

Ecoterrorism

Ned Hettinger, Philosophy, College of Charleston
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"Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent revolution inevitable."
John F. Kennedy (1962)

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

a number of university professors. His goal was to help bring an end to the industrial-technological system that, he believed, was destroying the natural world and technologically-enslaving humanity.

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

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

and strip-mining the oceans, appropriating and homogenizing earth's ecosystems, and generally taking over and poisoning the planet. Many environmentalists believe that we confront an extreme environmental emergency that requires drastic action. Might terrorism be an appropriate tool to bring about the significant changes needed?

What is Terrorism?

Although there is considerable disagreement about what should count as terrorism, one fairly uncontroversial feature is that terrorism is motivated by political ideology, rather than self-interest, personal vendetta, or psychosis. Drug lords who massacre and behead people, though they intend to intimidate and instill fear, are not typically thought to engaged in terrorism because their goals are financial, not ideological. Nor are the U.S. school shootings typically viewed as terrorism, for, by and large, the perpetrators act out of revenge or serious mental instability rather than ideals about how the world should be. While it is arguable that terrorists will often show evidence of psychological problems, ideological motivations dominate their thinking.

It is sometimes claimed that only individuals or sub-national groups can engage in terrorism and that states cannot (Hoffman 2006: Chapter One). Although one could insist that this is how the term 'terrorism' should be used, such a restriction is problematic. Perhaps the resistance to allowing state terrorism comes from the idea that the state's use of violence and intimidation is typically part of a war against other states and terrorism is not possible in war. But this ignores the well-accepted idea that even in war there is an important moral distinction between targeting civilians and targeting combatants. Intentionally killing civilians as a mechanism to cow one's wartime opponent certainly seems like a terrorist tactic. Such a

restriction also ignores that sometimes states use violence against their own citizens, aiming to intimidate them through fear in order to achieve political objectives. The Nazi treatment of European Jews seems like terrorism, and yet it was performed by a state. Environmental activists have sometimes been the target of such state terrorism: Ken Saro-Wiwa, the leader of a campaign to protect the native homeland of the Ogoni people from oil-production pollution by Royal Dutch Shell, was executed by a Nigerian dictatorship in a terror campaign aimed at undermining the Ogoni drive for autonomy (Center for Constitutional Rights 2016).

At its core terrorism is an act of violence that aims to intimidate for public purposes; it uses violence, or the threat of violence, to coerce by means of fear in order to achieve ideological objectives. Such acts can be performed by groups, individuals and even governments.

Must Terrorism Target Innocents?

One important feature typically associated with terrorism is that the violence is directed at non-combatants or innocents. Targeting innocents seems essential if we are to distinguish terrorism from typical acts of war. When two countries go to war against each other they are using violence in an attempt to intimidate and coerce the opposing nation and they are doing so for a political objective. If the violence is directed at military personnel and there is serious concern to avoid civilian casualties, then the terrorism label seems inappropriate. Perhaps this justifies the belief that U.S. drone attacks are not terrorist because the innocent civilians killed are not intentionally targeted and major steps are taken to avoid their deaths. Terrorism is most clearly indicated when violence is aimed at non-combatants, civilians, or those who are innocent in the sense that they are clearly not responsible for the injustice being opposed.

However, several examples challenge the requirement that the target of terrorism be

innocents or non-combatants. Part of the trouble is that it is not always clear who the combatants are or who is responsible for the perceived injustice. If an Al-Qaeda suicide bomber exploded himself inside the Pentagon, most would consider this terrorism. But because the Pentagon is central to the U.S. war-waging mechanism, it is arguable that people who work there are combatants. If we require that terrorism target innocent civilians, then, implausibly, this attack would not count as terrorism.

The case of the Unabomber is also instructive. Kaczynski's targets were not random innocent people but those involved in perpetrating the "techno-fascism" he railed against. It turns out that one of his bombs detonated on an airplane and this suggests that he was also willing to kill innocent people, that is, those not directly involved in producing techno-fascism. Is it only because of this that Kaczynski is properly labeled a terrorist, or would he have been a terrorist without this targeting of "non-combatants?"

