tagli

Feltrinelli



Gianluca Grimalda

A fuoco

Il mondo brucia
è ora di disobbedire

Gianluca Grimalda

Zooming in

The world is burning

It's time to disobey

(Italian original: "A fuoco"[1], ed. Feltrinelli, released on 4 June 2025. Below translations of the introduction to the book, author's profile, and Prologue of the book)

About the book:

Gianluca Grimalda, social scientist and climate activist, was the first employee to be fired for refusing to fly to protect the environment. In this book he explains the reasoning behind his decision, which is consistent with his 15 years of "slow travel" to reduce his CO2 emissions.

His professional and personal story is intertwined with the account of his 28,000 km journey – from the island of Bougainville in the Solomon Islands to Germany – which he travelled by ship, train, bus, truck, and taxi for a total of 650 hours of actual travel over 72 days. Slow travel offers the opportunity to "zoom in" on the inhabitants of the "global periphery" and to listen to the losses they have already suffered in relation to ongoing climate change, to their fears, their hopes and ways of adapting.

In these pages, Grimalda experiences the possibility of social change offered by civil disobedience. He forces us to face the dissonance that runs through our lives: knowing what should be done but not doing it.

"Zooming in" makes us question the boundary between individual and collective responsibility. It is also an invitation to change direction and overcome our toxic dependence on fossil fuels as soon as possible.

About the author:

Gianluca Grimalda studies the relationship between social cohesion, globalisation and climate change. After graduating from Bocconi University, he worked as a researcher and lecturer at the International Labour Office in Geneva, as well as at the universities of Southampton, Warwick, Lisbon, Castellón de la Plana, and Duisburg, and until October 2023, at the Kiel Institute

[1] In Italian, "A fuoco" has the meaning of both "On fire" and "Zooming in".

for the World Economy. He was an author for the International Panel on Social Progress and a contributor to the social cohesion task force of the Think20 network, which provides economic policy advice to the G20.

He has authored for the International Panel on Social Progress and been a member of ThinkTank20, advising the G20 on social policy issues such as global basic income. He also contributed to the Global Tipping Points Report 2023 in the chapter on social tipping points.

He has conducted various field studies in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea (PNG), to study local adaptation to sea level rise and drought among indigenous horticulturalists.
He has actively collaborated with Scientist Rebellion, coordinating and participating in campaigns and communication activities, including those aimed at blocking private jets and opposing the conspicuous consumption of the super-rich. In his latest fieldwork, Grimalda refused his research institute's injunction to return by plane, becoming the first known case of an employee being fired for climate conscientious objection.

Prologue

Hangan, 27 September 2023. Folly

The words fall heavily and precisely as axe blows on cork bark.

'Dr Grimalda, if you do not show up at the office in five days, on 2 October, we will begin the procedure to terminate your contract.'

Even as she utters these words, Frau A. remains impassive, maintaining the enigmatic smile I have always seen during my ten years of working at the Institute for the World Economy (IFW) in Kiel, a port city in northern Germany. I can see it, even though it is small on the video link via the Internet. In the past, I thought it was the smile of a friend. The new president of the Institute, whom I have never met in person, hastens to reiterate:

'Dr Grimalda, do you understand? We are telling you that you must be here in the office in five days, and we expect you to take a plane.'

I do not know whether instinct exists, and if it does, whether reason can sometimes govern it or never. All I know is that the words I think, the only words I can think, are: "I'm not getting on that plane." Perhaps, in a moment of caution, I ask instead,

"What am I supposed to do in Kiel in five days?".

A moment of silence falls in Frau A.'s office. Even the secretary, Frau M., stops taking notes for the minutes in the notebook with the Institute's logo. Frau A. repeats,

'Gianluca, your work permit has expired. It expired seventeen days ago. We expect you to be in the office in five days; otherwise, we will terminate your contract. We have found some flights for you. Do you understand me?'

The adrenaline is pumping. I can hardly breathe. Since arriving in Bougainville seven months ago, I have been searching for a ship to take me from this island to the nearby archipelago, allowing me to complete the entire 28,000-kilometre return journey to Europe without flying. Avoiding planes would reduce my carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions by a factor of ten. After multiple refusals from shipping company managers, I had finally found a shipowner who seemed seriously willing to let me travel on his merchant ship yesterday.

I think of the nearly 2,000 participants in my research and all the village leaders to whom I promised that I would do everything possible to reduce my CO_2 emissions, explaining that they are responsible for the damage of climate

change to which they are already vulnerable. In my research, I study the adaptation to climate change of populations highly susceptible to climate disasters. It would, therefore, be paradoxical if my research were to cause harm by exacerbating the problem it is supposed to solve. I think of all the reasons that prevented me from finishing my research on time, from the late arrival of my visa to the assistants I had to replace, from the armed attack in the middle of my research to the volcanic eruptions that hit some of the thirty villages we were supposed to visit, and the other delays that accumulated to accommodate the needs of the communities. These delays were not my fault, and I had kept Uli, my department head, constantly informed. I know that my eyes are burning, my voice is rising.

