

The Protest Group 'Last Generation',

Throughout 2022, disrupted traffic across Germany by gluing themselves to roads, and have stepped up their efforts recently. They protest against the government coalition's climate policies and claim the current coalition "protects business profits, breaks its own promises and our democratic constitution."

In a probe against the Last Generation group, police raided the homes of climate campaigners, shut down the group's website and froze two bank accounts. The raids were conducted on the behalf of the Bavarian authorities on the charge of "forming or supporting a criminal organization" that was planning "further crimes."

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BLACK CLOUD

The black cloud never fails to rain on my parade. Shrouding and guiding my hesitant, shaky hands and beating chest, it starts to sink deep. Slowly sinking in, it taunts, "Are you sure you are not making a fool of yourself again?" Usually, it would work to dispel the cloud with some faltering rationale, but the boxes on the screen appear too jarring. I convince myself that everyone is just mocking how inarticulate my stutters are, how wonky my nose is, and how I do not deserve to be here in this call, at all.

Pressing the tempting red button and exiting the call, I run leaps and bounds inside my head – rehearsing and flagellating what I could have – no, should have said. I could have worded it differently, perhaps used a different inflection, or maybe just not tried talking at all. I can practically imagine disappointed faces showing up in my brain over and over again. The cloud grows bigger and laughs at the ruminating spiral that encompasses me. Faltering words and a growing pulse, it derives pleasure from my fear of embarrassment.

I take a few breaths to focus on something around me, and my mind starts to gravitate towards the question, "How did I end up here?"

Everything felt fairly regular before the pandemic – the hesitance and rumination persisted, but they were not persistently spiral. I used to fuss over and stutter about my words, but those around me seemed to give nods of comprehension. Compassion made me fairly more relaxed about self-expression. Quickened heartbeats found ways to soothe themselves, ways to cope, without looming black clouds. Even when I worried about tone, pitch, words, and most of all, embarrassment, the thoughts stuck but got easily replaced.

No arrests have been made. Many commentators and other environmentalists condemned the crackdown as a disproportionate state response to peaceful protest.

The UN has highlighted the importance of climate activists and their right to hold demonstrations:

"Climate activists – led by the moral voice of young people – have continued to pursue their goals even in the darkest days. They need to be protected and we need them now more than ever,"

~ UN Secretary-General António Guterres'

He added that protesters had been instrumental at "crucial moments in pushing governments and business leaders to do much more," and that global climate goals would already be out of reach without them.

Germany aims to become climate neutral by 2045, and has set legally binding emission reduction targets for all its sectors. But the country is currently not on track to meet those targets. Many conservative politicians have criticized the protests and called for harsh punishments. Chancellor Olaf Scholz criticized the actions as "completely nutty."

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The slumber that the world was in also projects this idea that you must be ever-available to reply every second throughout the day. This expectation often makes conversations more pressure-filled. It becomes energy-reducing to reply and guilt-inducing to not. Even having conversations with people on video calls was hard. Where there existed tone, there existed near to no non-verbal cues that could signal to me whether or not what I said made any sense. Zoom made me feel more seen than I wanted to, hyper-aware of what I looked like on-screen, and ever on guard to not end up doing anything embarrassing. In a lecture filled with a hundred people or so, it felt daunting to even speak up in class. I could picture professors thinking about how incompetent I was in my scrambled answers. The few times I did, the black cloud refused to leave me alone, insisting that I continued to embody embarrassment. Everything slowly became more and more draining, furthering alienation.

In such a circumstance, I wonder, am I the only one? It certainly does seem so when everyone else is seemingly coping fine. The promise of the world opening up again feels even more daunting now. Nagging me, yet again, the cloud says, "Haven't you forgotten how to interact socially altogether? If everything opens up, you'll just embarrass yourself further."

The fear of going back into the world again, with my frazzled and anxious self feels very real. I wonder if being in the middle of a classroom with a hundred distracted kids would help me realize that no one is focusing on me, or if it would get too overwhelming to feel eyes on me. One is already scary, over-complicating what physical conversation takes for granted, but the other holds within its grasp the overwhelming nature of unpredictability and in-person embarrassment.

