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Book Review

Remarks from Reviews Editor

Every once in a while we at *Society & Natural Resources* like to mix things up a bit. The Book Review Section has an opportunity to do just that for this issue. Instead of providing a typical review of several books, this section provides a review, plus more, looking at just one book and some larger issues it touches upon. We hope you enjoy this change of pace.

Steven R. Brechin
Reviews Editor

Review Commentary: Green Apocalypticism: Understanding Disaster in the Radical Environmental Worldview

Lee, Martha F. *Earth First!: Environmental Apocalypse (Religion and Politics)*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995. \$17.95 (paper). ISBN 0-81560-365-7.

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As the end of the 20th century nears, expectations of millennialism and millennial violence are proliferating. Some of this growing concern represents an ironic flip side of the millennial coin- at least some of this anticipation represents a misguided projection onto social movements of millennial expectation, rather than a judicious discernment of belief structures in the putatively millennial groups. Using for a case study a recent book describing the radical environmentalism as a millenarian movement, I argue for greater precision when terms like apocalypticism, millennialism, and millenarianism are deployed to interpret utopian, heterodox, or insurgent religious movements. Caution buttressed by careful empirical research is needed to ensure that expectations of millennial expectation neither produces misleading portraits nor leads to self-fulfilling prophesy.

Earth First! and Environmental Apocalypticism

Holies and Wilders

Ironically, my own work may have spurred some misperceptions. In 1991 I published an article in *The Ecologist* characterizing Earth First! as an apocalyptic,

new religious movement (Taylor 1991, 263–264). I also described a major schism within it, tracing disputes about political tactics to differences about human nature and correspondingly different levels of optimism regarding the prospects for humans to solve environmental problems, differences that in turn were related to differing eschatologies. A more optimistic faction I labeled the Holies, activists who believe that social and ecological problems were of one cloth and must and perhaps could be addressed by broad coalitions of morally concerned actors focusing on diverse but related issues. A more pessimistic faction I called the Wilders, who contend that the best that activists can do is to defend the genetic heritage of the earth until the human war on nature precipitates a catastrophe that, in turn, will bring down industrial civilization and thereby provide an opportunity for a reharmonization of life on earth.

The Holies, I explained, include a faction of green anarchists drawn into the movement in the mid 1980s and contesting for power within it by 1987, as well as many others from political and religious countercultures who had retained a keen sense of social justice. These activists, at least until 1990, generally preferred as a strategy community organizing and civil disobedience to sabotage. The Wilders argued that little time was available for civil disobedience and political organizing, and given the imminent collapse, sabotage provided better prospects for saving the genetic heritage and biological diversity of the planet.¹

Millenarians and Apocalyptic

In a subsequent doctoral dissertation and book entitled *Earth First!: Environmental Apocalypse*, Martha Lee (1995) employed this basic thesis, arguing that a more precise analysis would label my “Holies” *millenarians* and my “Wilders” *apocalyptic*. Distinguishing “millenarian . . . belief systems [which] focus on the transformation of the community [from] apocalyptic belief systems [which] focus primarily on the imminence and meaning of the apocalyptic event” (1995, 19), Lee argued that millenarian Earth First!ers are optimistic utopians who believe they have a special role in ushering in a new, ecologically harmonious age, while the “biocentric apocalyptic” are pessimists who deny that “human beings are . . . the most important historical actors” and that their nihilistic worldview makes them more prone toward violence (1995, 19).² The Millenarian Earth First!ers retain, according to Lee, “a faith in education and social change [that] render them less dangerous” than the “apocalyptic biodiversity faction,” which, she claims, hopes “for an imminent apocalypse” and “gives no special status to human life” (Lee 1995, 149).³

In Lee’s assertions we can hear the echo of Millennialism scholar Michael Barkun, who, with Lee, believes that millennial movements with an “apocalyptic focus” are more violence prone, and that such apocalypticism is correlated with a pessimistic orientation (Robbins and Palmer 1997, 9; cf. Barkun 1997). Lee’s interpretation was recently deployed by “wise use” partisan Ron Arnold (1997) to attack radical environmentalists and label them ecoterrorists,⁴ illustrating that scholarly analysis can easily become a part of the conflicts it strives to interpret.

I presently address whether the researcher has a responsibility to anticipate and respond to the use of their work by partisans in social conflicts. First, however, I wish to object to Lee’s analysis, specifically, to her failure to appreciate fully the religious dimensions of the movement, her oversimplifications regarding its apocalyptic dimensions, and her strained effort to fit this complex subcultural milieu into her typology that posits a binary opposition between millenarians and apocalyptic.

Simplistic Oppositions and Typologies

On Optimism and Pessimism

While optimism and pessimism are important variables in religious movements, it is often difficult to assign specific amounts of these traits to specific individuals or factions. I have concluded, for example, that my own initial article about *Earth First!*, written in 1990 before I had conducted extensive field work, was too simplistic in its portrayal of the influence of the pessimism/optimism variable on movement factionalism.

Michael Barkun, to his credit, has recognized how difficult it can be to tease the optimistic from the pessimistic, asserting that “motifs of hopelessness and despair coexist uneasily with millenarian triumphalism” (Barkun 1997, 254). Drawing on his study of *Christian Identity* for an example, he notes that “millenarian and apocalyptic strains are in constant tension . . . and the explicit fantasy scenarios of victory compete with implicit nightmare visions of defeat and obliteration” (Barkun 1997, 255).

Unfortunately, rather than nuance my early article, Martha Lee has tethered her “millenarians versus apocalyptics” typology to an even more reified and nearly causal description of the influence of optimism and pessimism within this movement.⁵ Moreover, she “never takes her thesis further” than her basic distinction between millenarians and apocalyptics (*Publishers Weekly* 1995). More troubling is that, having established an “ideal type” distinction between peaceful utopian millenarians and violence-prone and nihilistic apocalyptics, Lee only attends to or is aware of evidence that coheres with her thesis. The result is a misleading portrait of the movement and misapprehension regarding the dangers it might pose.

Martha Lee’s oversimplifications regarding the optimism/pessimism variable (as well as the lack of a clear understanding of the religious perceptions animating the movement, to which I briefly turn) result from insufficient time in the field and from focusing her limited interviews on a few movement leaders. At critical junctures, for example, she accepts at face value how the movement’s most charismatic figure, Dave Foreman, portrayed both movement history and the schism, apparently unconcerned that Foreman’s perceptions are internally contested and, if I am right that this is a “new religious movement,” incognizant that his perspective might well represent a partisan effort to control religious production.

For example, Lee took at face value Foreman’s assertions to her that he “had no interest in paganism” and only placed pagan names in *Earth First!*’s masthead to “distinguish *Earth First!* from the mainstream environmental movement” (Lee 1995, 122). This conclusion is belied by numerous articles and statements he has made. In 1987, writing under a pseudonym, Foreman traced his own spiritual pilgrimage. After rejecting Christianity, Foreman wrote,

[I] flirted briefly with eastern religions before rejecting them for their anti-Earthly metaphysic. Through my twenties and early thirties, I was an atheist—until I sensed something out there. Out there in the wilderness . . . So, I became a pagan, a pantheist, a witch, if you will. I offered prayers to the moon, performed secret rituals in the wildwood, did spells. I placated the spirits of that which I ate or used (remember, your firewood is alive, too.) . . . For almost ten years, I’ve followed my individualistic shamanism. (Foreman as Blea 1987, 23)

But despite his often expressed ambivalence toward organized religion and even toward pagan ritualizing, Foreman concluded;

Nonetheless, we do seem to have a spiritual sense. Perhaps our fatal flaw, that which sunders us from Earth, is our ability for abstract thinking. To think of things as *things*. And spirituality, ritual, is that which attempts, albeit imperfectly, to reconnect us. Maybe I'll talk to the moon tonight. (Foreman as Blea 1987, 23)

A year later Foreman praised wiccan scholar Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* as "the best religious book since the burning times" (Foreman 1988). Perhaps it was by accepting Foreman's statement of "no interest" in paganism that Lee came to ignore the overwhelming evidence regarding how spiritual perceptions regarding the sacredness of earth and her creatures animates virtually all radical environmental activists, regardless of their relative pessimism or hopefulness.

Lee also blindly accepted Foreman's claim that the real division in the movement was between its early "biocentric" activists and latecomers more interested in "social justice." There was a dispute between social justice activists within the movement and Foreman and his soulmates. I observed this tension in my earliest analysis of this movement (Taylor 1991). Lee, however, apparently took Foreman's history at face value. She is apparently unaware that social justice activists were well represented in the movement from its inception, and that the increasing numbers of peace and social justice activists drawn to the movement were, despite criticisms to the contrary, largely biocentric wilderness lovers. Consequently, she overstates the differences between the factions that did eventually compete for power and produce a schism in the movement.⁶

It is the absence of field work that prevents Lee from correcting and nuancing her interpretations. As a result, Lee underestimates the pluralism within Earth First! and fails to see that any interpretation positing binary oppositions between only two factions would be misleading. Moreover, she overemphasizes the extent to which the more holistic factions are optimistic. Few even of these activists, including those who fit well my original Holies type, think that humans *actually will* avert catastrophe. Few Earth First!ers, of whatever faction, *expect* efforts to create massive consciousness change toward biocentric values and sustainable lifeways will occur; most believe there is insufficient time. Even the most mystical Earth First!ers, who believe that ritual and magic *could* produce widespread spiritual consciousness change, are nevertheless pessimistic that this will happen quickly enough to avert disaster. To exaggerate the optimism of Earth First! activists, suggesting some of them think humans will mend their ways, is to misapprehend the extent to which such optimism, within the main streams of the radical environmental worldview, would be perceived as an example of the very hubris that precipitated the environmental crisis in the first place.

A better way to explain the efforts of the Holies to build a mass movement than imposing an artificial and strained distinction between millenarian optimists and pessimistic apocalyptics would be to recognize the importance of the idea of sacred honor, or faithfulness, as a powerful motivating force. I have often heard such rhetoric during my fieldwork: One acts out of love, out of a sense of honor, out of reverence and faithfulness to the earth, despite one's despair and pessimism about the likely outcomes.

The overwhelming majority of Earth First!ers, then, whether involved in the more holistic postschism movement, or those radical environmentalists who express disdain for those naively expending energy on social justice issues, all share an overwhelmingly pessimistic and apocalyptic worldview.

Indeed, the majority of Earth First!ers (pre- or postschism, Holies or Wilders) would be more likely to agree with the slogan (and now bumper sticker and T-shirt) coined by James Barnes, "There is hope- but not for us!" (Barnes 1994) than would expect to see *Ecotopia Emerging* (Callenbach 1981).⁷ Why else would most of the Earth First!ers at the activist conference following the Los Angeles earthquake in 1993 celebrate the quake as, perhaps, the earth finally awakening to defend herself against disrespectful human hordes?⁸ Short of the direct intervention of Gaia herself, generally speaking, Earth First! activists believe that the human war on nature is so advanced that the widespread collapse of ecosystems is guaranteed and even underway, presaging the fall of industrial civilization.

An example of this sort of apocalypticism was published recently in an *Earth First!* by James Barnes. This passage expresses what I believe to be the typically complex apocalypticism found within the movement.

The glorious revolution will not free this land; the rising of the oppressed against the capitalist master will fail. The worker will not triumph over the ruling class, nor will women and persecuted peoples gain equality in a brave new world. The planet will not be "saved" by the people's new ecological consciousness.

But there will be rebellions, war, famine and, oh yes, industrial collapse. And there will be wilderness where there are now tree farms. Ruined cities choked with blackberries, kudzu or blowing sand will echo sad howls in the silence. Grazing herds will move across an empty plain, and great trees will rise up from the road beds. Humans will survive too, much as they always have- catching what they can, scabbling in the dirt and wresting a poor existence from the soil. By turns ignorant, wise, sick, joyful and greedy, the people of this land will get on with the business of raising their children and burying them. (Barnes 1977, 3, 13)

Here pessimism and optimism are two sides of the same tragic coin, fused in apocalyptic expectation. Barnes continued:

How does a seriously overpopulated species reduce its numbers? It *dies back*. Death is the answer to too much life.

Humans are clever and generally decent creatures [but] in conditions of stress, few animals behave well. Violence, murder, self-mutilation, insanity and the killing of young are all traits we share with other mammals when there's too many of us in the cage. (Barnes 1977, 3)

Despite such pessimism, unlike much millennial expectation, Earth First! spirituality rarely posits a sovereign deity who guarantees a certain result. Often the expectation of calamity is qualified in a way that holds out at least some hope that, perhaps, humans will act to avert disaster, because nothing is inevitable except the laws of nature. As Barnes continued,

Dieback doesn't have to be fast [but we must reject any] human exceptionalism- the idea that people are exempt from the basic economy of

life. Dieback might not happen, but it *can* . . . carrying capacity [is] a natural law (Barnes, 1997, 3).

Thus, dieback is not inevitable, although Barnes clearly believes it is likely, because we humans will probably not “gracefully reduce our population.” Indeed,

We’re going to have to get used to the idea that, for us at least, everything is not going to be all right. [This] strikes exceptionalists as distasteful As always it is the weak . . . who will suffer the most. [But] one way or another, justly, fairly or not, humans will be far less numerous than at present. The rest of the biosphere, what’s left of it, will take a quick breather. Natural selection forges on. (Barnes 1997, 13)

Two things are striking here. First, disaster is linked to hope (even if not for human individuals); and second, humans will probably not be the decisive or even particularly important agents in the coming transformations, unless negatively, by overshooting their carrying capacity and precipitating a spasm of die-offs and extinction. These are hardly the usual millennial dreams!

The inseparability of pessimism and optimism, the deep ambivalence about the coming catastrophe (tragic, painful, and even wrong, but a necessary pathway toward a reharmonized future) is certainly not a recent innovation in radical environmental eschatology. Indeed, from early on, the movement’s hope, its ironic and fragile optimism, was forged in despair. As movement elder, the novelist Edward Abbey once put it in the pages of *Earth First!*:

I predict that the military-industrial state will disappear from the surface of the Earth within fifty years. That belief is the basis of my inherent optimism, the source of my hope for the coming restoration of higher civilization: scattered human populations modest in number that live by fishing, hunting, food-gathering, small-scale farming and ranching, that assemble once a year in the ruins of abandoned cities for great festivals of moral, spiritual, artistic and intellectual renewal- a people for whom the wilderness is not a playground but their natural and native home. (Abbey 1986, 22; Manes 1990, 241)¹⁰

Thus, a prerequisite to understanding radical environmental apocalypticism is a clear understanding of its ambivalence toward catastrophe. Disaster is an imminent, probably unavoidable event. It represents a desecration of a sacred world, and it is to be resisted with all of one’s passion. It is simultaneously, almost certainly, the only conceivable path back to a paradise where humans live in harmony within the sacred, natural order, and thus, in the final moment, it may need to be embraced.

Prophetic Green Apocalypticism

Another thing that Lee ignores is that *Earth First!* apocalypticism emerges not from a charismatic religious seer, but is purportedly derived from environmental science.¹¹ This is not the only example whereby radical environmentalists transmogrify and mythologize a scientific story- appropriating it as an element in their religious world view; they do a similar thing with evolutionary narratives, deriving

from them an ethics of the kinship with all life forms (Taylor 1991). Lee errs seriously in failing to note the novelty of this consecration of scientific narrative. Earth First! apocalypticism is grounded in a story first told by scientists and based on studies of population dynamics and environmental degradation. Such narratives are mustered to argue that an escalating, anthropogenic extinction episode threatens millions if not billions of humans.¹²

Perhaps if Lee had attended to this fascinating aspect of the radical environmental world view she would have recognized that radical environmental apocalypticism can easily be viewed as a narrative form of prophetic rationality that is simultaneously a rhetoric of persuasion, as Stephen O'Leary provocatively suggests (1994). Or perhaps she would have considered the suggestion of David Bromley, that apocalypticism should be considered first and foremost "a radical form of social organization" expressing a "prophetic method [that rejects the prevailing social order in favor of] a new order whose arrival [is] imminent" (1997, 32–33, cf. 35).¹³ Bromley well captures some of the antinomies of the genre:

Apocalypticism is thus revolutionary but not revolution; it proposes much more than a transfer of power and a replacement of regime. And it is not a vision of doomsday. Catastrophe may be imminent, but the apocalypse is a cataclysm with meaning, one that has as its final purpose not destruction but creation. (Bromley 1997, 34–35)

Without such nuance Lee's study can be viewed as a counternarrative to the radical environmental apocalyptic- in her case, of proliferating cells of radical environmental extremists threatening human civilization.¹⁴ As such, it assumes its own quasi-apocalyptic cadence, which she fuels by adding that her "analysis appears to be supported by recent evidence that suggests that Theodore Kaczynski, the alleged Unabomber, attended Earth First! gatherings and read the movement's literature" (1997, 135). Although she qualified slightly this statement, adding, "Although the vast majority of Earth First!ers would likely deplore his actions," she continued to utilize her strained typology to warn that, nevertheless, "the biocentric faction's belief system (if pushed to its limits) would support such [terrorist] activity" (Lee 1997, 133).¹⁵

Although it is certainly true that terrorist violence could emerge from radical environmental subcultures and that some acts of ecotage risk causing injuries and even death, Lee does nothing to examine either the endogenous or exogenous factors that mitigate the likelihood that radical environmentalism will birth terrorist cells.¹⁶ Elsewhere, I have provided such an analysis (Taylor 1998, 1999),¹⁷ concluding that if terrorist violence does emerge from radical environmental subcultures it will most likely be characterized by what Jeffrey Kaplan calls alternately the "unguided missile" or "lone wolf assassin," namely, an individual largely untethered to the broader subculture with which the terrorist identifies (1993, 1995).

The flaws in Martha Lee's analysis of Earth First! apocalypticism underscores the importance of scholarly caution when analyzing utopian, heterodox, or insurgent religious movements that express apocalyptic views. I believe a key part of such caution involves direct observation of the participants in these movements within their own subcultural milieus. The stakes of social science research can be high, for the social scientist, and her research can itself become one of the exogenous variables affecting the fate of the group. It can do so by increasing public and law enforcement scrutiny of studied groups and by inflaming passions and even vigilante

violence against them, or, conversely, by diffusing alarm. Scholars should refrain from hasty and potentially dangerous generalizations.

A Final Caution

A number of scholars have noted the difficulty of applying terms like millennialism to religious movements that are far removed from the groups from which the terms were derived. In an attempt to overcome some of the resulting confusions, Catherine Wessinger recently suggested a distinction between "catastrophic" and "progressive" millennialism. Catastrophic millennialism (she uses "apocalypticism" as a synonym) is the more pessimistic of the two. It "expects a catastrophe." "Progressive millennialism" more optimistically believes that humans can cooperate with the divine will toward "a collective terrestrial salvation" (Wessinger 1997, 50).¹⁸

This distinction seems to me a step in the right direction. When examining radical environmental subcultures, however, it becomes clear that the term apocalypticism is not always a perfect synonym for catastrophic millennialism. This is because a future golden age seems endemic to the term millennialism (even if the tragic path to paradise is paved by disaster), while no such hope seems endemic to the term apocalypticism.