I say the only words I can say:

'Frau A., I will not take that plane.'

I can't see the president. He is not in his office, and his video camera is off. I can hear him getting agitated. His voice is slightly altered:

‘Dr Grimalda, I insist. If you're not in the office in five days, you'll be fired!’

I repeat, a little more quietly:

'Do what you want with my contract. I'm not taking that plane. There's nothing I need to do in Kiel that I can't do while travelling. Your request makes no sense and shows that you have no respect for the environment.'

Uli is silent. He will tell me repeatedly over the next few days that he wants to remain neutral. Frau A. intervenes:

'Dr Grimalda, you bear responsibility for your actions. There will be two warnings. The first will be delivered shortly. The second will be delivered if you are not here on 2 October. Please reconsider. If you do not, our relationship of trust will be irrevocably broken.'

It is eight o'clock in the evening in the village of Hangan. The simple chords in C major of Bougainville music, with a rhythm even slower than reggae, continue to drift across the neatly mowed lawns of Doreen's family homes. I have been staying in her hut for over a month by now. Uli calls me immediately and asks if I am really sure I do not want to travel by plane. I tell him that I will think about it, but in reality, there is no time to think, and I have already made up my mind.

'I didn't think you'd become so radical,' he says. And then:

'Do as you wish, but I hope you'll change your mind.'

I wonder if they'll really fire me. A colleague tells me that, yes, the new IfW president will not think twice about it. They need to save money, and my senior researcher contract is costly, belonging to a research field that is no longer strategic for the IfW.

Like all turning points in life, it is hard to believe it at first. I have a

permanent contract that a colleague of mine once described as "a marriage without the possibility of divorce". I do not have teaching responsibilities, or only occasionally, so I can devote all my time to what I love the most: doing research. Until now, the IfW had never objected to my slow, environmentally friendly travel, allowing me to count my travel days as working days. They had approved 31 travel assignments, totalling 261 days of slow travel, over the course of my ten-year contract. I have an apartment in Kiel that seems perfect for me, with an ample open space where I display souvenirs from my travels and where I enjoy cooking for friends. The windows look out onto the pond, surrounded by willows and oak trees, in Hiroshima Park. I have an enviable salary. I could not ask for more. It seems that all this will come to an end in five days, and I cannot foresee what will come next.

This book tells the story of what happened before and after that evening, but above all, it is a book about madness. The apparent folly of a solo journey of 28,000 kilometres by land and sea, passing through 16 countries, from the tropical temperatures of the beaches of Bougainville to the freezing temperatures of the 4,300 metres of the Kulm Pass between China and Tajikistan, arriving in Europe 72 days later. The folly of an individual gesture made to save a trifle in CO2 emissions at the cost of one's job while most of humanity continues undeterred in what the UN Secretary-General has called "our toxic addiction to fossil fuels".

But above all, it is a journey into the collective madness that is leading to the dissolution of the planet's main ecosystems and, therefore, of our civilization. All this occurs while the scientists' warnings go unheeded, and industry leaders propose scenarios for transitioning to environmental sustainability based on fanciful CO2 absorption technologies that are far from being applicable. The madness of already knowing alternative technologies to those based on fossil fuels but not using them because political and economic systems are effectively hostage to energy companies. The madness of heads of state who play at war to hold on to power and approve new extraction projects to achieve the elusive goal of energy sovereignty, even when all science says that it is imperative not to open a single new fossil fuel extraction project. The madness of continuing to cut down forests and celebrating the slowdown in their deforestation rate as a success, when forests, along with the oceans, are the primary sources of absorption for the greenhouse gases responsible for the extreme weather events unfolding before our eyes.

This book is intended as an act of love for this small, wonderful planet —a blue dot in the vastness of the universe based on fragile and ever-changing equilibria. It is an act of love towards the children of today and those not yet

born who, if we continue at the current rate of fossil fuel consumption, deforestation and dietary habits, will find themselves living on a planet that is uninhabitable in many areas. It is an act of love for the people of low-income countries, who see their homes flooded by the seas, their crops becoming scarcer, their days increasingly exposed to unsustainably high temperatures, and who remain unaware that this is happening, in large part to allow wealthy people on the planet to maintain their jet-setting lifestyles.

This book is about a journey into an unknown future, where nothing can be taken for granted, and everything is still in our hands.

My travel itinerary:

