
What Goes Up Must Come Down

Derrick Jensen

As a long-time grassroots environmental activist, and as a creature living in the thrashing endgame of civilization, I am intimately acquainted with the landscape of loss, and have grown accustomed to carrying the daily weight of despair. I have walked clearcuts that wrap around mountains, drop into valleys, then climb ridges to fragment watershed after watershed. I've sat silent near empty streams that, two generations ago, were "lashed into whiteness" by uncountable salmon coming home to spawn and die.

A few years ago I began to feel pretty apocalyptic. But I hesitated to use that word, partly because of those drawings I've seen of crazy penitents carrying "The End is Near!" signs, and also because of the power of the word itself. Apocalypse. I didn't want to use the term lightly.

But then a friend and fellow activist said, "What will it take for you to finally call it an apocalypse? The death of the salmon? Global warming? The ozone hole? The reduction of krill populations off Antarctica by ninety percent? The turning of the sea off San Diego into a dead zone? The collapse of earthworm populations in the Midwest? The cutting of remnants of this continent's native forests? The extirpation of two hundred species per day? Four hundred? Six hundred? Give me a specific threshold, Derrick, a specific point at which you will finally use that word."

Do you believe that our culture will undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living?

I didn't think you would. I don't either, and neither does anyone I talk to. For the last couple of years I've taken to asking people this question, at talks and rallies, in libraries, on buses, in airplanes, at the grocery store, the hardware store. Everywhere. The answers range from emphatic "no"s to laughter. No one answers in the affirmative. One fellow at a talk did raise his hand, and when everyone looked at him, he dropped his hand, then said, sheepishly, "Oh, voluntary? Of course not." My next question: How would this understanding—that our culture will not voluntarily stop destroying the natural world, eliminating indigenous cultures, exploiting

the poor, and killing those who resist—shift our strategy or tactics? The answer? Nobody knows, because we never talk about it.

This essay is about that shift in strategy and tactics.

I just got home from talking to a new friend, another long-time activist. She told me of a campaign she participated in a few years ago to try to stop the government and transnational timber corporations from spraying Agent Orange, a potent defoliant and cancer-causing agent, in the forests of Oregon. Whenever activists learned that a hillside was going to be sprayed, they assembled there, hoping their presence would stop the poisoning. But each time, like clockwork, the helicopters appeared, and each time, like clockwork, the helicopters dumped their loads of Agent Orange onto the hillside, onto the protesting activists. The campaign did not succeed.

"But," she said to me, "I'll tell you what did work. A bunch of Vietnam vets lived back in those hills, and they sent messages to the Bureau of Land Management, and to Weyerhaeuser, Boise Cascade, and the other timber companies, saying, 'We know the names of your helicopter pilots, and we know their addresses.'"

I waited for her to finish.

"You know what happened next?" she asked.

"I think I do," I responded.

"Exactly," she said. "The spraying stopped."

Closely allied to all of this is the second point, which might also be another way of saying the same thing. The same action can often seem immoral from one perspective and moral from another. What's more, the same action can often be moral from one perspective and immoral from another. From the perspective, for example, of salmon or other creatures, including humans, whose lives depend on free-flowing rivers, dams are murderous and immoral. From this perspective, to remove dams would be extremely moral. Those who make money from the generation of hydroelectricity, or who irrigate from reservoirs, or who live downriver and who very well might be killed if the dams were suddenly to burst, would probably take a dim view of the morality of someone intentionally blowing up the Grand Coulee or Glen Canyon dams. Of course the most moral thing to have done—defining morality in this case to be roughly similar to serving life—would have been to not build these or any other large dams in the first place. But they're built, and they continue to be built the world over, to the consistent short-term fiscal benefit of huge corporations—really the primary consideration of any political decision—and over the determined yet usually unsuccessful resistance of the poor.

The second most moral thing to do—continuing to define morality the same way—would be to let the water out slowly, and then breach the dams more or less gently, taking the survival needs (as opposed to the more abstract requirements of our economic system) of all humans and nonhu-

mans into account as we let rivers once again run free. But the dams are there; they're killing the rivers. In the Northwest, salmon and sturgeon are fast disappearing from the region, and in the Southwest, the Colorado River no longer even reaches the ocean. The current political, economic, and social systems have shown themselves to not only be consistently unresponsive, but irredeemably detrimental to human and nonhuman needs. Faced with a choice between healthy functioning natural communities on one hand, and profits on the other hand, those in power of course always choose the latter option. What, then, becomes the most moral thing to do? Do we stand by and watch the last of the salmon die? Do we write letters and file lawsuits that we know in our hearts will ultimately not make much difference, or do we take out the dams ourselves?

Here are more questions: what would the rivers themselves want? Would it cause them additional pain to have the dams blown, or would they perceive that as their release from a cement cage?

I'm aiming at a far bigger and more profound target than the nearly twelve million cubic yards of cement that went into the Grand Coulee Dam. I want to examine the morality and feasibility of intentionally taking down not just dams but all of civilization. I aim to examine this as unflinchingly and honestly as I can, even, or especially, at the risk of examining topics normally considered off-limits to discourse.

I am not the first to make the case—as I have in my other work—that the industrial economy, indeed, civilization (which underpins and gives inevitable rise to it), is incompatible with human and nonhuman freedoms, and in fact with human and nonhuman life.¹ If you accept that the industrial economy—and beneath it, civilization—is destroying the planet and creating unprecedented human suffering among the poor (and if you don't accept this, go ahead and put this book down, back away slowly, turn on the television, and take some more soma: the drug should kick in soon enough, your agitation will disappear, you'll forget everything I've said, and then everything will be perfect again, just like the voices from the television tell you over and over), then it becomes clear that the best thing that can happen, from the perspective of essentially all nonhumans as well as the vast majority of humans, is for the industrial economy (and civilization) to go away, or in the shorter run for it to be slowed as much as humanly possible during the time we await its final collapse.

But here's the problem: this slowing of the industrial economy will inconvenience many of those who benefit from it, including nearly everyone in the United States. Many of those who will be inconvenienced identify so much more with their role as participants in the industrial economy than they do with being human, that they may very well consider this inconvenience to be a threat to their very lives. I'll discuss this more later, but for now the salient point is that those people will not allow themselves to be inconvenienced without a fight. What, then, becomes the right thing to

do? Here's another way to ask this: Is it possible to talk about fundamental social change without asking ourselves questions we too often refuse to ask? Such as, "What if those in power are murderous? What if they're not willing to listen to reason at all? Should we continue to approach them nonviolently? When is violence an appropriate means to stop injustice?"

With the world dying—or rather being killed—we no longer have the luxury to ignore these questions. They are questions that won't go away.

For years now I've been talking about blowing up dams to help salmon, but suddenly today I realized I've been all wrong.

This understanding came as I read a description of attempts by ancient Egyptians to dam the Nile, and the Nile's resistance to these attempts. It was all a pretty straightforward process. The Egyptians would erect a dam, and the river would shrug it off, probably with as little effort as a horse quivering the skin of its shoulder to get rid of a fly.

By now, however, the concrete straitjackets have become massive enough that rivers have a harder time sloughing them off, the equivalent, to extend the above simile, to encasing a horse in concrete, leaving holes at head and tail to allow food and water to pass. The rivers need our help. (I first wrote "They may need our help," but even without me asking a couple of rivers strongly requested I remove the qualifier.) They can't do it themselves, at least in the short or medium run.

I've always wanted to blow up dams in order to save salmon, sturgeon, and other creatures whose lives depend on wild and living rivers. But that's not right. We need to blow up dams for the rivers themselves, so they can be again the rivers they once were, forever, the rivers they still want to be, the rivers they themselves are struggling and fighting to once again become.

Liberating rivers, blowing up dams. The difference may seem semantic to you—like "liberating" versus "invading" Iraq, like "creating temporary meadows" versus clearcutting—but it doesn't to me, for a number of reasons.

Rhetoric aside, both invading Iraq and clearcutting are motivated by the culture's obsession to control and exploit. The primary reason is to gain, maintain, and use resources—oil in the first case (as well as to provide a staging area for further invasions), trees in the second. Further, both invading and clearcutting damage landscapes, damage our habitat. They also enchain the natural world.

The primary motivation for liberating a river, on the other hand, isn't selfish, except as it benefits oneself to live in an intact, functioning natural community (duh!), and as doing good feels good.

This all leads to probably the most important question so far: with whom or what do you primarily identify? A way to get at that question is

to ask: whom or what do your actions primarily benefit? Whom or what do you primarily serve?

Who or what primarily benefits from the invasion of Iraq? Let me put this more directly: who/what benefits from US access to Iraqi oil fields?

The US industrial economy, of course. If you care more about and identify more closely with the US industrial economy than you care about or identify with people killed by US bombs or bullets (or by the “blunt force trauma” of smackface: the CIA’s preferred term for beating captives, often to death)—people under whose land the oil resides—then you may support the US invasion of Iraq.

Similarly, if you identify more strongly with “forest products” corporations such as Weyerhaeuser or MAXXAM—or more broadly with the industrial economy—than you do with forests, you may support clearcutting.

Just today I saw an article in the local newspaper saying that local shrimp trawlers are complaining (accurately enough) about regulations California is (finally) putting in place to curtail the (extraordinary) damage done by trawling. Shrimp trawls are designed to maximize contact with the sea floor. They scrape away everything in their path, the undersea equivalent of clearcutting, picking up every living thing as they go. In some places eighty percent of the catch is “bycatch,” that is, creatures the trawlers can’t sell, and who are merely thrown overboard dead or dying.

Local trawlers say the regulations will force them out of business. Politicians say they’ll hurt the local economy. This amounts to an explicit acknowledgment on both their parts that shrimping, and more broadly the local economy (and more broadly still the entire industrial economy) is predicated on harming and eventually destroying the landbase.

If you identify more closely with the local economy than the local landbase, it may make sense to you to support an economy that damages this landbase, your own habitat.

If, on the other hand, you identify more strongly with your landbase than with the economy, it may make sense to you to protect your landbase, your habitat. And since the industrial economy is poisoning us all, the same would be true for those who identify more closely with their own bodies and their own survival (and the survival of those they purport to love) than they do the industrial economy.

Who benefits from the removal of dams?

If you identify more closely with the Klamath River and its salmon, steelhead, lamprey, and other residents than you do with the agri-corporations which primarily benefit from taking the river’s water, it may make sense to you to help the river return to running free, to liberate it from its concrete cage, or rather, to help it liberate itself. The same would be true for the Columbia, Colorado, Mississippi, Missouri, Sacramento, Nile, and all other rivers who would be better off without dams.

With what/whom do you most closely identify? Where is your primary allegiance? Where does your sense of skin extend, and what does it en-

compass? Does it include ExxonMobil, Monsanto, Microsoft? Do you give them fealty? Do you give them time, money? Do you serve them? Does it include the US government? Do you pledge it allegiance? Do you serve it? Does it include the land where you live? Do you act in its best interests?

I still haven’t really gotten to the difference between liberating rivers and blowing up dams. It’s one of focus, and intent. I’ve written elsewhere that if I were once again a child, faced only with the options of a child (i.e., no running away), but having the understanding I do now of the intractability of my father’s violence, I would have killed him. But the point would not have been to kill him. The point would have been to liberate me and my family from the rapes and beatings, to stop the horrors.

Similarly, I don’t have a thing for explosives. If I took out a dam, it wouldn’t be so I could get off on the big kaboom. I’m not even sure it would be to help the salmon (although yesterday I saw seven baby Coho in the stream behind my home, and fell in love with them all over again). It would be to help the river, which in turn would help the salmon. It would be to stop the horrors.

