

# Experimenting with Truth

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It is with a distinct sense of *deja vu* that in December 2005, I began writing this foreword, during yet another round-up of activists arrested for crimes the United States government labels “ecoterrorism.”<sup>1</sup> The arrests occurred in five different states, and the allegations included a series of arson attacks on federal buildings associated with US agricultural and forest practices, and private companies involved in logging or lumber production, as well as the downing of a transmission tower in the Pacific Northwest. The actions were claimed by the Earth Liberation Front and, in one case, as a joint effort between the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front. Most of the activists arrested as suspects in these crimes face prison terms of up to twenty years if convicted, and one or more could even serve a life sentence.

On 23 December 2005, a day after finishing what I thought would be the final draft of this foreword, I learned that one of those arrested, William C. Rodgers, committed suicide while awaiting extradition from Arizona to Washington State to face accusations springing from a string of arson attacks, including on federal research facilities involved in the genetic modification of poplar trees, and the burning of several buildings at the Vail ski resort in Colorado, which was expanding into habitat considered by biologists to be critical to the survival of the endangered Canadian Lynx. The forty-year-old proprietor of a radical bookstore in Prescott, Arizona, was well known and beloved in his community and among radical environmentalists who knew him, as well as by his students from the days when he worked in outdoor environmental education for Lesley University’s Audubon Expedition Institute and for Prescott College. The crimes he was suspected of, and his refusal to remain incarcerated, underscore the high stakes that are involved when activists turn to extra-legal tactics in their resistance to the destructive forces of an always expansionist and predatory market capitalism.

These arrests reminded me of the first time I had heard about such tactics being deployed, in the late 1980s, when five activists were arrested for sabotage in several incidents in the Southwest. They were charged with attempting to down transmission towers coming from a nuclear power plant in Arizona, and for sabotage of ski lifts at a resort planning to expand and further desecrate lands considered sacred to many American Indians. The suspects were all eventually convicted and those most directly involved served several years in prison.

Probably like many who will read the book you now hold, I was drawn to such bold acts of resistance both out of raw curiosity (who *are* these people and what is motivating them?), and because of my own frustration and recognition that mainstream environmental strategies had been unable to halt or even significantly slow an intensifying environmental crisis. I wondered if direct action—both civil disobedience and sabotage—might provide more effective means of environmental struggle. I left my academic enclave in order to meet the activists promoting such tactics in an effort to determine whether there was promise or peril (or both) in the approaches

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<sup>1</sup> “6 Arrested Years after Ecoterrorist Acts,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2005, A18.

with which they were experimenting. I thereby began a long journey, researching and writing about radical environmentalism and ecological resistance movements.<sup>2</sup>

When looking back at twenty-five years of environment-related resistance since the founding of Earth First!, I find more similarities than differences between the 1980s and now. Some factions and branches of the resistance, perhaps especially the most militant ones, have grown and expanded their fields of operation. There are more who express primitivist and/or anarchist ideologies. There appears to be less tension and more cooperation between animal and earth liberationists. Greater numbers of activists are both advocating and practicing sabotage and arson. More activists articulate a rationale for armed struggle—although they are still few in number, none seem to call for the deployment of such tactics immediately, and there are no examples of such violence as yet. Among Earth First! activists, there seems to be a decreasing interest in deep ecology and spiritually-focused approaches to ecological resistance in favor of more cultural and political approaches. At the same time, however, there has been more interest in spirituality within anarchist subcultures that, generally speaking, used to view religion as simply a way in which elites legitimate their power. Clearly, there is increasing fusion between radical environmentalism, and urban punk and anarchist subcultures. Yet most of the internal points of contention remain, including whether these movements are radical or revolutionary, and what these terms mean.

*Igniting a Revolution* represents an intensification of a political instinct that until the mid 1990s was largely just talk—the effort to cross class, ethnic, gender, and ideological divides and build new kinds of radical alliances, like those between earth and animal liberationists, Black liberationists, Native Americans, and anti-imperialists. This book is both a reflection of new multi-issue global alliance politics and a contribution to their potential formation. In *Igniting a Revolution*, Steven Best and Anthony J. Nocella, II have assembled fascinating and rarely heard voices that seek to intensify and unify the gathering resistance to the destructive forces of global market capitalism.

