

Taylor, Bron, "Revisiting Ecoterrorism," in *Religionen im
Konflikt: Vom Bürgerkrieg über Ökogewalt bis zur
Gewalterinnerung im Ritual*, Vasilios N. Makrides and Jörg
Rüpke, eds. Münster, Aschendorff: 2004, 236-247.

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Religionen im Konflikt

Vom Bürgerkrieg über Ökogewalt
bis zur Gewalterinnerung im Ritual

herausgegeben von

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unter Mitarbeit von
Ferdinand Kasten

2004



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Revising Ecoterrorism¹

1 *The Specter of Ecoterrorism*

On 28 August 2003 a biotech company in Northern California named Chiron was bombed by 'the Revolutionary Cells' of the 'Animal Liberation Brigade.' In claiming responsibility for the two pipe bomb explosions, which were timed to explode in the early morning hours and precipitated only minor property damage, the group claimed to have targeted Chiron because of its 'murderous connection' with a New Jersey-based company, Huntington Life Sciences (HLS). Chiron had conducted animal tests for HLS as part of its drug development testing. The Revolutionary Cells said HLS had been 'exposed numerous times as some of the most egregious animal killers in the industry.'

Although the anti-HLS campaign originated in the United Kingdom in 1999, the perpetrators of the bombing claimed responsibility and explained themselves through the website of 'Stop Huntington Life Sciences USA' or (SHAC). Newspapers dutifully reported SHAC's disavowal of violence. My own field work, however, at presentations given by SHAC activists in the Spring of 2004, indicates that at least one prominent SHAC spokesperson thinks violent threats, if not outright violence, are needed and justifiable in the campaign to stop animal abuse. SHAC activists have certainly been involved in intimidating their adversaries and some HLS employees have been beaten in the United Kingdom, appar-

ently by those involved with or sympathetic to SHAC. It may not be surprising, therefore, that the communiqué in the Chiron bombing included the menacing statement, 'If you choose to continue your relations with HLS you will no longer be subject only to the actions of the above ground animal rights movement, you will face us. This is the endgame for the animal killers and if you choose to stand with them you will be dealt with accordingly. There will be no quarter given, no more half measures taken.' It signed off with the phrase, 'For animal liberation through armed struggle.'

Just a few days earlier, on 22 August 2003, twenty-two new 'Hunners' (large 'sport utility' automobiles worth about \$50,000 each) were destroyed by fire on 22 August 2003 at a dealership at West Covina, California. That evening, at another dealership, fifty more sport utility vehicles were damaged. The 'Earth Liberation Front' claimed responsibility by painting 'ELF' on some of the vehicles and leaving other slogans, such as 'gross polluter' and 'fat, lazy Americans.' This was the first such attack on 'gas guzzling' automobiles since the tactic erupted in Eugene, Oregon, in 2001, with a series of similar arsons that caused over a million dollars of damage. In the earlier, Oregon cases, two young men were convicted. They had earlier been direct-action forest defenders involved in Eugene's vibrant radical environmental and anarchist subcultures. One of them was sentenced to over 18 years in federal prison for his role in the arsons.

The Earth Liberation Front also claimed responsibility for a 1 August 2003 arson fire that destroyed a construction site for one thousand five hundred apartments near the University of California, San Diego. Damages were estimated at over fifty million dollars. A banner left at the site issued a challenge, 'You build it - we burn it.' This arson and an increasing number of similar ones, which have occurred at diverse sites across the United States, are considered to be 'direct action resistance' to urban sprawl which damages environmentally important wildlands. The San Diego campaign continued later that month, when five more, under-construction homes were burnt.

These are but a few examples of an intensifying phenomenon in America and Europe whereby radical environmentalists, or animal liberationists, have used arson or other arguably violent tactics in efforts to halt what they consider to be egregious moral wrongs. Such incidents have fueled alarm among law enforcement officials, politicians, commercial

1 These reflections draw with permission on a number of related, recently written articles, including several forthcoming in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Bron Taylor, Editor in Chief, London and New York: Continuum, 2005); see especially: 'Earth First' and the Earth Liberation Front, 'Environmental Ethics,' and 'Radical Environmentalism. For my most in-depth treatment of the subcultures of radical environmentalism, one that spotlights the reciprocal influences among such groups in America and Europe, see Taylor 2002. This is in a volume edited by Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Löb (2002) that is especially noteworthy for those interested in oppositional religious subcultures and violence, and whose theoretical framework and questions informs much of my work, including in this short analysis. A new and provocative work edited by Steven Best and Anthony J. Nocella provides an important primary source explaining the perspectives of those supportive of, and some who have even been engaged in, animal liberationist actions which have been labeled terrorism. An extensive list of articles and resources about radical and other grassroots environmental movements can be found at www.religionandnature.com/bron, a scholarly site that will be updated periodically.

interests, and ordinary citizens, raising the specter that radical environmentalists and animal rights extremists may not only be turning toward tactics that risk hurting people, but toward those that intend to kill or maim.

Gary Ackerman, Deputy Director of the Chemical and Biological Weapons Nonproliferation Program at California's Monterey Institute for International Studies, for example, has concluded that green anarchist, animal liberationist, and radical environmental groups are <sister organizations, or a least close cousins.> He believes such activists are likely, sooner or later, to intend to kill or maim their adversaries. Indeed, he thinks they may even try to cause mass deaths by using chemical, or more likely, biological agents.²

Those who do not want to see environment-related violence increase or take on new dimensions will certainly view such claims to be alarming. But how cogent is the analysis put forward by Ackerman and others, such as the pro-business and free-market activist Ron Arnold (1997), who are publicly worried about or critical of these groups, calling them <ecoterrorists?> How apt might that appellation now prove? And what does all of this have to do with religion, or religion-related violence, a connection often mentioned as an important, violence-inducing variable by those who view these groups as violent.³

I have a stake in this argument partly because since 1990 I have studied these groups both in the field and through careful reading of their many tabloids and more recently, their websites. I therefore know them more intimately than most (if not all) other scholarly observers. In 1998 I published <Religion, Violence and Radical Environmentalism in Terrorism and Political Violence>, arguing that such movements are unlikely to turn toward tactics that intend to kill or maim people, despite their occasional use of revolutionary and martial rhetoric. My belief then was that there are many worldview elements internal to these movements, as well as social dynamics external to them, that reduce the likelihood that movement activists will attempt to kill or maim people as a political strategy. I suggested that labels such as <violent> or <terrorist> were not apt, at that time, but suggested that they could be, if certain trends were to continue or intensify and if some of the dynamics and variables that could lead to violence were to change.

Recent events suggest that this might well be an appropriate moment to <Revisit Ecoterrorism> and ask whether such changes are now underway. I will do so first by providing a brief typology of radical environmental and animal liberationist groups, which will be especially helpful to those new to these subcultures. I will then address whether I would significantly modify my earlier analysis of their violent potential, based on the apparent increase in their use of arson, and the emergence in one case of the use of explosives, in the five or so years since I last took up such questions. I will conclude with some suggestions about which groups that could be considered to reside under the wide umbrella of <radical environmentalism> and <animal liberationism> are most likely to intentionally cross the threshold from sabotage-risking harm, to terrorist violence that intends to kill or maim. My hope is that this analysis will contribute to a trans-Atlantic dialogue that will eventually clarify which variables are most important with regard to understanding the prospects of terrorist violence emerging from these groups in America, Europe, and beyond.

2 Radical Environmental and Animal Liberationist Subcultures

Radical environmentalism most commonly brings to mind the actions of those who break laws in sometimes dramatic displays of <direct action> civil disobedience in defense of nature. The tendency of media to focus on their tactics and grievances, however, often obscures understanding of their religious motivations as well as their central ecological, political, and moral claims.

Nor all radical environmentalists engage in illegal activities, of course, and it should be understood that many specific tactics are controversial within such movements. Especially controversial are tactics which might, even if unintentionally, entail risks to living things, including human adversaries. While the embrace of direct action and support for extralegal nature defense is an important common denominator in radical environmental subcultures, it is even more important to understand radical environmentalism as a cluster of environmental political philosophies, and corresponding social movements, which claim to understand the roots of the environmental crisis and offer effective solutions to it. In this sense radical environmentalism includes not only groups like Earth First!

² Ackerman 2003.

³ Lee 1995; 1997.

(founded in the United States in 1980) and the Earth Liberation Front (which first appeared in the United Kingdom in 1992 and nearly instantly hopped the Atlantic to North America), but also green anarchists, deep ecologists, ecofeminists, pagans and wiccans, anti-globalization protesters, and some animal rights and animal liberation activists.

In short, radical environmentalists can be recognized by their diagnoses and prescriptions regarding the environmental crisis. Their diagnoses generally involve a critique of the dominant streams of occidental religion and philosophy, which are said to desacralize nature and promote oppressive attitudes toward it, as well as toward people. Prescriptions generally include overturning anthropocentric and hierarchical attitudes (especially capitalist and patriarchal ones). Accomplishing this is generally believed to require 'resacralizing,' and reconnecting with nature (which is usually gendered female, as in 'mother earth' or 'mother nature'), combined with direct action resistance to oppression in all forms.

Reconnection and consciousness transformation can be facilitated in a number of ways, radical environmentalists generally agree. Most important among these is spending time in nature with a receptive heart, for the central spiritual episteme among radical environmentalists is that people can learn to 'listen to the land' and discern its sacred voices. Other means of evoking and deepening a proper spiritual perception include visual art (appearing in tabloids or photography presented in public performances), which appeal to the intuitive sense people have of the sacredness of intact ecosystems, and music, dancing, drumming, which can erode the everyday sense of ego and independence in favor of feelings of belonging to the universe, or even kindle animistic perceptions of interspecies communication.

Many radical environmentalists can therefore be labeled 'nature mystics,' and they usually express affinity with religions they consider more nature-beneficent than occidental religions, such as those originating in Asia, or surviving among the world's remnant indigenous peoples, or being revitalized or invented anew, such as in contemporary Paganism and Wicca. Sometimes newly invented nature spiritualities, such as the British atmospheric scientist James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (1979) or the theologian Thomas Berry and Physicist Brian's Swimme's 'Universe Story' (1992), which consecrates cosmological and evolutionary narratives, have become new, free-standing religious movements which promote radical environmental ideas. Whatever the nature of the hybrids and

new religious amalgamations, the religious alternatives to occidental monotheisms theisms that characterize radical environmentalism are thought to harbor environmentally friendly values and to promote behaviors that cohere with them. These alternatives promote not only a sacralization of nature but kinship ethics wherein all life forms are considered family in the journey of evolution. Within this kind of worldview, all life deserves respect and reverent care.

Despite such common themes, however, radical environmentalism is plural and contested, both politically and religiously. There are penultimate ideas and practices that produce various and different tendencies, priorities, and practices. Nevertheless, views that are typically shared by radical environmentalists can be summarized in the following chart:

'Binary Associations Typical of Radical Environmentalism' ⁴	
Good	Bad
Foraging (or small-scale organic horticultural) Societies	Pastoral and Agricultural Societies
Animistic, Pantheistic, Indigenous Goddess-Matriarchal, or Asian Religions	Monotheistic, Sky-God, Patriarchal, Western Religions
Bio- and Ecocentrism/Kinship Ethics (promotes conservation)	Anthropocentrism (promotes destruction)
Intuition	Reason (especially instrumental)
Holistic Worldviews	Mechanistic and Dualistic Worldviews
Decentralism	Centralization
Primitive Technology	Modern Technology
Regional Self-Sufficiency	Globalization and International Trade
Anarchism/Bioregionalism/Participatory Democracy	Hierarchy/Nation-States/Corruption/Authoritarianism
Radicalism	Pragmatism

3 *Shades of Radical Environmentalism*

Differing stresses on the relative importance of such worldview elements and political assumptions lead to differing priorities and factions among

4 Adapted here after Taylor 2000, 276.

radical environmentalists. The most militant and thus best known branches of the radical environmental tree are Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front. They tend to be among the most apocalyptic in their view of the human role in causing species extinctions and the most insistent that political systems are corrupt, dominated by corporate and nation-state elites, who cannot be reformed and must be resisted. They have been the most likely to use illegal tactics, including sabotage and arson, in the pursuit of their political and ecological goals. Other branches of radical environmentalism have their own distinctive emphases, but in reviewing these branches it is important to recognize the extent to which they are engaged in a reciprocally influential encounter, often sharing religious and ethical ideas, political perceptions, and tactical innovations.

Green anarchists and social ecologists focus on hierarchy as the chief cause of social and environmental calamity. Anarchists exposed to radical environmental thought rather easily adopt environmental and animal liberationist concerns because anthropocentrism and 'speciesism' (a neologism drawing an analogy from animal exploitation to racism and sexism) appear to be obviously oppressive and hierarchical. Moreover, because small-scale indigenous societies are viewed as more ecologically sensitive, they and their supposedly animistic nature religiosity are often held in high esteem. Indigenous societies are therefore viewed as religious and ethical models for the hoped-for, post-revolutionary world.

Some anarchist thinkers, such as John Clark, assert that religions such as Daoism, and many minority sects within larger religions, also promote environmentally sensitive forms of anarchism.⁵ Meanwhile other anarchist thinkers, such as John Zerzan, who in a series of books has promoted a type of anarcho-primitivism,⁶ express increasing openness to considering non-hierarchical, nature-spirituality as an important resource for the struggle to overturn industrial civilization.⁷ This kind of anarchism has become increasingly influential within the radical environmental milieu, including within Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front.

Certain streams of Paganism and Wicca have also adopted anarchist ideology or had members promoting it enthusiastically. Perhaps best known in this regard is the Wiccan priestess and author Starhawk, whose Reclaiming collectives by early in the twenty-first century had spread

beyond the San Francisco Bay area, gaining adherents and sponsoring events at a wide variety of locations throughout the United States and Western Europe.⁸ In the United Kingdom the 'Donga Tribe' and 'Dragon Environmental Network' provide two additional, important examples.⁹ The diverse and various forms of green anarchism have all made contributions to the anti-globalization movement.

Ecofeminism, like green anarchism and radical environmentalism in general, harshly critiques hierarchy, especially patriarchy, viewing it as the most fundamental cause of environmental decline and inter-human injustice. Ecofeminists, while sometimes critical of sexism found within radical environmental groups, nevertheless share their critiques and concerns. Conversely, the fundamental assertion of ecofeminism, that a 'logic of domination' is at work in modern civilization which simultaneously subjugates women and nature, is widely accepted within radical environmental subcultures. Such reciprocal convictions provide a solid ground for collaboration between ecofeminists and other radical environmentalists.

Animal Rights and Animal Liberation ethics also have also played a significant role within radical environmental subcultures, even though such ethics have not been considered close kin to radical environmental ethics because they focus on individual, sentient animals rather than on ecosystems as a whole. They are also less overtly involved in nature spirituality than are radical environmentalists. But there are interesting intersections both religiously and ethically between animal-focused and radical environmental activists. Moreover, the apprehension of the value of animals, and the affective connection to them, often is and certainly can be understood in spiritual terms by participants in these movements. Indeed, as with radical environmentalists, this sometimes even takes on ritual forms.¹⁰

The key to whether animal liberationists fit in the radical environmental camp, of course, depends on how one defines radical environmentalism. One prerequisite seems clear: radical environmentalism must be biocentric or ecocentric, namely, life- or ecosystem-centered. As unfortunate as it may be, there are many cases where a moral agent cannot have it both ways, caring equally for individual animals or ecosystems as a

5 Clark 2005.

6 Zerzan 1988; 1994; 1999.

7 Telephone discussion with Zerzan, October 2003.

8 Salomonson 2005.

9 Plovs 2005; Harris 2005.

10 See 'Environmental Ethics' in Taylor 2005.

whole. Indeed, with animal rights or liberationist perspectives, there is no basis for valuing organisms if there is little reason to believe they can suffer; moreover, there is no basis for preferring the lives of individuals essential to the survival of an endangered species over those who are not. Radical environmentalists but not animal liberationists approve of hunting, for example, in cases where killing is the only effective means to reduce the populations of animals threatening endangered species. These are intractable differences.

In addition to a biocentric outlook, radical environmentalism also involves a political ideology harshly critical of current political arrangements if not of nation-state governance itself. Here, participants in animal liberation movements are as diverse as other radical environmentalists, from those who retain hope that their movement of conscience will precipitate effective political reforms, to anarchists who believe the entire system must be torn down.

These are all differences that make a difference. Is ethical individualism or holism most important? Do democratic institutions exist and is reform through ordinary political processes possible? Or is such a view just a fiction fostered by a totalitarian, life-destroying, industrial civilization? Where individuals and groups come down on such critical issues shapes which causes will be championed and which tactics are considered justifiable.

4 *Re-visiting the <Ecoterrorism> Hypothesis*

What, then, can be concluded about violence in general, and the likelihood of terrorism in particular, emerging from radical environmental and animal liberationist subcultures? From this vantage point, while there have been an increasing numbers of arson incidents and one case rooted in animal liberationist ideology where explosives have been used, at least, in an effort to terrorize and intimidate their adversaries, I would not markedly alter the <risk assessment> I published in 1998.

I would like to take the opportunity in this venue, however, to offer some further theoretical reflections as to why animal liberationists have crossed a threshold and used explosives in an attempt to threaten and intimidate their adversaries, while apparently, radical environmentalists have not (at least to my knowledge and up to this date). The pipe bombs

used in the incident with which I began the present analysis, even if the intent was not to kill or maim, as it apparently was not, will nevertheless and understandably be understood as <terrorism> by many if not most observers. Certainly such a device could have caused injuries had there been miscalculations or surprises of a relevant kind. What then of the prospects of violence from the groups under discussion in these pages?