Consider certain tactics used in the campaign to end the production of foie gras. Almost 10 years before California banned the production of fat-engorged liver from force-fed ducks and geese, animal activists targeted a chef and part owner of a restaurant that sold what plausibly can be consider a product of animal cruelty. In addition to flooding his restaurant, they vandalized his home and car and left a video-tape of him and his family with the message "stop or be stopped." This is clearly an attempt to intimidate for political goals. It seems clear that a chef who uses foie gras is not innocent of what the animal activists are trying to prevent. (Such activists might also not consider innocent those who consume this "delicacy of despair.") If targeting non-combatants is required, then this might not be what the FBI called "an act of domestic terrorism." Was this terrorism only because the activists threatened not just the chef

but also his family who are innocent of the alleged evil the activists are trying to stop?

Those who advocate terrorism often stretch the notion of combatants to try to avoid our natural moral revulsion toward violence against innocent civilians. Militant jihadists, including Osama Bin Laden, have made the following pronouncement: “To kill the Americans and their allies—civil and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim” (Lewis 1998). This appears to accept the killing of innocents as a legitimate tactic. But after the September 11 attacks, Bin Laden suggested that American civilians are not innocent:

“The American people should remember that they pay taxes to their government and that they voted for their president. Their government makes weapons and provides them to Israel, which they use to kill Palestinian Muslims. Given that the American Congress is a committee that represents the people, the fact that it agrees with the actions of the American government proves that America in its entirety is responsible for the atrocities that it is committing against Muslims (Bin Laden 2005: 140–141, quoted in Primoratz 2015).

Such a pronouncement stretches the notion of responsibility too far and is a thinly disguised attempt to avoid the natural moral horror we have at targeting of innocent civilians.

Some in the environmental movement may be accused of a similar stretching of the notion of responsibility. It has been suggested that Derrick Jensen’s *Endgame* (Jensen 2006) makes the following argument: Because civilization depends on widespread violence, all civilized people (even dogmatic pacifists) are complicit in violence simply by their own participation in the industrial economy. Thus to violently bring down industrial civilization, as Jensen clearly seems to advocate (see below), even if it were to involve the death of millions of

ordinary people, would not count as terrorism (under the restriction that innocents must be targeted) because these ordinary people share in the responsibility for the destruction of nature.

As can be seen from these examples, those who support violence for political causes have a strong desire to avoid being seen as advocating violence against innocent parties. One reason to include the targeting of innocents in our conception of terrorism is that it explains and justifies the special moral horror that is associated with this tactic. Note, however, that we need not categorize an act of ideologically inspired, violent intimidation as terrorist in order to condemn it. Such violence might not be terrorism and yet still be severely wrong (perhaps even worse than an act of terrorism). We might say that the shooting of armed Jews by Nazi soldiers was not terrorism (as the Jewish resisters are obviously combatants) but insist it was clearly wrong (Coady 2001). So we could strongly object to the Al-Qaeda bombing of the Pentagon, Kaczynski's bombing of technocrats, and the animal activists' attack on the chef while insisting that because they attack combatants, they are not terrorism.

Might Property Destruction Count as Terrorism?

Our working understanding is that terrorism involves intimidating violence that is motivated by ideology and that paradigmatically targets those not responsible for the evil being resisted, that is, innocents or non-combatants. What kind of violence does terrorism involve? Must the violence in terrorism be aimed at persons, or might violence aimed at property (sabotage) also count as terrorism? Virtually all violence perpetrated by radical environmentalists and animal activists has been aimed at property, not persons. Those who destroy property for environmental or animal protection reasons repeatedly say that their goal is to protect all life, including humans, from the forces destroying the earth. Here is Edward

Abbey's articulation of the distinction between destroying property for political goals and terrorism:

Sabotage is an act of force or violence against material objects, machinery, in which life is not endangered, or should not be. Terrorism, on the other hand, is violence against living things-human beings and other living things. That kind of terrorism is generally practiced by governments against their own peoples (Loeffler 2010: 8).