This volume will interest any reader who wishes to hear directly from some of the leading intellectuals, activists, and prisoners involved in these movements. The insights gained by listening directly to these voices—rather than by accepting the sometimes biased and often ill-informed interpretation of these movements by their adversaries, journalists, and many academics—can hardly be underestimated. Perhaps most important is to hear for oneself what motivates these activists; such attentiveness illustrates that many of them speak not only with anger about the injustices they perceive, but

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<sup>2</sup> For my own interpretive work about the movement, see “The Religion and Politics of Earth First!” *The Ecologist* 21, no. 6 [November/December] (1991): 258–66, and Taylor, Bron, ed. *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995). The most synthetic introduction I have written to the radical movements is “Radical Environmentalism” and “Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front,” which appear in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor, Bron, ed. London & NY: Continuum, 2005. v 2. 1326–35 and v 1, 518–24). These and other essays exploring these movements are available online at <<http://www.religionandnature.com/bron>>.

also with passion and love for the world they consider endangered. *Igniting a Revolution* thus provides little-known histories and perspectives from activists and political prisoners on the front lines of the resistance, those who are now beginning to talk with one another. With a little imagination, this book may provide the next best thing to joining radical activists in the trees, urban neighborhoods, prisons, or what Edward Abbey called “nightwork,” that is, sabotage under the cover of darkness.

Yet before you read on, I would offer a few cautions.

First, I would urge that readers understand that these essays do not represent the whole spectrum of opinion in the environmental movement (whether mainstream or radical), nor do they, in most cases, explore the possible rebuttals or alternative approaches that other activists would offer. It is worth noting one critical reason for at least some of the disagreement among activists: it is exceedingly difficult to determine what the levers of social change are, or how to counter the power that inheres to corporations and the governments who generally serve their interests. Consequently, it is inevitable that among people who care about and seek to slow or halt global warming, species extinctions, or promote greater equity among human beings, there would be diverse approaches offered as the most effective means toward the desired ends. This particular book, by focusing on what the editors call “revolutionary environmentalism,” provides a unique window into such visions and related political perspectives and practices.

Second, I would stress that revolutionary rhetoric often does not match the reality on the ground. It is one thing to argue that it is morally permissible or politically effective to deploy a given tactic, and another to undertake that action. It is yet another thing for readers who agree with the position to then put it into practice. Here I am thinking especially about the rationale for tactics involving property destruction, or tactics that seek to injure or kill adversaries. There have always been more people who are willing to argue for the permissibility or necessity of such violence than who are willing to put their ideas into practice.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps as the ecological crisis grows ever more severe, the most militant and martial rhetoric will converge with activist practices. To date, however, there are still relatively few activists who defend the use of violence and very few indeed who have elected to actually harm people in an effort to achieve their goals.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony J. Nocella, II and Richard Kahn. “Serious Politics, Serious Consequences: Reinventing Direct Actions Educational Strategies.” December 20, 2005. <[www.animalliberationfront.com](http://www.animalliberationfront.com)>

<sup>4</sup> I have written about the likelihood of violence springing from these movements in three articles: “Religion, Violence, and Radical Environmentalism: From Earth First! to the Unabomber to the Earth Liberation Front,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10 no. 4 (1998): 10–42; “Threat Assessments and Radical Environmentalism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15 no. 4 (Winter 2004): 172–83; and “Revisiting Ecoterrorism.” In *Religionen Im Konflikt*, edited by Vasilios N. Makrides and Jbrg Rüpke. Münster, Germany: Aschendorff, 2004. This last article explains why animal liberationist subcultures are more likely to engage in intentional violence than are environmental liberationists. While this book suggests that the likelihood of intentional violence emerging from members of these groups may well be increasing, it is still worth asking—before we consider them to be some subset of terrorists (if they are): Where are the bodies? It is also important to note that in environmental conflicts, the overwhelming

Certainly, many who hear the term “revolutionary” will have a visceral, fearful reaction. But it is worth underscoring from the outset that for many, the term “revolutionary” is concerned primarily with making lasting, systemic change. The revolutionaries featured in this book seek to overturn contemporary social and ecological conditions that they judge to be anti-democratic and anti-ecological in favor of democratic, environmentally-sustainable ecosystems and communities. Many of them fervently believe their demands and visions cannot be realized within the constraints of current social arrangements, without abolishing these systems altogether.