I think it would be virtually impossible for even the most dogmatic pacifist to make a moral argument against immediately taking down every cell phone tower in the world. Cell phones are, of course, annoying as hell. That might be a good enough reason to take down the towers, but there are even better reasons. There is, of course, the very real possibility that tower transmissions cause cancers and other problems to humans and nonhumans alike. Even ignoring this, however, there’s the fact that towers—cell phone, radio, and television—act as mass killing machines for migratory songbirds: five to 50 million per year.² These birds die so the jerk at the table next to you can yammer at full volume (of course) about his latest financial conquest.

To the direct killing of birds we can add as a cost of cell phones, the effect of speeded-up business communications, both because of the decreased quality of individual lives in a culture addicted to speed (“People who work for me should have phones in their bathrooms,” said the CEO of one American corporation³) and on the natural world as a whole (the activities of the economic system are killing the planet: the higher the GNP, the more quickly the living are converted to the dead).

The question becomes, how do you take out a cell phone tower? I need to say up front that I’m a total novice at this sort of thing. I am, to slip into the language of the mean streets, a goody two-shoes. My whole life I’ve rarely done anything illegal, not out of an equation on my part of morality and obedience (or subservience) to laws—at least I hope not—but instead, partly because many illegal activities, such as using illegal drugs repulse or scare me, while others, such as insider trading, simply do not hold my

interest. Even with those that do hold my interest—e.g., taking out dams, hacking, destroying (or otherwise liberating) corporate property—I'm not only almost completely ignorant of how to do it, but fairly nervous about getting caught. Don't get me wrong: I've raised a little hell in my time. Sometimes I go crazy and turn right on red without coming to a complete stop, and I routinely drive four or sometimes even nine miles over the speed limit. A few anarchist friends were trying to set up a talk where I'd share the stage with a couple of former Black Panthers. One of them did time for robbing a bank, the other for hijacking a plane. I thought a moment, then confessed, "I once shoplifted dog food from Wal-Mart." High fives were exchanged around the table.

I have to add that were I more attracted to illegal activities I would probably curtail them because of what I write. It's possible—though doubtful—that I've drawn at least a little attention from the powers-that-be, and the last thing I want to do is give them an excuse to pop me for something non-political (and frankly I'm not too keen on getting popped for something political either). If they want to come after me because of what I write, I'll take them on, and if someday I have the courage to quit writing and take out dams (note the plural: I don't agree with the Ploughshares tactic of turning yourself in if you destroy property belonging to the occupiers), they can try to catch me. But in the meantime, I'm not going to give them any cheap opportunities.

All of which is to say, I'm a coward. I'm going to write about how I would take down a cell phone tower here in town, but I'm not going to do it. If I were going to do it, I wouldn't be so stupid as to write about it, or even talk about it with anyone I didn't know and trust literally with my life. And all of that is to say that you FBI agents reading this essay (and the ones tracking my strokes on the keyboard) can go ahead and lose your erections. This isn't a confession. And even if your CIA buddies decide to play smackface with me there isn't much I can confess (unless you count the survey stakes I've removed, but I've already written about that, and besides, removing survey stakes is a fundamental human duty).

Recon is always the first step in any military action, so I drive my mom's car to the cell phone tower behind Safeway. I take her car not out of some fiendishly clever plot to make it so if anything happens she'll get sent up the river instead of me, but because my car has been sitting on blocks in her driveway for more than a year now (I never knew, by the way, that moss would grow along the weatherstripping around the rear window).

There are two towers I know of in Crescent City. There's the one behind Safeway, and another off in the woods a few blocks north. The one closest to the grocery store is in the open, which would obviously make taking it down more problematic. The tower is enclosed in a chain-link fence topped by barbed wire. The two sides of this fence farthest from Safeway face thick woods, which might provide a solution to the problem of it being in the open. I'm certain the fence could be cut easily and quickly.

The problem is that I wouldn't know what to do next. There are a couple of sheds inside, and I'd imagine that some gasoline and matches could render the whole thing inoperable. That may be great for (temporarily) stopping the guy at the restaurant from bothering his neighbors, and would slow the destructive march of the economic system, if only ever so slightly, but it wouldn't do a damn thing for the birds. Unfortunately, the tower itself is probably three feet in diameter, hollow with a two-inch shell of some sort of metal.

I sit in my car and look at it. I'm nervous, as though even thinking about how I would do this is enough to draw cops to me. (The same is true now as I write this.) Of course if I were going to bring this down I would never have driven here for this reconnaissance. At least not during the middle of the afternoon. I would have parked far away and walked. And there's no way I would have done it in this town, either. Crescent City is too small, and I'm too well known. For crying out loud, at the (excellent) Thai restaurant two blocks south of this tower they know me well enough to always bring me a huge glass of water without me asking, and like me well enough to pack my salad rolls full to bursting (of course after they read this essay my future salad rolls may be limp and wrinkly). I'm almost surprised no one has stopped by while I'm sitting in this car, just to say hi and pass the time of day. I don't know what to do. I'm a writer. I have no more idea how to take down this tower than I would know how to write a computer virus, or than I would know how to perform brain or heart surgery. Worse, I'm spatially and mechanically inept—probably a couple of standard deviations from the norm—with a heavy dose of absent-mindedness thrown in for good measure (and it seems that absent-mindedness would be a tremendous curse to anyone contemplating anything deemed illegal by those in power).

An example of the spatial ineptitude: whenever I pack for a road trip, my mom always takes a look at my suitcase, sighs, and repacks everything in about half the space.

An unfortunate experience in eighth-grade woodshop class highlights the mechanical problems. For our final project, we got to build whatever we wanted. I chose a birdhouse. I was excited. From close observation I knew the birds in our area (though I no longer live in a region with meadowlarks, even recorded versions of their songs still make me smile), and from reading I knew their habits and preferences. In some cases I knew their Latin names. I cut each piece of wood as meticulously as I could, nailed them together as tight as they would go (admittedly there were a fair number of gaps where my cuts hadn't quite been straight), then put putty in the nail holes. I stained it all (an irregular) dark brown. On the final day of class we each brought our projects to the front, one at a time. The other pieces looked pretty good, and I got increasingly nervous as my turn approached. For good reason. When I held up my birdhouse, the entire class burst into laughter. One of them—I still remember your name, David Flagg, and you're still not on my short list of people to invite over

to dinner—pointed at the lumps of still-white putty and shouted, “It looks like the birds have already been on it.” Even the teacher laughed so hard he had to remove his shop glasses and wipe his eyes.

The infamous shower curtain episode makes clear my absent-mindedness. My shower curtain was hanging too far into the tub. It floated when I showered, and I often stepped on or even tripped over it. After only about a year of this, I decided to fix it and cut off the bottom of the shower curtain. Only later did I remember that the bar (which I had purchased and installed) was springloaded, and it was a simple matter to just raise it a few inches.

The point is that when it comes time for us to start taking out dams, I’m not sure I’m the one you want holding the explosives.

That said, here’s what I’m thinking as I look at the cell phone tower. Basic principles. There are, I’d think, maybe six major ways to take down anything that’s standing. You can dismantle it. You can cut it down. You can pull it down. You can blow it up. You can undermine it until it collapses. You can remove its supports and let it fall down on its own. This is all as true for civilization as it is for cell phone towers.

In the (smaller) case before us, I think we can dismiss out of hand dismantling and digging. So far as the former, the tower is constructed of two or three huge pieces, and so is obviously not a candidate for dismantling. And the big parking lot (as well as presumably deep footings, would certainly eliminate digging.

Pulling it down can be dismissed just as easily, unless you’ve got some big earth moving equipment and a hefty cable to attach fairly high up on the tower. I don’t think my mom’s car has the horsepower to move it (and I know mine sure as hell doesn’t). I keep picturing that scene from *The Gods Must Be Crazy* where they attach one end of a cable to a tree and the other to a jeep, and end up winching their vehicle into the air. Oh, hello, officer. What am I doing up here? That’s a very good question. My cell phone reception has been really crappy lately, and I thought I’d get better reception if I got closer to the antenna. And say, would you mind helping me down?

Cutting would probably work, so long as we’re clear that we’re not talking about hacksaws. This tower is big. A grinder wouldn’t work either in this case. There are lots of cell phone and other towers out in the mountains, and so long as you had lookouts, grinders might work out there, but that much noise here in town seems contraindicated. Oh, hello, officer. What am I doing here? That’s a very good question... But an acetylene torch might do the trick, although once again here in town there’s a good chance it would draw some attention. And so far as me doing it, I have used acetylene torches, but you don’t even want to hear about my experiences in metal shop class (and yes, David, I still remember you from there, too).

Explosives would have the advantage of it not mattering whether anyone notices, because timers are easy enough to make that even I could use them, so by the time the tower comes down I could easily be in another

state (not quite so dramatic as it sounds here since I live about twenty minutes from the border). Additionally, in this case explosives would be safe. Although I’ve been saying this tower is “behind Safeway,” it’s way behind Safeway, in an old abandoned parking lot. The problem, once again, is that I know nothing about explosives. I was certainly a nerd in high school, college, and beyond, but evidently the wrong kind of nerd for the task at hand. While the science geeks were busy seeing what bizarre combinations of chemicals would blow things up, and dropping M-80s down toilets in (usually unsuccessful) attempts to get school cancelled (though being geeks I was never quite sure why they wanted to cancel school), me and my friends were reading books, and playing Dungeons and Dragons (and a hell of a lot of good that does me now: if only a +3 Dwarven War Hammer could bring down civilization, I’d be in great shape).

Ah, the pity of a misspent youth.

This all makes me wish I would have joined the Navy Seals, and learned how to blow things up. (I probably would have learned how to kill people too: strange, isn’t it, how when the system’s soldiers are taught to kill, that’s banal—the final night at boot camp, drill instructors sometimes christen their students’ new lives by saying, “You are now trained killers”⁴—but when someone who opposes the system even mentions the k-word, it’s met with shock, horror, the fetishization of potential future victims, and the full power of the state, this latter manifesting as those who’ve been trained to kill in support of the centralization of power.) Or better, it makes me wish I had a friend who was a Navy Seal, and who shared my politics.

This leads us to removing the tower’s supports and letting it fall on its own. That may be the easiest, and something even I could handle. The other tower, in the woods to the north, has about twenty guy wires. Everything I’ve read suggests these wires are even more deadly to birds than are the towers themselves. Some places you can pick up dead birds by the handful beneath the wires. Their necks are broken, skulls cracked, wings torn, beaks mangled. But I also know what happens when high tension wires are severed: those opposed to their own decapitation ought to be far away. Which leads us back to explosives.

But there’s good news in all of this. I see giant bolts surrounding the base of the tower behind Safeway. I’d imagine they’re secured very tightly, but for one of the few times in my life my physics degree might come in handy. Of course you don’t really need a physics degree to understand that if you want to unscrew a tight bolt all you need is a long lever arm on your wrench. Just as Archimedes said, “Give me a long enough lever and a place to stand and I can move the world,” I’ll go on record as saying that if you give me a long enough lever arm I can unscrew any bolt in the world—oh, okay, maybe just a lot of bolts that are pretty damn tight. So a huge pipefitter’s wrench with a long metal pipe over the end to extend your

lever arm might be enough to get you the torque you'd need to loosen the base (failing that, you could always cut the bolts instead of the tower itself: remember, always attack the weakest point). Then walk away and wait for the next windstorm to do the trick.

All this talk of taking down towers makes me wish I was a farmer, not only because the farmers I've known have generally been crackerjack mechanics—I was a farmer (commercial beekeeper) in my twenties, and learned, to my dismay, that most farmers spend far more time with machines than animals—but also because back in the 1970s a group of farmers called the Bolt Weevils were pioneers in the art and science of taking down towers. They specialized in towers for high-tension electrical wires.