Although, as I have documented, the expectations of some Earth First! activists fit well into such a catastrophic millennial world view (and certainly more so than they do in progressive millennialism), these activists generally do not have a theistic spirituality providing them with a teleological expectation of earthly salvation. So it may well be that we should reserve the term apocalypticism for those world views envisioning disaster, regardless of whether a positive, postapocalypse world is envisioned.¹⁹

Notes

1. The Wilders also accused movement activists working on social justice issues of remaining tethered to anthropocentrism, arguing that on a dying planet, the pursuit of social justice is either futile or low priority.

2. Taking Earth First! leader Dave Foreman as the most charismatic figure of the apocalyptic faction, Lee has to ignore how Foreman on his stump speech, throughout the 1980s, continually said that "this was the most important generation in three in a half billion years of organic evolution." This quote is but one example of how strained is her typology.

3. At one point Lee chided me for not making even more of the differences I had observed among movement participants regarding human nature and eschatology than I had (Lee 1995, 16).

4. Unlike many of the Christians expressing alarm about pagan environmentalists, in a 17 June 1997 telephone interview, Arnold insisted that his concerns were not based on religion.

5. Although it is not my present purpose to criticize other aspects of Lee's work, it is equally telling that in this book-length treatment of Earth First! the curious reader is left "wanting a clearer explanation of what Lee finds religious about Earth First!" (*Publishers Weekly* 1995). For a clear sense of Earth First! as a religious movement, see Taylor 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, and my forthcoming book, *On Sacred Ground: Earth First! and Environmental Ethics*.

6. She also pays inadequate attention to the role that a small group of movement anarchists played- that a dispute over the control and ownership of the movement's journal (and de facto fund raising center) was also a central aspect of the schism.

7. This is the title to the "prequel" to Callenbach's truly optimistic, New Age best seller, *Ecotopia* (1975).
8. I have heard, on numerous occasions, Earth First!ers express enthusiasm about one or another natural disaster, hoping this one might be an example of the earth striving to heal herself.
9. Abbey's novel *Good News* is the perfect example of the ironic hope movement activists place in the expected collapse of industrial civilization.
10. Of course, there may be more to it than this; for example, I sometimes wonder if some individuals are psychologically predisposed to apocalypticism and pessimistically inclined to adopt worst-case scenario world views. I do not know how this possibility could be tested, however.
11. For an introduction to such studies see Catton (1980) and Meadows and Randers (1992).
12. Bromley adds, "and inevitable," which, as I have discussed, would not fit the views of some Earth First!ers.
13. She recently wrote that "individuals who hold such [apocalyptic] beliefs are capable of wreaking significant havoc on . . . human civilization" (Lee 1997, 133). Which civilization is left unstated, presumably the Western-industrial sort.
14. It is revealing, however, that Lee, who has not conducted ethnographic field work, is unsure whether the majority would deplore the Unabomber's bombings, and incredible that for her source of information about this link to the Unabomber that she uncritically cites the ultraconservative columnist Linda Chavez (see Chavez 1996), she is apparently unaware and did not check on the problematic nature of the charges Chavez was repeating. For details, see Taylor 1998.
15. Endogenous factors refer to traits internal to the group; exogenous variables refer to the influence of actions and actors external to it. For this distinction, see Robbins and Anthony (1995).
16. See also Taylor 1999. An unpublished paper submitted to *Terrorism and Political Violence*, May 1998.
17. Wessinger adds a needed nuance by acknowledging that the 7e types are not mutually exclusive (Wessinger 1997, 51).
18. Catherine Wessinger writes, "Millennialism in its most general definition refers to an expectation of an imminent and collective earthly salvation accomplished according to a divine or superhuman plan" (Wessinger 1997, 48). This does seem to fit well the usual understanding of the term. Given this general definition, I conclude that the radical environmental movement does not qualify as such a movement, for with few exceptions and certainly as a whole, there is no firm expectation within it that everything will come out well in the end.

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