The use of arson by members of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) provides a useful test case. In 1998, ELF members burned \$12 million worth of buildings and ski lifts at Vail Colorado because of plans to expand into endangered lynx habitat. ELF has claimed responsibility for burning sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and hummers at dealerships around the country (while others were spray painted with "Lazy Fat Americans" or "I love to pollute"). In 2001, a research laboratory at the University of Washington was burned down because it was believed (mistakenly) to be genetically engineering Popular trees. As recently as 2008, ELF members opposed to urban sprawl have set ablaze luxury homes and condos in various stages of construction. In one case, they mocked claims the homes were environmentally friendly by spray painting "Built Green? Nope black! McMansions . . . not green. ELF." These cases of arson involve targeting property, not people, but they also seem violent because they involve destructive force that harms.

Some of the activities of the Sea Shepard Conservation Society also provide examples of violent sabotage. This group has been fighting to protect marine mammals for decades using tactics such as cutting drift nets to prevent dolphin deaths—a tactic that does not seem violent-but

also ramming whaling ships at sea and sinking one at a dock for allegedly violating international treaties regulating whaling. Paul Watson, who founded the group, specifically advocates violence, but never against life, only against property (Best 2005: 1720). One analysis of sabotage in defense of the environment argues that—with the notable exception of Unabomber—“in more than twenty-five years there have been no cases where environmental activists have sought to kill or maim anyone” (Taylor and LeVasseur 2009: 290).

The distinction between violence to property and violence toward persons seems clear at a superficial level. Because of this, some theorists have argued that ecological sabotage should not count as terrorism:

Acts that maintain the principled distinction between persons and property – neither harming nor threatening to harm persons – must be distinguished from genuine terrorism in theory and ought also to be distinguished from those more objectionable tactics under law . . . ecotage must be understood as a categorically different offence than terrorism (Vanderheiden 2008: 304).

Nevertheless, the assumption that there is a bright line between violence directed at property and violence directed at people is problematic. While the distinction is important, we must not let it delude us into thinking that violence against property has no harmful effects on people, as if only things are being hurt and not people (Morreall 1976). Violence that harms people need not cause physical injury to them. Sabotage that destroys people’s property, puts them out of work, or deprives them of income or profits harms them. The owners of the SUV dealerships were harmed by the arson campaign against them as were the researchers at the university who lost their labs and data. The owners of the fishing and whaling vessels were

harmful as well by the sabotage directed at their property. Note too that violence that destroys a person's significant property can be far worse for her than a minor physical injury.

One important definition of terrorism explicitly includes property destruction. Coady (2001: 1697) suggests we might define terrorism as the tactic of intentionally targeting non-combatants (or noncombatant property when significantly related to life and security) with lethal or severe violence meant to produce political results via the creation of fear. Despite arguing for the importance of the distinction between harming persons and property, Vanderheiden also acknowledges that destroying property can terrorize:

If a person or people can be "terrorized"—that is, illegitimately intimidated by the calculated use of force and implication of further violence—by random killing, then surely they can also be similarly terrorized by the significant destruction of certain kinds or quantities of property (Vanderheiden 2005: 430).

If we allow that acts aimed at destroying property are not immune from the charge of terrorism simply because they don't directly aim at physical injury to a person, then the question remains whether ecological sabotage can be terrorism. Ecological sabotage seems to fit our working definition of terrorism fairly well. It is politically-motivated, coercive, and illegal. Frequently it aims to change people's behavior by instilling fear of being the target of harmful illegal activity. ELF members who burned SUVs probably hoped to dissuade people from buying them and animal activists acts of sabotage often seem aimed at intimidating those who harmfully use animals (much as anti-abortion sabotage aims to intimidate abortion providers and those considering abortion). In so far as people lose their jobs or homes as the result of ecological sabotage, these losses seem "significantly related to people's life and security" (as

Coady's definition requires). Note, however, that even non-violent, civil disobedience can intimidate and cause harm to people in the ways I'm suggesting sabotage can.

However, Coady's requirement that the property targeted must be that of "non-combatants" may exempt most acts of ecological sabotage from the category of terrorism. Ecological sabotage targets property used in what the saboteurs believe to be environmentally harmful ways and thus, from their perspective, those who own or use that property are not "innocent bystanders." The debate over who counts as combatants discussed above comes into play at this point: Perhaps the developers of Vail Resorts can legitimately be looked at as combatants but can those who own or build homes that constitute suburban sprawl be so considered? Note that whether or not we consider them to be terrorism, tactics like arson and ramming ships (as compared with tactics like pulling up survey stakes, siltating construction equipment, or cutting drift nets) are more morally problematic as they present significant risks of physical injury to people.

Expanding the notion of terrorism to include some types of property destruction may contribute to an unfortunate tendency to overuse and extend the term. The FBI has an expansive definition of terrorism that both includes property destruction and does not require the violence be directed at non-combatants:

Domestic terrorism is the unlawful use, or threatened use, of violence by a group or individual based and operating entirely within the United States (or its territories) without foreign direction, committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives (Jarboe 2002).

The 2006 “Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act” criminalizes behavior which intentionally “damages or interferes with the operations of an animal enterprise,” whether or not it involves “physical disruption.” This act suggests not only that non-violent, civil disobedience might count as “terrorism” but even otherwise legal divestiture campaigns (ACLU 2013). Derrick Turner points out that if we call environmental and animal saboteurs terrorists we might “create the mistaken impression that they are no different, morally speaking, than the Unabomber” and that “if we are too liberal in applying the term terrorism, we will no longer be able to use that term to capture what is distinctively bad about actions such as the September 11, 2001, attacks, or the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing” (Turner 2009: 283).

So is ecological (and animal) sabotage terrorism or not? I think the best approach is to pass on the temptation to assume there is some fact of the matter here or to simply stipulate an answer by insisting on a precise definition. We should also not assume a strict all inclusive dichotomy between two types of politically-motivated lawbreaking: Either civil disobedience or terrorism. If our account of civil disobedience rules out property destruction (and it may or may not), that does not entail that such politically-motivated property destruction is tantamount to terrorism. We have paradigms of environmental civil disobedience and also paradigms of environmental terrorism. We also have cases that fall on a spectrum in between. Some are closer to civil disobedience, such as when, in the late 1960s before the Clean Water Act, the middle-school science teacher and eco-activist known as “The Fox” “collected 50 pounds of sewage that a company had spewed into Lake Michigan and dumped it in the company's reception room” (Martin 2001). Others are closer to terrorism, such as, the burning of 5 luxury

“green” homes outside Seattle in 2008 by eco-activists rejecting the claim that these high-end homes were environmentally friendly (Yardley 2008). The more environmentally-motivated property destruction instantiates the core features of terrorism—namely, violence that harms (especially non-combatants), attempts to intimidate and coerce, and creates fear as a tool for ideological objectives—the more like terrorism it is. On this account, acts can be more or less terrorist-like, depending to what extent they embody the core features and resemble the paradigm cases of terrorism.

The Morality of Ecoterrorism

Some might think that there is an absolute ethical prohibition against ecoterrorism, because terrorism is necessarily morally wrong. Terrorism, they might think, is a unique evil that can never be justified. To consider this position in its strongest form, let’s assume we are talking about terrorism in its paradigm instantiation: Killing and terrorizing innocent non-combatants in order to coerce a politically-motivated change in policy. An absolute moral prohibition on terrorism would object to the allied terror campaign in WWII aimed at forcing the Germans to surrender (as well as Truman’s bombing of the Japanese to end WWII).

One way to defend this absolutist position is with the idea the no ends can ever justify a sufficiently evil means. As G.E.M. Anscombe argued while defending her objection to giving President Truman (“Two-Bomb Harry”) an honorary degree at Oxford because he authorized the atomic bombing of the Japan: “If you had to choose between boiling one baby and letting some frightful disaster befall a thousand people—or a million people, if a thousand is not enough—what would you do?” (Anscombe 1958: 3). The idea is that some acts by their nature

are so wrong that they should never be done, no matter what the consequences.

Such a position rejects the consequentialist position in ethics that asserts that what makes actions right or wrong are solely the consequences—so that a sufficiently good consequence (preventing far more innocent deaths than one causes) could justify any act whatsoever (including terrorism). A consequentialist justification for ecoterrorism might look like this: Suppose a campaign of terrorism aimed at fossil fuel industry workers, executives, and users could quickly shift world economies away from fossil fuels to renewables. If such a shift prevented far more deaths than would have occurred from rapid climate change than the deaths this terrorism causes, then, other things being equal, consequentialist considerations would justify it.

Consequentialist moral reasoning is suspect in the eyes of many and so one might be tempted to reject this ethical approach and with it its defense of terrorism. But even non-consequentialist, rights-based ethics can be used to justify acts of terrorism. Virginia Held argues that non-consequentialist considerations of distributive justice can support a limited use of terrorism. Fairness in the distribution of rights violations is an important moral goal. “If we must have rights violations, a more equitable distribution of such violations is better than a less equitable one” (Held 2008: 88). Imagine a defective society (like 20th century apartheid South Africa) where one group of people’s rights to personal safety are not respected and another group of people’s rights to personal safety are respected. If limited terrorism against the privileged group were the only way to transition that society to one where everyone’s fundamental rights were respected, then fairness in sharing the burden of rights violation would

justify such terrorism.

Arguments justifying terrorism only begin to make sense in extreme circumstances. The presumption against using violence to bring about change, especially violence against innocents, is extremely high. But many environmentalists—and not just the few who advocate direct or (more strongly) violent action—articulate our environmental situation in a way that it does seem to constitute a supreme emergency, thus opening the door to the justification of extreme tactics.

Pulitzer Prize winning author and award-winning scientist Jared Diamond has said that unless the world changes its environmental actions and policies, the world of 2050 will be “a world not worth living in” (Diamond 2014). On this account, our environmentally unfriendly, unsustainable lifestyles are not just harming other species, they are not just dramatically lowering the quality of our lives today and in the future, but they will also bring about a world so horrible that it would be better that our children not be born into it. Such a threat presents an emergency situation that could justify the most extreme tactics in order to prevent it.

One of those advocating such tactics is Derrick Jensen, author of *End Game* (Jensen 2006) and an advocate of what he (and others) call “Deep Green Resistance” (McBay, Keith and Jensen 2011). Jensen believes that “all the world is at stake” and advocates “acting decisively to stop the industrial economy” (Jensen 2009). According to Jensen, industrial civilization is inherently violent, unsustainable, and irredeemable and we must therefore bring it to an end:

This culture will not undergo any sort of voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living. If we do not put halt to it, civilization will continue to immiserate the vast majority of humans and to degrade the planet until it

(civilization, and probably the planet) collapses . . . The longer we wait for civilization to crash—or the longer we wait before we ourselves bring it down—the messier the crash will be and the worse things will be for those humans and nonhumans who live during it, and for those who come after” (Jensen 2006: ix-x).

In response to the worry that dismantling civilization “will kill millions of people in cities,” he argues that in our current predicament, no one has clean hands:

No matter what you do, your hands will be blood red. If you participate in the global economy, your hands are blood red because the global economy is murdering humans and non-humans the planet over (DeepGreenResistance.Org).

Furthermore, “any option is better than a dead planet” (Jensen 2009). Morality requires that we act: “To fail to *effectively* stop the grotesque and ultimately absolute violence of civilization is by far the most immoral path any of us can choose. We are, after all, talking about killing the planet” (Jensen 2006: 253). He thus advocates “blowing up dams” (Jensen 2006: 252) and that we consider “assassination” (Jensen 2006: 252). “Some things, including a living planet . . . are worth fighting for, dying for, and killing for when other means of stopping the abuses have been exhausted” (Jensen 2006: 79).

