

(Introduction to an earlier version--2019--of)

Lawbreaking and Ecoterrorism

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(the full paper in final form was published in Benjamin Hale, Andrew Light, and Lydia Lawhon, eds., The Routledge Companion to Environmental Ethics, 1st Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), pp. 794-806.

"Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent revolution inevitable."
John F. Kennedy (1962)

"I do not believe in violence as in any sense a solution to any problem."
Wendell Berry (2008)

Introduction

Imagine a future where climate change, mass extinction, and planetary poisoning are brought to an end by a campaign of political violence carried out by a coalition of radical environmental groups. Hackers manage to shut down computer systems that run coal-fired powerplants. World-wide, targeted attacks on machinery stymie new human encroachment into natural areas. Industrial-scale fishing is hamstrung as vessels are sunk. Environmentally-harmful consumption is seriously discouraged when the tires of gas-guzzling vehicles are routinely slashed, trophy houses as likely to be burned to the ground as successfully built, and those who eat meat in public are frequently spray painted with a red X. Would such a campaign count as terrorism? Would it be morally justified?

The term "ecoterrorism" was probably first used by anti-environmentalists trying to discredit the environmental movement (Arnold 1983). They applied the label to acts of sabotage (e.g., tree spiking, bulldozer siltation, and more—see Foreman and Haywood, 1985) carried out by some within the environmental movement in the late 1970s and 1980s. Since then, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) has classified groups and acts as ecoterrorist, has successfully

prosecuted environmental activists as terrorists, and has imprisoned them with longer sentences using “terrorism enhancements” (Harris 2007). Some in the radical environmental movement have advocated tactics that seem to fit this rubric and there have been concrete instances of acts that likely warrant the label.

For many, ‘terrorism’ is a word used to condemn more than describe. If something counts as terrorism, then it is morally odious. If something is morally permissible, then it cannot be terrorism. With this usage, the test of terrorism is not simply what is done but whether one believes it was justified. This leads to arbitrary and hypocritical applications of the term, as suggested by the cliché “one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter.” Even though we use similar tactics, it is only those who fight against us that are the terrorists. Consider that many of the thousands killed by U.S. drone strikes in the “war on terror” are innocent civilians (Cavallaro et al. 2012) and yet few in the U.S. would consider this practice to involve terrorism.

When most people in the United States think of terrorism, they think of the September 11, 2001 Al-Qaeda attack that killed almost 3000 people in New York and Washington. They think of foreign suicide bombers exploding themselves in crowded public spaces. But many examples of terrorism are domestic, not international. Consider the thousands of lynchings of African-Americans by the Ku Klux Klan in the late 19th and 20th centuries or the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building by anti-government fanatics that killed and injured hundreds, including infants in a day-care center inside the building. Ted Kaczynski—known as the Unabomber for his targeting of university personnel—is perhaps the best example of an environmental terrorist. Between 1978 and 1995, he sent over a dozen bombs in the mail, killing a computer store owner, an advertising executive, and timber industry lobbyist. He also maimed a number of university professors. His goal was to help bring an end to the industrial-

technological system that, he believed, was destroying the natural world and technologically-enslaving humanity.

Terrorism seems the epitome of pure, unadulterated evil. Nevertheless, the assumption that terrorism is an absolute moral wrong is contentious. It would have us automatically condemn the allied “terror bombing” of German cities during WWII, a campaign that severely injured or killed over one million Germans, most of them civilians (Walzer 1977: 255-56). Its goal was to inflict sufficient death and destruction on civilians in order to break the German will to pursue the war. Or consider that Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first black President, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace despite having advocated violence in the early days of the campaign to overthrow the apartheid regime.

Although we should not assume that all terrorism (including ecoterrorism) is necessarily wrong, such acts face a seriously high burden of justification. While there can be good reasons for breaking the law, doing so is no trivial matter. In relatively just societies, it violates norms of fairness, promise keeping, and the duty to uphold just institutions (Hettinger 2001). If environmentalists expect those who would degrade the environment to obey laws with which they disagree, then environmentalists also can be expected to act in a law-abiding manner. The complexity of arguments for civil disobedience (Welchman, this volume) shows that even non-violent, submissive law-breaking must overcome substantial moral objections. Law breaking that is coercive, intimidating, and violent is thus exceedingly difficult to defend. Only in extreme circumstances might it be justified. Are we now facing such a situation? Humans are destabilizing the earth’s climate, wiping out other forms of life in massive numbers, acidifying and strip-mining the oceans, appropriating and homogenizing earth’s ecosystems, and generally taking over and poisoning the planet. Many environmentalists believe that we confront an

extreme environmental emergency that requires drastic action. Might terrorism be an appropriate tool to bring about the significant changes needed?