, it can be and has been. Police violence is not as far away as many might like to think. It just depends what and how you are protesting. If you're seen as an actual threat to social order, you probably would be dragged down the street. That's why riots are met with pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons.

And don't think your race has nothing to do with it. Bias is inherent in an institution that came from whiteness. Take one look at the history of Aboriginal deaths in custody in so-called Australia - for offences much more mundane than trespass or damaging property. Sure, you'll never get 'dragged down the street' for an isolated protest that looked more like a beach festival, in front of families and kids building sandcastles. Nor for quietly sitting in a tree, even. But God help you if you're a person of colour actually trying to turn the state upside down. A qualification should have been added to that sentence: "...at least for someone like me, in a country like this, in a context like this." It might have little impact on the life of a middle-class, educated, English-speaking white woman, but might pose a much bigger problem for the future life path of a Somalian asylum seeker, for example.

Another problem with this uncritical celebration of arrest: I know this was paying tribute to the risk that these people took for what they believe in, their dedication to the cause. But the tone feels *off*. I wrote earlier about the role social capital plays in getting people along to these events. Suggesting that confrontation with the law is only undertaken by the most brave and dedicated creates a sense of hierarchy and competition amongst the activist community. This is unproductive; in and of itself arrest is not something to aspire to. Whether or not an act places someone in an arrestable position does not define the worthiness or usefulness of that act. The risk of arrest is not necessarily proportional to the impact of an act. For example, I would argue that helping an activist through a mental breakdown is an act just as worthy of applause. But this isn't the story that was told. And don't get me started on the fact that many arrestable acts are unfeasible for people with physical disabilities!

a warped portrayal of environmental resistance...

One email irked me in particular. On April 22nd:

"For the last few months filmmakers have followed four communities who are preparing to take part in Break Free from Fossil Fuels next month. This teaser trailer will give you goosebumps.

The film is about a new phase of the climate movement: courageous action that is being taken on the front lines of the climate crisis on every continent, led by regular people fed up with the power and pollution of the fossil fuel industry."

Wait, when did you decide it was the new phase of the climate movement?

The kind of environmental pillaging that settler urban activists generally protest has been occurring on stolen land in so-called Australia and around the world since colonial invasion, but now that they/we realise it's to *our* peoples' (or our grandkids') detriment *as well as* destroying the cultural base and sacred lands of First Peoples, we're all up in arms. Anyone involved in the movement **needs** to understand the irony and hypocrisy in this.

Besides, people have been resisting in Indigenous communities - with their bodies - since the first colonial encounters, and as a settler I wouldn't blame them for laughing at this kind of talk.

...and the unexamined privilege of getting arrested scot-free

"...If you're ready to be one of them, join us in Newcastle on May 7-8 to Break Free from Fossil Fuels."

Given that the video in this email also contained footage of someone getting pepper sprayed, I took it to inadvertently mean that you will be really tough if you do this. This is something to aspire to.

What is this?! Why are we getting inspirational goosebumps off of something most of us will never even face? Why is this idea 'exciting' for us but serious, non-optional shit for many communities in low-lying areas? How dare they Hollywood-ify 'disobedience' and turn it into something cool, only done by the most daring and committed, yet attainable by you - yes you! - if you would just sign this here registration form - having the money, time and physical

ability to get there too. When a) this kind of action and this kind of media exposure is not even an option for those whose homelands are literally already getting flooded. b) Far too often, DISOBEDIENCE GETS BLACK PEOPLE MURDERED, LITERALLY.