Oh, decisions, decisions.

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PROFITS SIGNAL 'ALL-OUT WAR ON AMERICAN CONSUMERS'

The largest oil companies in the United States, ExxonMobil and Chevron, posted respective third-quarter 2022 profits of nearly \$20 billion and \$11.2 billion, intensifying outrage from advocates and lawmakers who say the corporations are actively fleecing the public.

"It's no surprise that after months of extreme price gouging, Chevron and Exxon raked in a whopping \$73 billion in profits so far this year," said Jordan Schreiber, director of energy and environment at Accountable.US. "But, instead of providing badly needed relief to consumers, they spent over \$32 billion to enrich their wealthy shareholders while forcing American families to foot the bill."

"Make no mistake," Schreiber added, "Big Oil has launched an all-out war on American consumers this year, needlessly extracting every last dime out of working and middle-class people."

Exxon's record-shattering \$19.7 billion in profit bolstered by surging gas exports, is three times higher than what the company reported during the same period last year, an indication that the company has benefited handsomely from energy market chaos that has driven up costs across the globe. Exxon has overtaken Facebook parent Meta Platforms Inc. in market value and is now back in the S&P 500 Index's top 10 stocks for the first time since 2019.

Shareholders have been the main beneficiaries of Exxon's post-pandemic comeback. At the beginning of the year, Chief Executive Officer Darren Woods reactivated share repurchases that had been on hold for more than half a decade. The \$15 billion-a-year buyback program is about the same cash outlay as Exxon's dividend, already the second-largest in the S&P 500 Index.

Woods said that "there has been discussion in the U.S. about our industry returning some of our profits directly to the American people. That's exactly what we're doing in the form of our quarterly dividend," a remark that drew immediate mockery and outrage.

Chevron's third-quarter profit figure was its second-highest on record and nearly double the \$6.1 billion it reported during the same time last year.

The U.S. oil giants' banner earnings numbers came 24 hours after the European energy behemoths Shell and Total reported huge third-quarter profits, sparking fresh calls for a windfall profits tax to return some of the gains to consumers struggling to heat their homes and afford other necessities ahead of the winter season.

Earlier, the U.S. gas giant Valero reported a 500% profit increase.

While U.S. President Joe Biden has criticized oil companies for raking in massive profits at the expense of consumers, he has thus far declined to endorse a windfall profits tax, opting instead to demand voluntary action from fossil fuel executives.

Lindsay Owens, executive director of the **Groundwork Collaborative**, argued on social media that such a passive approach won't be enough to stop corporate profiteering.

"One thing is clear: they won't stop until someone makes them," wrote Owens, who along with her Groundwork colleagues has been tracking corporate earnings calls and reports throughout the year.

Owens observed that "executives are admitting to the strategy of keeping prices high because it means bigger profits for their companies and massive payouts to their shareholders. The need for urgent action is undeniable—but you don't have to take the word of watchdogs or critics. Corporations themselves are admitting to profiteering at the expense of American consumers. And one thing is clear: These companies won't stop doing the 'inflation dance,' as one CEO called it, until we change their tune."

Sen. Elizabeth Warren was among the progressive members of Congress demanding legislative action following the latest batch of earnings reports.

"Big Oil is raking in obscene profits while gouging Americans at the pump, Putin's war in Ukraine is driving up prices, giving oil companies a massive windfall, and lining investor pockets with stock buybacks. We must crack down on corporate price gouging."

Robert Weissman, the president of Public Citizen, said in a statement that "it's past time for Congress to put an end to this madness. A windfall profits tax with rebates to taxpayers would offset the pain at the pump and limit Big Oil's egregious rip-offs. Even Shell's CEO, Ben van Beurden, acknowledges that it makes sense for governments to tap the industry to aid struggling consumers. Oil and gas executives, and lawmakers, should follow this rare bit of common sense from an executive at an industry that has done so much damage to our planet and consumers."

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