It all started (and I'm indebted to Mary Losure of Minnesota Public Radio for this account:⁵ I'm not sure why, but accounts of the Bolt Weevils are fairly hard to come by) when the United Power Association and the Co-operative [sic] Power Association decided to put a 400 mile transmission line across Minnesota farmland between coal-fired generating stations in North Dakota and the industry and homes of the Twin Cities. As always, the poor would be screwed so the rich could benefit. First, as with water, most of this electricity would not be used to benefit human beings, but industry. Second, the utility corporations chose to put the powerlines across lands belonging to politically powerless family farmers rather than across huge corporate farms with political clout.

One of the farmers, Virgil Fuchs, became aware of the plan, and went door to door informing his neighbors. He was just in time: representatives from the utility corporations were right behind him trying to get farmers to sign easements. After Virgil's warning, not one farmer signed.

What follows is a story we've heard too many times, of local resistance overwhelmed by distant power, of politicians and bureaucrats who go out of their way to feign community interest while going just as far out of their way to stab these communities in the back. In essence, it's the story of civilization: of human beings and communities harmed, so cities and all they represent may grow.

Local townships passed resolutions disallowing the powerlines, and county boards refused permits for construction. The response by the corporations was to ignore local concerns and turn to the state for help. The farmers also turned to the state for help, speaking to their purported representatives. The response by the state government's Environmental Quality Council was predictable: public hearings were held, people voiced their opinions, and after discovering that opinions ran overwhelmingly against the powerlines, the state doctored the transcripts of the meetings (dropping out unfavorable testimony), then went ahead and granted the permits. One county sued, but the case was dismissed.

Government representatives promised they would at least let farmers know when construction would begin, but they lied. Suddenly one day surveyors showed up in Virgil Fuchs' fields.

Here is why, in many ways, I respect at least some family farmers more than most environmentalists: Fuchs fought back. He drove his tractor over the surveyors' equipment, and rammed their pickup truck.

It must be said, however, that Fuchs was, in some ways, risking less by doing this than had he done the same actions as an environmentalist. He was sentenced to community service, and eventually even the record of his arrest and conviction was expunged. You and I both know that any environmentalist who did this to equipment belonging to any extractive corporation would probably get charged with attempted murder, and receive at least 50 years in prison: remember that environmental activist Jeffrey Luers is serving more than 22 years for torching three SUVs in the middle of the night when no one was around, and three environmentalists face up to 80 years for allegedly torching an unoccupied logging truck. Similarly, when gun-wielding farmers in the Klamath Valley stood off sheriffs and sabotaged public dams to force water to be diverted away from salmon and toward their (publicly-subsidized) potato farms, sheriffs joined the fun and no one was arrested, let alone indicted, let alone prosecuted, let alone sent to prison, let alone shot. And they got the water. If you or I re-sabotage those dams to keep water for salmon (water for fish: what a quaint notion!), and we pull guns on sheriffs as we're doing so, we, too, wouldn't go to prison. But we would go to the cemetery.

Farmers began gathering, at Fuchs' farm, and at others across several counties. They fought the surveyors wherever and however they could. They'd suddenly, for example, gain permission from the county to dig a ditch across a road for this reason or that. One farmer stood next to the surveyors running his chainsaw so the workers couldn't communicate.

Local sheriffs did the right thing, or at least didn't do the wrong thing. One said,

As sheriff of this county, I became involved when the landowners and other concerned citizens objected to trespasses of their property [by the power companies]. In the meantime the power companies expect my department to use unlimited force, if necessary, to accomplish their survey and ultimately the routing of the powerline. In my opinion this is a situation that began with the Environmental Quality Council, at the request of the power companies, and that's where the problem should be remanded for resolution. I will not point a gun at either the farmer or a surveyor. To point a gun is to be prepared to shoot, and this situation certainly does not justify either. It does justify a review of the conditions that bring about such citizen resistance.

Where is this sheriff when environmentalists need him? If only sheriffs would always defend local humans against distant corporations, or at the very least, not enforce the ends of these corporations through violence.

The governor also refused to intervene. That's where things stood when a new governor took office that winter. Things looked good for the farmers: the new governor considered himself a populist. As one farmer

said, "He thought of himself as representative of the people, with a capital P, not of the bureaucracy or the bigwigs or the business people, and so he had, I think, a great hope and belief that he could get people together and solve the problems."

But when politicians present themselves as representatives of regular people it's time to start packing (either your luggage so you can flee, or a pistol, so you can, well, you know...you choose which).

The governor took to slipping off in secret to visit farmers at their homes. He told them he sympathized, and said, "You really got stuck in this case."

Philip Martin, head of United Power Association, sympathized too. He'd grown up on a farm, and he even knew and loved Virgil's mother—"She reminded me somewhat of my own mother," he said—but as from the beginning of civilization the demands of this deathly economic system trumped all human cares, feelings, and needs. Demand for electricity was growing by ten percent per year, construction of the lines had already begun, and the clock was ticking on interest of a \$900 million federal loan. The logic was, "I may love my mother, but if the economic system—and more broadly civilization—demands it (or hell, even hints at it) I'll screw her over and leave her for dead."

Martin was clear on the source and solution of the problem: "We built all the way across North Dakota and we had one person protesting it. That was solved when the law enforcement—he did some damage—and the law enforcement there initiated the action to put him in prison, or jail. And pretty soon he said, 'I'll be a good boy, I won't do anything more,' and they let him out, and we built a transmission line. We didn't have any problem in North Dakota."

But, he continued, in Minnesota, "The law enforcement refused to enforce their own laws. We would go out and try to survey, and they would simply pull up all our stakes, they would destroy everything we had out there [Kinda makes you proud to be an American, don't it?]. And there was never anything done. President Norberg, who was president of the cooperative, and I were out there to many meetings. I drove a car with an escort in front of it and back of it with guns going off, sticking out the windows."

The farmers said the transmission lines would come in over their dead bodies.

They filed more lawsuits, which went to the Minnesota Supreme Court. The Supreme Court decided against them. This journey through the courts radicalized many of the farmers, who to that point had believed in the system. One farmer stated: "I had the feeling that it was all decided. The courts weren't acting as courts at all, they were just a front. And it was just a terrible, terrible shock to me. I thought, gee, this can't be."

That November, construction started in western Minnesota. When farmers protested, the corporations filed \$500,000 lawsuits against them.

The farmers found allies, from former Vietnam War protesters to Quakers to musicians.

The corporations, of course, already had allies in the court system, and now the governor, and through him, police with guns. For all of his rhetoric, when push came to shove, the governor, as representative of the state's economic system, shoved the powerlines down the farmers' throats. He said, "You know, this is a nation of laws. And there's a lot of things that I don't like, you know, and I'm sure there's many things that you don't like, but there's a process that we can work, it's a process that's open. It's a process that people in November go and they make that mark on that ballot." Let me translate: "It does not matter whether this or any other particular law or action is good for humans or the landbase. It does not matter whether you like what happens to your landbase, to your children, or to you. It does not matter whether I like it. It does not matter if the laws were designed by and for the rich, and the same is true for the courts and law enforcement. It does not matter if we lie to you and put you through processes of sham public participation. Your participation in processes that affect your life, the lives of your children, and your landbase begins and ends with a checkmark on a ballot in a meaningless election. The only thing that matters is the growth of the economic system. If you don't like it, we will send in people with guns to put down resistance."

Farmers broke up construction sites and corporate representatives said construction would not continue without police protection. The governor sent in state troopers, with up to ten cars and twenty cops protecting individual dump trucks.

The state legislature considered a moratorium on construction until further health studies could be performed. It was already known that electrical lines can lower conception rates and milk production in dairy cows. And the state's own guidelines warned farmers against refueling their vehicles under the transmission lines, and warned school bus drivers against picking up or discharging children under them.

Across the state, people overwhelmingly favored the farmers over the utility corporations. But, as a corporate attorney argued, "The critical question for you as legislators is, is this a government of law, or of men?"

Think for a moment about that question, and think about its implications.

The legislators thought about it long enough to kill the moratorium.

By now the cops (who, too, may have sympathized, but who, too, were too enthralled with the machinery of civilization to follow their human hearts) were behind the powerline a hundred percent. They told farmers they couldn't assemble, couldn't drive county roads, couldn't stop on township roads, couldn't speak. When a farmer asked why cops were stopping farmers on county roads, the officer responded, "We will do whatever we can to get that powerline through." The farmer made the point that the officer did not say, "We are there to protect you," nor even "We are there to protect the workers."

In August, someone loosened the bolts on one of the 150-foot steel transmission towers. Soon after, it fell, and soon after that so did three more. People cut guard poles in half, they cut bolts three-quarters of the way through, then replaced them, waiting for someone to step on and break them.

The governor called out the FBI. A helicopter soon guarded the powerline, presaging the sort of surveillance that is now familiar to the poor in many parts of the country. There were more than seventy arrests in one county alone. But home-cooked justice prevailed this time, as even the two people convicted of felonies were sentenced only to community service. In some cases, everyone refused to testify against the farmers.

A reporter asked one farmer whether he agreed with those who were bringing down towers.

The farmer responded, "I wish a few more would come down, and I think they will, as time goes on. They shouldn't have done this to us in the first place. We've did everything we could lawfully. We went to Minneapolis, got lawyers, went through the courts. But either the judges are paid off, or they just don't realize what's going on here. I think there's a lot of different laws and ways you can look at it. There's moral laws, too. I don't know, I don't figure it's wrong what we're doing out here. Sure, people think you gotta stay with the law, but what is the law? Who makes it? We should have more of a say with what goes on in this state too, you know. They can't just run over us like a bunch of dogs."

Although the farmers ultimately lost—the powerlines have been operating for two decades now—over the next two years they knocked down ten more towers, and shot out thousands of insulators.

Dissatisfied even with victory, the power corporations wanted to make sure no one would ever again challenge their hegemony. In the words of Philip Martin, "We got the federal government to pass the law" that it's a federal crime to take down a tower transmitting electricity across state lines.

I'm sitting again by the cell phone towers, and this time I'm thinking, I could do this. There are, as with so many activities we may find intimidating, several categories of barriers to action. There's the intellectual: I must convince myself it's necessary. There's the emotional: I must feel it's necessary. There's the moral: I must know it's right. There's the consequential: I must be willing and prepared to deal with the effects of my actions. Related to this, there's the fearful: I must be willing to cross barriers of fear, both tangible, real, present-day fears; and conditioned fears that feel just as real and present but are not. (e.g., If I wanted to go waterskiing, which I don't, I would have to face not only whatever fears I might have of speeding behind a boat, but my visceral repulsion to waterskiing based on beatings associated with it when I was a child: there is no longer any danger of my father hitting anyone if I were to go waterskiing, but it still feels

like there is. How many of our other fears have been inculcated into us by our families or the culture at large?) There's the technical: I must figure out how best to proceed. There are undoubtedly others I can't think of.

For someone to act—and this is a generic process, applying as much to asking someone out, as to weeding a garden, as to writing a book, as to removing cell phone towers, as to dismantling the entire infrastructure that supports this deathly system of slavery—each of these barriers to action must be overcome, or sometimes simply bypassed in moments of great embodiedness, identification, and feeling. (For example, if someone were attempting to strangle me (with bare hands, as opposed to the toxification of my total environment) my movement through these various barriers to action would, of necessity, be visceral and immediate (no pondering, just reaching for the pen to stab into his eye).)

Sure, I don't know how to take down a cell phone tower. But that's not why I don't act. One purpose of this essay is to help me, and perhaps others, to examine and if appropriate, move past these other barriers to then leave us only with the technical question of how-to, because so often how-to is actually the easiest question, the smallest barrier.

I could take out a cell phone tower. So could you. We're not stupid (I'm presuming no members of the current Administration have made it this far in the essay). And while our first few attempts may not be pretty—you'll notice I don't show you the first stories I ever wrote (at the time, my mother said they were good, yet now we both laugh when she says, "They were terrible, but I could never tell you that") and even now I don't show you my first drafts—but we would learn, just as we learn to do any technical task. I'm certain that if I made as many birdhouses as I write pages, not even David Flagg could laugh at them.

Practice makes perfect. This is as true of taking down cell phone towers as of writing. And fortunately, there are a lot of cell phone towers (I bet you never thought you'd see me append fortunately to a statement like that!). According to some estimates there are 138,000 cell phone towers in the US (more than 48,000 of which are over two hundred feet tall)⁶ plus radio and television towers. And the number of American cell phone users went up another 23 million between 2000 and 2001, leading to 20,000 new towers.⁷

That's a lot of practice. If we just put our hearts and minds and hands to it, it probably won't take very long before we get pretty good at it, so that taking down towers becomes something natural, like breathing, like taking long deep breaths of cool fresh air. Soon enough, we'll wonder what took us so long to get started.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jensen, Derrick. *The Culture of Make Believe*. White River Junction: White River Junction, 2004; and *Endgame: The Collapse of Civilization and the Rebirth of Community*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006.
2. Malakoff, David. "Faulty Towers." *Audubon* <http://magazine.audubon.org/features/0109/faulty_towers.html>
3. Schor, Juliet B. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Basic Books, New York, 1991), 19.
4. Wilkinson, Bob. "Trained Killers." *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, 30 April 2003, 3.
5. Losure, Mary. "Powerline Blues." *Minnesota Public Radio News*. <http://news.mpr.org/features/200212/08_losurem_powerline/>
6. Sadovi, Carlos. "Cell Phone Technology Killing Songbirds, Too." *Chicago Sun-Times*, 30 Nov. 1999. <<http://www.rense.com/politics5/songbirds.htm>>
7. Wikle, Thomas A. "Cellular Tower Proliferation in the United States." *The American Geographical Society*. <<http://www.amergeog.org/news.htm>> See also <<http://www.towerkill.com/>>.

People Ain't Feeling This Bullshit

Leslie James Pickering

I was brought up to succeed. To get mine any way I can. Whatever it takes to get what you've got coming. And if you can't do it honest, do it dirty. If you ain't watching out for yours then you won't get it. Any money is good money, as long as it's yours. That's how they make us.

I actually remember a thought I had early in my childhood about how lucky I was to have been born white, male, and American. Not how fucked the world was, but how lucky I was, because the world was mine. I delivered newspapers seven days a week and memorized every word out of my teachers' mouths. I wanted to be an astronaut, until I realized that I could aim higher.

In America, the ends justify the means, and I am an American, home-grown. If I have to slaughter Iraqi civilians to get myself through college, then sign me up. If I have to flip burgers in a clown suit at McDonald's to make my American Dream come true, I count my blessings. Made in the USA.

But somewhere along the way I stopped giving a fuck. It wasn't that I stopped believing that the means could be justified. It was that I lost interest in the ends.

I see the high class. I see the prestige and the people groveling at your feet, the bling and the white picket fences, it's bullshit. My life's worth more than that. I want a fucking world worth living in, and I'm gonna get it or die trying.

In this "free country," the moment your ends aren't monetary, your means become questionable. You can destroy people, families, communities, and the entire quality of life on Earth for the almighty dollar and somehow be beyond question. But destroy even a few thousand dollars worth of property, for any other ends than money, and you'll quickly be reminded just how below the law this system regards its citizens.

We are above the law. The law is supposed to serve us, not imprison us or pave the way for our oppression. Fuck the law, it wasn't written for us. It's in place to keep us from getting free. Freedom is never gonna be on the ballot. Liberation ain't coming from holding a sign or writing a peti-

tion. The laws don't protect the people, they protect the system. So you want to know how to truly challenge the system? It's simple, break its laws, and get away with it.

You want to change the world? You want to save the Earth? You want to break free? Then get the fuck off your knees. You don't break free by begging.

They say we resort to breaking the law. There ain't no "resort" about it. I've resorted to begging, pleading, petitioning, and protesting for petty policy changes. I've resorted to walking their walk and talking their talk in front of their media and their courts. But I never had to "resort" to breaking the law, it was always a pleasure.

Breaking the law never compromised my morals. How could it when we're made to aspire to the world's worst criminals—the officials, the authorities, the rich and powerful who break the law on a daily basis? My problem ain't that these people are breaking the law, it's that they don't give a fuck about anything but money, and that I've been raised to be the same.

My problem is that I've been lied to. I've voluntarily ran myself through their courts too many times because I believed the lie that you can get free by begging and placing yourself in the mercy of this sick system. Even civil disobedience is a fucking bullshit lie, a filtration device to sort out dissidents and place them in the hands of the courts. It never got me anything but a criminal record and a few more knocks over the head. So fuck voluntary arrests and fuck any form of begging, we'll take our freedom whatever way we can get it.

We are made to mirror this system. To be machines driven by greed, fueled on the American Dream, bloodthirsty. Vicious and unrelenting, whatever it takes. Fuck the Earth, fuck the people, fuck the air we breathe and the water we drink, fuck our friends and family. Fuck anything and anyone that gets between you and all the money you can get your hands on.

So be it, only let freedom be our ends instead of money. You want to make a nation of heartless killers, but it's turning on you. You want to raise us on violence and yet expect us to make tax-deductible donations for our freedom? Fuck that. You reap what you sow.

We are America's chickens coming home to roost, the seeds of its own destruction. Middle class, upper class, lower class, working class, woman, man, white, black, brown, red, yellow...we've all been lied to and victimized by this system, yet we stand as the most significant force for revolution.

Guerillas have caused tens of millions of dollars in damages to the seemingly indestructible power structure. Riots have reduced cities to ruins. The powerful have been assassinated, computer viruses have wreaked havoc on institutions, and people have found new ways of living, loving, communicating, fighting, working, as revolutions speckle human history. So let's bring it on already.

There is no time or place better than right here, and right now. There is nobody more capable or more justified than you and I. The only thing stopping us is the belief in their bullshit lie that we can get free by begging for petty policy changes. There is no excuse for our passivity and we are the only ones to blame if we fail to even try.