Why are they not using all this exposure opportunity to shine a spotlight on the environmental resistance that has already been taking place for decades, in Indigenous communities and Pacific Islander communities the whole world over? Why aren't we excited about these documentaries (SO many of which already exist?)

the tactics and structure of Break Free 2016

1. Hierarchy and insularity

My personal experience of these spaces has always gone something like the following:

You're greeted at the entrance with smiles and warm, back-scratch hugs from those faces you know. Then the rest of the time they potter around, busybees wearing natural fibres and drinking out of glass jars, always looking mildly stressed, pursed lips and clipboards, making sure this and that have been done, checking iPhones. You just sit there, stupidly, feeling like everyone knows what's going on apart from you. They know all the secrets; you won't find out til later. You want to change the world and all, and you understand all too well how bad society and the environment is, on all fronts. But everyone's so happy. This is really exciting and really cool, and what a good turnout! This is going to be the biggest non-violent direct action in Australia's history, in fact. Organisers still running around with an air of heightened importance. Always looking over shoulders, muttering into hands-free mics, always seem to be bloody looking for someone. It's almost funny, except it's starting to piss you off - a constant reminder of who's Someone Important and who isn't in this scene.

Familiar?

It felt similar at the 'Flood the System - Connect the Dots' blocking of Collins St back in December 2015. It was the first time I'd done something of this nature. Who were these people heading this group and why were they taking charge like they were? Why can't I get in touch with them? How come I didn't know there would be lock-ons? Why did nobody ask me if I wanted to? I might have said yes!

As I waited for the presentation to start, sitting in my white plastic chair, I remember thinking: If it happens in a similar way to that Flood The System action, where we showed up to do the street block but didn't realise there was an extra element - people locking on to building entrances - I'm going to be furious. I bet, I just bet, there's a side action that nobody knows about yet. The activist's Holy Grail of will be reserved for those few people - the unspoken suggestion being that you can only get to that level if you somehow have the right connections. Who on earth knows how you get them.

For me, the truth came out the night before the flotilla when I asked a well-connected and very active friend if there was anything else planned apart from the kayaks. The answer came, "The flotilla is basically a distraction."

I so fucking knew it.

I asked, how do you get to do these actions?

The response? "Oh, sort of knowing who's who... Yeah..."

So there it was again, that gutted feeling of thinking everyone is in it together and then realising you're such a pawn, such a newbie, being used to make a nice picture, the REAL activists getting to do the REAL dangerous dirty work.

Their consolation prize? "But the flotilla will still be heaps of fun! You're still helping to stop the coal ships!"

I don't think I've felt so strange before, being patronised by the very people who are central to the movement I tell myself I believe in, the people who I think are my friends. Why the fuck would something being 'fun' be a reason for me to do it? That is not why anyone should primarily take part in direct action. If you happen to find it fun too, well, bonus. But first and foremost you should believe and know that you are needed and that you are making a tangible, material difference.

You have to be 'in' these circles on a personal, friendship level to get asked about doing these things. This is a big factor as to why so few people do it. If someone has to push and push and spend years in activist circles before they do something like this, we'll never get anywhere. It's probable they will burn out before reaching that stage, and not many people have the time, energy and money to sustain such a deep level of involvement. It's paradoxical that only the most privileged tend to end up doing this kind of thing. This speaks to a broader issue of insularity in the activism community, which is definitely not restricted to Break Free, and too much for the scope of this piece. But we need to give training, legal advice and support to people from the get-go, people with fresh energy.

This relates back to my earlier point about the benefits and power of dispersing know-how to reduce dependency on NGOs. Of course, I understand there is a huge need for trust, and preferably a well-established relationship in activist settings, between friends setting out to

stop a coal train or climb a tree. I *do* understand *why* the organisers couldn't tell us about people that were going to hang in harnesses off coal loaders early in the morning.

But for me personally, the side action at Newcastle did less in terms of damage inflicted on the industry than they did for an increased hierarchy of involvement. We already stopped millions of dollars worth of coal being transported with the port's operations shutting down for the day. Was it necessary?

2. A microcosm of colonial structures: Cultural appropriation, patriarchy and 'multiculturalism by invitation'

The environmentalist community in so-called Australia is white-dominated - partly by default, as a subset of the wider Australian population - but also in part a reflection of the general socioeconomic characteristics of the Left - a lot of white, middle class and/or tertiary-educated people. (There are many exceptions, but here I am discussing whiteness as a phenomenon and white cultural dominance as a whole).

Any white-dominated activist group that comes to be racially self-aware should have protocols in place that can foresee and deal with the instances of racism and racist discourse that are predictable and inevitable coming out of such a cultural setting. These incidences are symptomatic of racial power imbalance, and typically include cultural appropriation or ignorance, inappropriate cultural interactions, enlightened racism, tokenism, white ways of organising and grievance procedures, and the like. What I saw at Break Free led me to believe that there was still a long way to go with critical self-reflection in this area. They are not demonstrating enough what society would need to be like to really challenge the system that has caused the climate crisis.

- Did all the white people who had painted red war paint stripes on their faces feel awkward and remorseful once they saw how closely they resembled those of the First Nations people doing a Welcome to Country dance? Did anyone know that they are actually taken from the Native American custom of painting faces to convey various messages in wartime and on battlefields, and is a sacred practice? Were people aware of this, yet chose to wear them in a *really* screwed attempt to 'Indigenise' themselves, claiming that they are as much the victims and a part of this heritage, appropriating the hurt and rage of colonised people? Do people

understand that by using these symbols they are feeding the continued colonisation of these cultures, not showing them the respect they deserve, and taking without asking *or* understanding? **Even if it was in genuine ignorance, the effect is the same. Self-education in this area needs to be a priority.**

- How many more times do we need to have the conversation that DREADLOCKS ON WHITE PEOPLE ARE NOT OK - a hairstyle that black people have been persecuted for wearing, with specific cultural origins in pan-African spirituality, that is specifically to keep afro hairstyles neat, a symbol of honour and resistance for people of colour in the face of white supremacy - *a hairstyle that is not everyone's to wear!* Appropriation is a renewed attack on these communities, a suggestion that racialised people and their bodies and cultures are there just to be collected. **Even if it was in genuine ignorance, the effect is the same. Self-education in this area needs to be a priority.**

- I'd also like to get rid of the "BREAK FREE" - "HUH" call-and-response ritual that everyone seemed to think was really quirky and uniting. It's making a mockery of various Islander war dances (the Māori Haka springs to mind), bestowing a primitive-esque element to such cultures, people of whom were actually in attendance. Also, as a friend pointed out, it's a very macho, masculine cry that... women would never really do.

- Being treated condescendingly by men is nothing new, but it happened quite a lot to me personally over the three days. In addition, I witnessed the same old patterns of men taking up all the speaking space in informal settings, and an old favourite, the emergence of the 'slippie', or sleazy hippie (ever got a hug from an enviro guy that went for *way too long?*). Guys, let's please make the environmental movement a good place for everyone to be in. Try to be conscious of your behaviour. **Even if it was in genuine ignorance, the effect is the same. Self-education in this area needs to be a priority.**

I was also uncomfortable and disappointed with the dynamics between organisers and Aboriginal groups - in how they were included in the event, and how the rest of the crowd responded to and interacted with them.

At the action briefing, the MC announced, "I'd like to invite some *amazing* original mob up." Powerful speeches were given by representatives from the Awabakal nation as well as other nations as far away as central Australia. When they said they were 'standing with us, our brothers and sisters', there were whoops and cheers. But then, when someone else said not

long after, "You destroyed our environment. You destroyed US.", it was met with the same response. I cringed. Was that appropriate? Did you actually listen to what was just said?

Watching this play out made me extremely uncomfortable. It seemed to me that settler attendees were latching onto the feeling of being absolved of complicity with colonialism (when being referred to as 'brothers and sisters') but forgetting to reflect on - or purposefully ignoring - the history of genocide and ecocide that benefits settlers to the detriment of Aboriginal people (inappropriate cheering a moment later). I do hope this is not the limit of those people's solidarity with Aboriginal people, but I have cause to be sceptical. It might be tempting to think of it this way, but in the context of environmental justice, settlers and Aboriginal people can never be a nice, homogenous mass. Their different histories (of colonisers and colonised), worldviews and relationship to the land mean that this is impossible. The Aboriginal activists are fighting not only the fossil fuel industry, but settler ignorance. (At one point on the action day, an MC actually forgot the name of the country she was on, hurriedly saying "Sorry, I can't remember the name up here, but thanks!!". Uh, isn't that the whole point?)