Jensen—and other Deep Green Resistance advocates like Aric McBay who argues for “Decisive Ecological Warfare” (McBay, Keith, and Jensen 2011: 462-63)—seem to be advocating eco-terrorism. Clearly Jensen is a “revolutionary” desiring to take down and replace our culture rather than to simply reform it, but much of what he claims about the current state and future of the environment coincides with the dire pronouncements of many mainstream reformist

environmentalists who would not dream of advocating such tactics. But if we are making the planet uninhabitable for ourselves and most other life forms (as both revolutionaries like Jensen and mainstream environmentalists like Diamond claim) and if terrorism is not ruled out in principle as absolutely immoral, then ecoterrorism would seem to be a live option.

At this point practical questions of political strategy become central. Would terrorism be effective at “saving the earth?” Is it the only way to do so? Clearly less violent and less harmful means should be used if they would be effective; at best, terrorism is a last resort. Because a variety of activities might qualify as “terrorism,” how effective terrorism might be depends on what kind we talking about (damaging property that hurts people, physically injuring people, harming only combatants or also noncombatants, and so on).

Might ecoterrorism function like environmental civil disobedience as a communicative tool aimed at persuading society about the severity of environmental problems and the importance of strong environmental policies? Because it fails to renounce violence and does not take legal responsibility for its actions, terrorism “compromises much of the sympathetic appeal characteristic of civil disobedience as a form of address and so is likely to be less persuasive” (Vanderheiden 2008: 309). However, we should not rule out this “appeal to the public” function of terrorism in principle. Although attempting to coerce people by causing fear is very different from trying to persuade them to change their behavior, it is possible it might also have that effect (and even have that as a secondary aim). For example, seeing the neighbor’s Hummer burn might make a person realize the importance of taking fuel economy seriously. As Robert Young (1995: 206) argues: “Sometimes the use of violence serves to highlight an injustice in a way no

other form of protest can match. . . . it is not until there is violent protest that any meaningful response to wrongs is likely to be made in many a society.” If people really are willing to act coercively and violently to try to solve environmental problems, then perhaps we need to take environmental problems more seriously.

Nonetheless terrorism, even less severe terrorism, seems unlikely to be an effective form of public appeal:

As many radical activists have acknowledged in interviews—even those who have supported sabotage—the more an action risks or intends to hurt people, the more the media and public focus on the tactics rather than the concerns that gave rise to the actions. This means that the most radical tactics tend to be counterproductive to the goal of increasing awareness and concern in the general public (Taylor 2013: 311).

It might even be argued that any form of lawbreaking, including civil disobedience, will cost environmentalism the public support it desperately needs. Still it seems plausible that sometimes extremists can—in bad cop, good cop fashion—succeed in making ordinary environmental proposals and advocates look more modest and thus move the policy debate in the right direction.

Might ecoterrorism in one of its forms be successful in directly ending environmental exploitation? Interestingly, both the revolutionaries and sober analysts agree that ELF’s ecological sabotage campaign has been ineffective. The eco-revolutionary Aric McBay claims that “It’s hard to find a case in which a construction project has actually been given up because

of ELF activity” (McBay 2011: 418). Political science professor Steven Vanderheiden argues that “Despite causing over \$100 million in damage over the past decade, the ELF has not significantly affected the underlying profit structure of targeted businesses (Vanderheiden 2008: 307). Still another analyst argues that the prospects of eco-terrorists overthrowing industrial culture is “fanciful.” He concludes that “It makes little sense to base strategy and tactics on such an unlikely possibility that communities of resistance will ever be able to mount a sustained campaign to bring down industrial civilization, even if that were a desirable objective” (Taylor 2013: 312). Of course, some would pessimistically claim that not only would terrorism be ineffective in bringing about the needed changes, but no tactic—civil or otherwise—will be successful.

If we leave open the possibility that ecoterrorism might be morally and practically justified, this presents the dangerous suggestion that environmental activists will have to decide for themselves whether their goals and their practical circumstances warrant this extreme behavior. The worry becomes clear when we reflect on cases where those with whom we disagree have sincerely believed their terrorism was justified. Consider the terrorist campaign against abortion which has included dozens of cases of arson, bombing, and assassination (resulting in almost a dozen deaths). Or consider Al-Qaeda terrorists who seek to avenge innocents killed in the U.S. war on terror. Nevertheless, to allow the possibility that sometimes terrorism might be justified is not to commit to the view that any sincere act or campaign of terrorism is justified. Such justification depends on the righteousness of the cause and the effectiveness and necessity of the action. But how are activists to know if their possible terrorist

acts are justified?