We have a choice we make every day of our lives. We can fight each other or we can fight this system. We can struggle to get ahead of everyone else or we can struggle to get free. We can do the same bullshit that everyone is doing; go to school, go to work, go to the bank, go to the store, go to the retirement home, and go to the grave. Or we can fuck this system up and get free. We can live and die for this system or we can live and die for freedom and revolution.

We need a revolution. We need a revolutionary movement, passionate and powerful. Nothing's going to get any better while this reigns supreme. We need a complete reevaluation of our priorities and values as a people, and we need a revolutionary movement struggling with those as our objectives. We don't need a utopian dream, we need a fucking people's army, some hope and something to believe in, something to live and die for. We need to fucking change our world, and that starts with the overthrow of this system.

In his book on the Haitian revolution of 1791–1803, *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James put it this way:

The Slaves destroyed tirelessly. Like the peasants in the Jacquerie or the Luddite wreckers, they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much. They knew that as long as these plantations stood their lot would be to labor on them until they dropped. The only thing was to destroy them. From their masters they had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind.¹

There ain't nothing nice about it. Revolution is born of oppression. You're wrong if you think we wanted it like this, but you're just as wrong if you think we ain't gonna fight back like we mean it. The oppressed write the rules in our own struggles to break free, no one else. So you want the theory spelled out, here it is—the people aren't relating to the struggle.

We've all got plenty of our own problems. I've got the bills backed way up again and my brother's getting suicidal, so I ain't really thinking much about some trees off in some lumber mill somewhere. That's just how it is. People really have to find themselves in a unique position to care an awful lot about the abstractions that a lot of American middle-class movements are built around. Everyone I know is oppressed, but not everyone can identify with it.

I hated school, a lot of us did. I hated how adults were always telling me how to live my life and I hated the constant disrespect that I got as a

youth growing up in America. I wanted to quit, but I didn't want to stay poor. I wanted liberation, but I couldn't quite identify with it.

Then I came across the Earth Liberation Front, and I liked that. There was something about how urgent and raw their struggle was that drew me in. I wasn't a tree hugger, I didn't really relate to that at all, but I was lost, like so many of us, looking for something, and this was as close as I've ever seen.

To tell the truth it was the criminality of that struggle that attracted me the most. I wasn't at all interested in holding signs and writing letters. I had already gone through too much to feel empowered by that kind of thing. But seeing buildings burn down is another story. If someone had written a letter to the superintendent I probably wouldn't even have cared; if someone held a protest at the Board of Education I'd probably forget about it pretty quick, but if the bus rolled up to a pile of ashes in the morning I could relate to that. That would change my life.

When the struggle doesn't relate directly to your oppression you're gonna have a hard time relating to the struggle. People that do find ways to relate to abstract struggles are usually satisfied with a minimal level of participation. That's when a struggle's doing more to shed your guilt than to break you free. And since we need to build a revolutionary movement, not another pastime, we're clearly doing something wrong.

So here's the strategy—relate the struggle to the people.

The primary responsibility of the struggle isn't to be saintly and righteous, it's to win. Not all that many people I come across are all that interested in *ahimsa*, they're just looking to break free. We're doing dirt everyday just to get by, so that kind of utopia is way too far out there for most the people I come across to relate to. We shouldn't be expecting oppressed people to relate to an abstract struggle, we should be working to relate the struggle to the people.

We need to identify with our own oppression. Stop running around the world searching for the lowest of the low when this shit's keeping you and your people down every day. Once you identify with your oppression you can start to find your community. These are the people who are bleeding like you're bleeding. You probably see them all the time, those other rats in the race. When you know your true community you can start to organize it. This is gonna look different in every circumstance. There's no map to follow because we haven't gotten there yet, and everybody's going somewhere different.

Over the last year and a half I've been developing a model of revolutionary community organizing through Arissa in Buffalo.² When something ain't working you try something else or give up, and we ain't about to give up. Our entire first year was devoted to a community needs assessment survey. Instead of going into a community organizing effort acting as if we already know what is wrong and what should be done about it, we took a survey to find what the rest of the community thought and used the results of that survey as the foundation for our local efforts in Buffalo.

As a result we've been developing several programs addressing needs like food, housing, incarceration, and corruption in local politics. We've got an ongoing revolutionary education program where we give multimedia presentations on historical revolutionary struggles on a regular basis.

I've found myself working in ways I never imagined, like organizing public forums with county legislators so people from the community could come and tell them what they think about the county budget crisis that's shutting down countless crucial services, arts and cultural programs, and causing thousands of layoffs in our county.

Whatever it takes. And it's going to take a revolutionary movement to create revolutionary change, so that's what we're working to build. For once I'm starting to see all kinds of people from the community—from youth too young to be in school to county legislators—saying that the system has failed us, and coming together to do something about it. And when the shit inevitably hits the fan around here everybody will know who's down, and nobody can say we didn't try to talk it out first.

You got a better theory and strategy? Then implement it. For real, I can hardly wait. Let's see some new shit start to happen. But fuck a theory and strategy with no action. We got too many of those. The struggle needs people, and the people need some inspiration, something to believe in, to live and die for. We're tired of this bullshit. No one is about to join another movement that ain't moving. We've gotta prove to the people that we are fighting to win, that revolution is possible, that together we can turn this motherfucker upside down and finally break free. Enough is enough.

Notes

1. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 88.
2. The primary goal of Arissa is to create a social and political revolution in the United States. We believe that none of the single issue problems—whether in the human or environmental categories—can be resolved until a political structure is put in place to allow for an atmosphere of change. Arissa will have reached its initial goal when that revolution occurs. Realizing that the citizens of the United States are nowhere near prepared for a revolution, we believe that public education is a priority. In order to build a revolutionary movement, we must first build a revolutionary consciousness. We believe there are sound reasons for fundamental political and social change in this country, and it is crucial to assist in allowing the people to understand this as well. See <<http://www.arissa.org>>.