Moreover, why did the organisers 'invite' mob up where we went - Awabakal country - to join in and have their voice heard? Why were they not central? It's not the organisers' land *or* fight to invite people to - why weren't *they* inviting *us*? A purely hypothetical question, but would they cancel the action if the local tribe's elders and representatives withdrew their consent?

One good thing. The main promotional movie made by 350.org in the lead-up to Break Free gave a lot of screen time to women and Indigenous folk. In fact, most of it featured not-white-males. Weird, refreshing, fantastic.

3. No room for critique, dissent or flexibility at or before the action

Things were run to a tight schedule. Breakfast will be from this time, official proceedings will commence from 9am, we will reconvene after the morning session (which was broken into 15-minute topic slots). Etc. The inflexibility of the program meant that if someone found something problematic, or wanted to suggest a better way to do things, now was not the time. But I'm not just talking about *time* inflexibility. I was disturbed by the inflexibility of stance

and narrative, too. More than once I felt that the very opinions of the group directors were forced upon me, giving me no chance to act according to my own beliefs.

The one time I did actually raise a contentious point, it was shut down with such baffling logic (or purposefully silencing, I'm still not sure), I was incredulous. In an introduction to the concept of non-violent direct action, we were asked to talk amongst ourselves why non-violence was the best policy and the way that we should go about things. There was a complete assumption that nobody in their right mind would condone the alternative, let alone act in any other way. This really shocked me. I looked around, wondering if anyone else was as irritated at having an opinion heaped on them like that, but this appeared to have flown over everyone's head, so I raised my hand when we were asked to share. I said, I think we should all acknowledge that some people don't get to choose whether to be non-violent or otherwise. While some are oppressed to the point that their resistance options don't include non-violence, the fact that we *can* choose speaks to our massive privilege in life.

Nonviolence lacks effectiveness when people are being directly oppressed by the state. When you present an actual threat to state systems, the state will respond with policies and regimes whose effects are tangibly felt by the people it controls. You can either be silent, or fight back using the same weapons. There are many historical examples of this - anti-colonial emancipation wars, for example.

To say that the only legitimate way of responding to intergenerational/systemic violence is with peaceful protest is showcasing a particularly ignorant side of race and class privilege. Shaming and distancing oneself from those who respond to violence with what has only been inflicted upon them first is not climate solidarity, it is elitism.

So this is what I raised (albeit with the eloquence level of someone much more comfortable typing behind a computer screen than speaking in front of hundreds of people). The facilitator said, "Yes, absolutely. We live in such a safe society where we don't really run the risk of things happening to us." And then the bit that baffled me with its vagueness and incoherent logic: "I was actually at a thing and heard a Nigerian man speak who had been trained in non-violence and actually was in a situation where someone had a gun to his head. He said because of his training he made the choice to turn away and diffuse the situation, by demonstrating a non-violent reaction. But yes, yes, you're definitely right."

Huh?

I don't think she actually grasped what I was getting at. Aside from completely silencing what I was saying in a way I took to be quite passive-aggressive, did this Nigerian man really have any other option that to try and negotiate his way out of a situation where someone had a gun to his head? What else was he going to do, give the gunholder a kick in the shins?!

But she had a strict schedule to follow, after all. A talk about the intricacies of what we consider 'violence' (interpersonal vs systemic?), a debate on whether violent protest is inherently bad or not, a reflection on the question of if we de-legitimise many people's only response, are we silencing them and siding with the system? Etc etc... would have been too much to cover. The next person to raise their hand in response to why they preferred non-violence chirped, "It's more FUN when a protest is non-violent!". At this point I walked out.

Martin Luther King, Jr., who they all claim as the biggest proponent of non-violence, also said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." *and* "When peaceful revolution is impossible, violent revolution is inevitable." He may not have employed violent tactics, but he definitely understood why it occurs and did not morally rob them of their only means of resistance. Besides, many of the successes of the American Civil Rights campaign were actually forced due to the militant tactics of the Black Panthers, but MLK was the one the establishment engaged with, and is the one placed on a historical pedestal.