Those considering such radical tactics must begin their vetting process with supreme humility. Although too absolutist, Gandhi's position on violence is instructive. He argued that because our beliefs are subject to error, no one should be so presumptuous as to inflict harm on others to further those beliefs (Gandhi 1957). Those who engage in violent activity are often arrogant, macho, and/or deluded and they are likely to have an irresponsibly high level of confidence in the rectitude of their cause and the effectiveness of their tactics. Would-be eco-terrorists have a solemn duty to vet their ideas with many thoughtful others, including those with whom they disagree, and to make sure they respect the humanity of those they oppose (and plan to harm).

For example, the ELF members who burned the research lab they believed was engaged in genetically-engineering popular trees, needed to ask if doing so would actually help stop the use of genetically-modified crops. They should have been extraordinarily familiar with the debate over whether or not genetically modified organisms (=GMOs) really are a significant threat to the environment. And since the scientists experimenting with the GMOs are not moral monsters who can be ignored, they needed to consider what will happen to the researchers and their livelihoods if the arson plan succeeds.

One useful constraint is to employ John Rawls requirement that those considering breaking the law must limit their justifications to conceptions of justice that have widespread acceptance and that they not rely simply on their own narrow political allegiances, religious conviction, or private moralities (Rawls 1971: 365). This would arguably rule out terrorism by

abortion-opponents as well as terrorism in support of non-human life forms. Neither the right to life of human fetuses nor that of other species is a “commonly shared conception of justice that underlies the political order ” (Rawls 1971: 365). However, this requirement seems to be met when ecoterrorism is justified by the fear that our industrial civilization is making the earth uninhabitable for humans. It is widely (if not universally) accepted that it would be a terrible injustice to destroy the human habitability of earth. Would-be ecoterrorists share this conception of justice both with their anti-environmentalists opponents and their less extreme environmentalist ones. What the advocates of ecoterrorism as a general strategy for the environmental movement do not share with their opponents is a sober, level-headed assessment of the likely success of using extreme violence to bring about a better environmental future and about the prospects for alternative, less extreme strategies to bring it about. It is hard to see how eco-terrorism could be justified when it is based on such rash and farfetched empirical assumptions.

Conclusion

Terrorism is the act or threat of violence that aims to intimidate and coerce by means of fear in order to achieve ideological objectives. In its paradigm form it targets innocents and attempts bodily injury to them. Because the distinction between innocent parties and those responsible for the alleged injustice is contentious and because one can harm people by destroying their property, the concept of terrorism can be expanded to include attacks on those involved in the alleged injustice, as well as to attacks on property. Given this expanded definition, the environmental movement has seen acts of ecoterrorism and some in the movement attempt to defend it. An absolute prohibition on terrorism (including ecoterrorism) as

a supreme evil is not plausible. As Virginia Held has argued: “Terrorism is not uniquely atrocious but on a continuum with many other forms of political violence . . . wars, even ‘good wars’, are often morally far worse” (Held 2008: 9). The language of extreme environmental emergency used by many in the environmental movement—that we are creating a world not worth living in and that we need to “save the earth”—provides support for the radicals who seek to justify ecoterrorism. Nonetheless, it is highly dubious that ecoterrorism, at least in its extreme manifestations and as a general strategy for the environmental movement, could be effective in achieving the changes needed. Those contemplating this tactic should worry about their ability to judge wisely, and they have a solemn duty to vet their rationales with their opponents and to seriously consider the humanity of those they intend to harm.

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Related topics

Civil disobedience

Further Material

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Biographical Note

Ned Hettinger is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at the College of Charleston. His research specialization is environmental philosophy, including environmental ethics and aesthetics.