The holistic, eccentric worldview of most Radical Environmentalists is theoretically capable of justifying violent terrorist acts, and even the use of weapons of mass death. Humanity at large or elite sectors of it could be targeted as pathogens, or even as desecrating agents, according to such worldviews. Violence could be viewed as a natural and appropriate response, or even as a sacred duty. Activists could concoct an argument that they are somehow helping sacred Gaia defend herself against the human hordes.

There are many variables, however, that work against such a conclusion or the deployment of tactics based on it, in my view. These include the reverence for life ethic that animates such movements, which places a high burden of proof on those who would kill. The comprehensive critique of hubris that is a central part of these movements as well makes it difficult to believe that humans could use violence, and especially that which intends mass casualties, in a way that could be containable and not damage more than benefit ecosystems. I do not think, therefore, that apart from psycho-pathology it is likely we will find radical environmental activists concluding that violence in general, and especially the use of weapons of mass death, is a morally permissible or feasible way to resacralize human perceptions of the earth and foster environmentally sustainable lifeways.

The individualistic ethics of animal liberationists, on the other hand, does provide more fertile ideological and moral grounds for violent tactics. The focus on either a right to life or on equal consideration for the suffering of non-human organisms, for example, provides a strong basis for labeling the killing of non-human, sentient animals as murder, or on the other hand, for calling animal experimentation torture. Such value systems do provide a logic that can be used to justify violence as a means to protect innocents from such crimes. Moreover, within these subcultures, there are fewer ideational variables to counter such justification than is true in the case of radical environmentalists. This is, I surmise, why there are a number of cases where animal liberationists appear to be

willing to assault and threaten to kill those they consider torturers/murderers. The logic is akin to that justifying in the mind of some anti-abortion activists in the United States the assassination of abortion doctors and their collaborators.

There are many other variables, however, including affective ones, which work against the use of such tactics. The compassion that leads to animal welfare concerns, for example, is a character trait. It is not easily erased or ignored even when these activists are angry over the cruelty they perceive. For such reasons I think animal liberationist ideology is unlikely to lead to protracted and sustained violent campaigns with significant numbers of individuals or terrorist cells. It is even less likely that such individuals would think to deploy weapons of mass death, for individualistic ethics, which animate many of these actors, presumes the protection of innocents. Such individuals would obviously, or at least presumably, be harmed by such tactics which were to be deployed.

What then of the freedom-focused anarchist movement, which considers hierarchy in general, and nation-states in particular, to be the enemy. Anarchism, including its newer 'green' forms, certainly can provide an ideological infrastructure that can justify violence, especially against rulers and their proxies. Among the various anarchist factions, anarcho-primitivists may be the ones most likely to engage in arson and other tactics that they hope will accelerate the decline, or overturning, of a rapacious, authoritarian, industrial state. Often for these actors, environmental concern is secondary to the quest for freedom, as they understand it. There may, therefore, be fewer scruples than would typically be the case with radical environmentalists against tactics that may involve 'collateral damage' to the environment.

Long discussions I have had with some such activists suggest that some of them could turn to intentional violence if they were to conclude that the 'revolutionary moment' had come. This could involve a means/ends rationality to justify the targeting of their adversaries and even, for the most extreme among them, the rationalization of killing innocents as a necessary means. There are, however, many within these movements who are committed pacifists and are known to resist the violent provocateurs sometimes in their midst. This suggests that there might well probably be obstacles within these groups to overcome were participants in them to consider, advocate, or seek to develop the ideological rationale and capacity to instigate violent campaigns.

While I think the anarchist movement provides more fertile ground for violent tactics than those who identify chiefly with radical environmentalism, I do not think there is much evidence to expect more than more of the same from these groups, namely, sporadic arson and small-scale (non-lethal) violence in street battles with the police.

From this vantage point, if by 'ecoterrorism' we mean tactics designed to kill or maim individuals or groups of people as a means to prevent *environmental* degradation, there is little evidence such terrorism exists. If by 'ecoterrorism' we mean tactics designed to scare or terrorize political adversaries, then we can find more examples of it emerging from animal 'liberationist subcultures' than 'radical environmentalist' ones, and when such tactics are deployed by radical environmentalists, they are most likely to be from its anarchist wing. Finally, I would argue, contrary to those who believe that the *more* religious a group is, the more likely they are to deploy violence in the pursuit of sacred goals, my fieldwork-based perception is that the more overtly religious these subcultures are, the less likely they are to try to kill or maim either their adversaries. This suggestion is consistent with my earlier analyses and if anything, the passage of time only increases its plausibility. In summary, I think radical environmentalists are probably less likely than animal liberationists or their less-religious anarchist wing to turn toward violence as they pursue their value-based political objectives.