4. No demands, not working - what's the aim, and what's the risk?

I'm yet to be convinced of the effectiveness of this whole venture. *Especially* relative to the time and energy that went into it. It's surely a given that this was water off a duck's back in terms of actually hurting the industry. The ships are still coming in and out and global coal production is still increasing. Even stopping the coal trains and coal loaders, which was more of a surprise, cost the people far more in court fines proportionally than it did the coal companies in losses.

Also, something that didn't strike me as obvious initially, but slowly became apparent: there was no concrete *demand* from this action. A demand would have established a goal to work towards as well as making the tone more serious.

People will say, well that might all be true, but it's sending a message...

Well, only if the media circulates it far and wide, which they don't. There's only so much self-generated social media these organisations can create. As for the fossil fuel companies and their CEOs - they don't care. They know they are economic giants, and they also have the Murdoch media on their side.

The police, as well as the coal company, knew about the action well in advance. These flotillas have been an annual event since 2006. It remains to be seen whether this one will fade into the same relative obscurity; the numbers are greater than ever before, the global context is very different.

Basically, organisations want actions like this to create a media frenzy. This seems somewhat out of step with the core intentions of similar actions being carried out by people directly in line of environmental destruction (for example, First Nations people recently defending the Lawler's Well sacred site in the Leard State Forest). They aren't doing NVDA to gain media attention. It's their life and culture they have no choice but to defend. At Break Free, what should be the central intention (a big show of people power standing up to the fossil fuel industry, direct empowerment and skill and knowledge sharing) is overshadowed by the scramble to get as much media attention as possible. I'm not sure I have the language for this... but it *feels* wrong. Even if it is 2016 and that's the shape of modern activism.

Who is it geared towards? What happens next? Do we all feel good about ourselves having spent our money on a bus ticket up to Newcastle and taken a selfie on a kayak? Do we think we actually are breaking the system? It's too "My First Direct Action" for me, despite the fact that it was probably very new, challenging and a big deal for some. I wonder how long it'll take for the people just entering the scene now, the fresh-faced 20-year-olds - how many actions and chants and marches and meetings will it take for them to realise that *it's not working*? It took me more than a couple of years to become the fully jaded, failed protégé that I am now.

The real risk is this: In the absence of sustained material impact on the industry, and the absence of empowered individuals coming out of it, we will end up with baseless self-congratulation being the only result of attending things like Break Free. We'll be attracting and catering to misguided attendees, some (not all) of who may be the kind who are only driven to join something because it is rebellious and exciting, no matter what it is. A certain

kind of activist who, I'm sorry to say, is someone who is content with taking selfies and sharing videos, not one that goes on to get deeply involved in social justice work, starting with their own lifestyles and prejudices. I hate to sober things, but are we breeding activists that are too happy and not angry enough?

end bits

If you've read this and nothing has offended, shocked or surprised you, I'm not worried about people like us. We're going on to do more powerful things. I'm worried for the people who felt exalted, proud and satisfied, who revelled at the after-party and will keep telling everyone about it for months to come. Who think this is the be all and end all of activism.

I am critiquing this from a structural point of view - not individuals. People in the activism field do a heck of a lot of hard work and many don't get paid for it. *I am not criticising their work.*

However, this is the response I usually get whenever I voice these concerns: "But they're trying to do a good thing, they're good people, they're working really hard." Or, "It's just about sending a message to the government and the rest of Australia that climate change is real and that ordinary people are willing to go to these kinds of lengths." And then the conversation stops. This piece is the conversation I never get to have.