Such qualifications made, there is no doubt that for many who identify with revolutionary environmentalism, there is both a willingness, if not insistence, that more militant tactics are necessary, including sabotage, and sometimes actions even more risky to activists and adversaries alike. So anyone drawn to such tactics should be clearheaded—for this is serious business. The authorities have steadily increased the penalties for such actions. The PATRIOT Act and other laws have further empowered government surveillance, increasing the likelihood and costs of apprehension. The case of Jeffrey Luers, from whom you can hear directly in this volume, is instructive. He was convicted for torching several sport utility vehicles in an action that resulted in no injuries, and sentenced to over 22 years in prison.

This draconian sentence reminded me of Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*, which asserts that arrests and jail can be very good for a revolutionary or social change movement by dramatizing the cause, making its leaders martyrs, and inspiring others to action. Alinsky added that jail can provide precious time to think carefully about and refine goals and strategies. But he also argued that if the incarceration is too long it will be counterproductive, removing the revolutionary from action.<sup>5</sup> To Alinsky’s concerns I would add that long incarcerations can discourage followers while costing the movement time and resources as these are shifted into prisoner support.<sup>6</sup> Some activists and, no doubt, contributors to this volume, would view Alinsky’s rules as quaint and obsolete, but it is certainly worth discussing if and when Alinsky’s rules should be ignored or followed.

Third, while appreciating the many contributions of this groundbreaking volume, it is also important to recognize its limitations. Despite the many essays included in this anthology, few activists have the time or inclination to focus on movement

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proportion of violence has been directed at activists, and this is particularly true in the global south. For a somewhat dated introduction that nevertheless demonstrates the trend, see Helvarg, David. *The War Against the Greens*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Alinsky, Saul. *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Vintage, 1971. See esp. “Time in Jail” (155–58) in which he explains both the positive and potentially negative aspects of incarceration. One positive aspect he mentions is the rare opportunity to reflect and refine one’s strategic thinking. On the negative side, he comments, “the trouble with a long jail sentence is that (a) a revolutionary is removed from action for such an extended period of time that he loses touch, and (b) if you are gone long enough everybody forgets about you.”

<sup>6</sup> This is one reason that Edward Abbey crafted *The Monkeywrench Gang’s* “Code of the Eco-Warrior” to include, “if you get caught you’re on your own” (NY: Avon, 1975).

history. Consequently, commonly received depictions of the alleged racism or other faults of earlier activists are sometimes based on thin evidence, or statements ripped out of context, which have become magnified through oral transmission. In my view, the depiction of some of the early founders of Earth First! as racist provides a good example.<sup>7</sup> Some criticisms of certain writings were made that ignored the context or qualifications that accompanied the offending statements. Often these criticisms were made by political rivals uninterested in fairness, but the criticisms were subsequently taken at face value, passed on orally and in later writings, becoming something of their own reality. Just as it would be wise to avoid taking criticisms of specific figures at face value, so is it ill advised to accept uncritically romantic depictions of individual activists or specific movement branches. A critical approach leads to appreciation of both virtues as well as limitations, failings, and sometimes, outright unreasonableness.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, I think ongoing, critical thinking about the reasons for the emergence and intensification of ‘ ‘radical” or “revolutionary” environmentalism is crucially important. Clearly, contemporary political institutions have been corrupted by corporate power and wealth. It is certainly understandable why some would question even civilization itself, given its obvious destructive power and inertia, and decide therefore that the only appropriate response is a comprehensive revolution. Some articles in this volume present forceful arguments for such approaches. If a revolutionary response is indeed justifiable or is the only reasonable response, then such strategies will stand up to critical scrutiny.