The flotilla was never intended to be a surprise ambush - but this wasn't made clear enough in the lead-up. This forces us to consider what the point of the whole thing was. A media-worthy show of boldness is the best I can give it. Its strength came in part from being located within a global series of actions. In conjunction with them, it sent a message (to those it reached, anyway). Therein lies the only strength of tactic. It's adding momentum to a (hopefully) slowly-shifting global attitude towards environmental policy and resource extraction. And for the record, slowly-shifting global attitudes is too little, too late. It won't save us in the slightest. Most people are aware by now of the link between global GDP growth and an increase in CO₂ levels. Anything other than explicit anti-capitalism is falling short of the mark. And it's getting increasingly hard to detangle capitalism from other historical forces such as industrialism, colonialism, and racism.

And it all feels so commodified. Direct action need not be media-friendly. Individuals should not be gaining social capital from it. If this is happening, we need to set up structures to prevent it. There should be minimal direction past initial training; it should be built on widespread trust. It should not be tailored for promo films. It shouldn't need celebrity endorsement. Et cetera. And in doing these things, it snowballs: these large-scale events

continue to attract a type of person into their fold who *do* react positively to this kind of message bait and *don't* think for themselves.

If we're talking about building a diverse movement, we need to talk about the very *nature* of diversity, lest we end up just replicating a faux, invitation-only multiculturalism that reeks of white dominance.

We *can't* run amok romanticising and celebrating arrest without equal education about the privilege we are exercising in doing this and getting off pretty much scot-free - a recognition that this is a serious thing, and its relevance in a global context.

It's going to lose its impact if it becomes expected, and 350.org are 'running' sit-ins and the like almost monthly it seems, asking us to "chip in" all the while to keep them going. It's pretty disempowering when we're told that THE ways to help are either by a) giving money, or b) going along to pre-fabricated, top-down controlled Actions. Then to add insult to injury, being misled to believe it's inflicting damage on the industry.

Why is this article important? Because the organisers are right. This IS a pivotal moment in time. Many of the people who attended are only just realising their own abilities and potential to make change. *This is a critical window*. If you're going to do it, do it right.

My friend on the bus who forgot the selfie stick, for all their good intentions, probably isn't delving any further into the global crisis right now. Probably isn't thinking about forming an action group of their own, likely isn't reading any critical anti-racism theory, probably isn't starting conversations with their friends about how they can challenge consumer capitalism. But they *will* probably go along to another 350 event.

* * *

I am not opposed to the existence of global climate advocacy groups, as they play a clear role at a political level, and have more power than small groups in getting media attention. For those with the time and financial means, they also provide useful skill development in community organising, communication, legal training, welfare skills, first aid and more. They ARE bringing a core community together, but this community is pretty insular and inaccessible.

Staging creative, palatable, eye-catching protests has a place. However, I am worried that this method is coming to dominate. I am concerned about the problematic structure and discourse within Break Free - things that will in turn influence how newer people will go about the rest of their life's activism. That they will think this is *the* way to organise. I am worried about the warping of historical events to suit their narrative. I am worried about the lack of individual agency it instils in the very people who make it work. I am worried about its very embryonic intersectionality. I am worried about the exclusivity of being involved and the personal social capital being gained by those who are 'in' at a very deep level. Despite its majority volunteer workforce, it retains a business-like vibe. **Commodified resistance.** It feels to me that they have an agenda, they need more bodies to make it happen, and the people who are willing to do it are doing it for all the wrong reasons.

Many people will criticise what I'm doing here, and the effect this piece might have on the community. A common response I anticipate is: "That's all very well, but it's easier to sit back and complain than it is to get involved. At least we're doing *something*." A final reiteration: I acknowledge and appreciate the hard, hard work that so many people are contributing to the social justice/environment movement. This piece is intended to prompt honest reflection about the efficiency and effectiveness of individual and collective output. Don't take it personally - but also, do. There are plenty of places you can put your energy - groups that already exist - that don't keep you as a pawn. Groups that truly break down the structures we're supposedly resisting, rather than gradually change, work with or appeal to them. Showing your support for a cause such as this does not need to be branded. To force an issue, we don't need centralised, media-friendly mass actions. We need lots and lots of little spot-fires :)

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**For more copies, or if you wanna talk about all this, please email me at
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Thank you for reading!