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<sup>7</sup> A good specific example is the article by Miss Ann Thropy (a pseudonym for Christopher Manes), who wrote with regard to environmental decline, “the only real hope...is an enormous decline in human population.” He added that AIDS has advantages over other cataclysms that might otherwise reduce population, especially because “it only affects humans” and therefore “has the potential to significantly reduce human population without harming other life forms” (see “Population and AIDS,” *Earth First!* 7 no. 5 (1 May 1987): 32. Those who criticized this writer and the journal editors for publishing the article, charging that it was misanthropic or callous, never cited an important qualification made in the article, that “None of this is intended to disregard or discount the suffering of AIDS victims.” The critics universally ignored the central contention of the article, that human overpopulation itself causes great suffering, both of humans and among the broader life community, and important context of the overall argument. One need not endorse the argument to note that a careful reading of the article reveals that some of the criticism of it was not based on a full and fair understanding of it.

<sup>8</sup> For example, I am thinking of Judi Bari, one of the contending figures for power and influence in the movement from the middle of the 1980s until her death in 1997, at the age of 47. An important figure certainly to those who considered themselves involved in a revolutionary movement, she spoke early and eventually published an article about “Revolutionary Ecology” in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Journal of Socialist Ecology* 8 no. 2 (1997): 145–49. Those who knew her understood she was a complicated character—charismatic, funny, passionate—as well as one who was not obviously politically effective. Some activists concluded she had become emotionally troubled and ineffective. Still others fought fiercely against those who recalled her less effective or unsavory sides. In my view, it is better to neither exaggerate the virtues or vices of the individuals involved in concrete social struggles. Imperfect people can make significant contributions and sometimes they make missteps that have been devastating to their own causes. There are valuable lessons both ways.

There are a number of questions that seem seldom raised by those most inclined to urge a revolutionary response, however. One might ask, for instance, how compelling is an ideology that requires a highly optimistic view of the very species that is responsible for so much destruction? That there are elites who are more responsible than others does not seem to overturn this question, for few people seem immune from desiring greater affluence or power when the opportunity is present. From this, a second question follows: Does an ideology, revolutionary or not, have the resources within it to bridle the abuse of power, even if wielded by the revolutionary agents themselves? It is understandable that those intent on halting destruction and living in the revolutionary (or at least, the resistant) moment, would not be focused on this latter question. But before we conclude any ideology is worth our energy, let alone our prospective liberty, it would be wise to have an answer to this question.

It is, essentially, the age old question central to social philosophy: How can we order our common lives to promote the commonwealth and protect the weak? While revolutionary environmentalists have arguably contributed to moral evolution by insisting that the commonwealth be understood to include all forms of life, it is less certain they have found a compelling answer to how we achieve and maintain it. This may, indeed, be an unobtainable task, but it is a worthy pursuit. It is, therefore, important to scrutinize every proffered solution, both means and ends, to see which sorts of political systems might actually be compatible with the flourishing of ecosystems in which they are situated.

Then again, it is only through “experiments with truth” (to borrow a phrase from Gandhi’s autobiography) during concrete political struggles that we have a chance to discover or recover viable solutions.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps generations from now, revolutionary environmentalists will be lauded for making a decisive contribution to a sustainable future by having the courage to experiment boldly with paths to it. And perhaps some key elements of the solution will be found in the pages of this important and provocative collection.

In an anthology I compiled entitled *Ecological Resistance Movements*, I spoke about how values are linked to and embedded in narratives. I urged readers to consider whether they found any of the stories in that volume inspiring, and if the forms of resistance described and analyzed there made sense, and were worth emulating. The same question seems equally pertinent here. The narratives and voices in this volume flow within the broader currents of progressive environmentalism and social justice movements. Which of them are compelling emotionally, and square with your own moral sentiments? Which make the most sense strategically? This volume, carefully

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<sup>9</sup> For a way into the conundrums, readers could start with my analysis of green social philosophy, “Deep Ecology and Its Social Philosophy,” in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays on Deep Ecology*, edited by Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000 or with Andrew Bard Schmockler’s *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984 and Andrew Dobson’s *Green Political Thought: An Introduction*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

considered within the light of social movement histories and the analysis of them, might well help us discern how we might more effectively stand up for life on earth.



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Foreword to *Igniting a Revolution*.  
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