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Leaderless Resistance and Ideological Inclusion: The Case of the Earth Liberation Front

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Leaderless resistance is a strategy of opposition that allows for and encourages individuals or small cells to engage in acts of political violence entirely independent of any hierarchy of leadership or network of support. This article examines the development of the leaderless resistance strategy by the radical right and more recently by the radical environmentalist movement. While both movements use leaderless resistance to avoid detection, infiltration, and prosecution by the state, environmental groups like the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) benefit additionally because of the ideological inclusiveness that leaderless resistance fosters. Historically, ideological cleavages have rendered radical environmental groups such as Earth First! less effective than they would have been otherwise. Using leaderless resistance, however, the ELF eliminates all ideology extraneous to the specific cause of halting the degradation of nature. This elimination enables the ELF to mobilize a greater number of “direct actions.”

Keywords Earth First!, Earth Liberation Front (ELF), eco-terrorism (ecoterrorism), environmentalism, leaderless resistance, radical environmentalism, terrorism

April 19, 2005 marked the tenth anniversary of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, an act that some have described as being an example of “leaderless resistance.”¹ Leaderless resistance is a strategy of opposition that allows for and encourages individuals or small cells to engage in acts of political violence entirely independent of any hierarchy of leadership or network of support. Although Louis Beam, a Klansman with strong connections to the Aryan Nations, developed and popularized the concept of leaderless resistance in the hopes of mobilizing many acts of violence from the far right,² such acts have been relatively rare. The notion of leaderless resistance may have inspired the bombings carried out by Timothy

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McVeigh and Eric Rudolph,³ but it has thus far failed to take hold widely among adherents of the racist far right in the way that Beam envisioned.⁴

Another social movement, however, has been employing the strategy of leaderless resistance with a much higher degree of success. The radical environmentalist movement—the Earth Liberation Front (ELF)⁵ in particular—offers a contemporary example of leaderless resistance in action.⁶ Although the ELF's acts are less severe than those of Timothy McVeigh or Eric Rudolph,⁷ they are far more numerous. James Jarboe, the FBI's top domestic terrorism officer, linked the ELF to 600 criminal acts committed between 1996 and 2002, totaling \$43 million in damages.⁸ Most destructive of these was the arson of a Vail, Colorado ski resort resulting in \$12 million in damages. The ELF communiqué claiming responsibility for the Vail fire was written “on behalf of the lynx,” an endangered species threatened by Vail Inc.'s expansion plans, and further warned that “We will be back if this greedy corporation continues to trespass into wild and unroaded areas.”⁹ Attacks at many U.S. locations have indeed continued since, including the August, 2003 burning down of a 206-unit apartment complex that had been under construction in San Diego, causing roughly \$50 million in damages.¹⁰ Most recently, four attacks occurred in November and December of 2005, three in the USA and one in Greece, together causing an estimated \$567,600 in damages.¹¹ As a consequence of this frequent and escalating leaderless resistance, John Lewis, an FBI deputy assistant director and top official in charge of domestic terrorism, labeled “eco-terrorism,” along with “animal liberation terrorism,”¹² as “the No. 1 domestic terrorism threat” in 2005.¹³

Thus far, academic literature pertaining to leaderless resistance has focused on its use as an effective strategy for avoiding detection, infiltration, and prosecution by a powerful state.¹⁴ In this article, I argue that the strategy of leaderless resistance has another benefit—one most easily enjoyed by social movements that display a high degree of *ideological diversity*. The radical environmentalist movement, itself an incredibly diverse social movement,¹⁵ thus provides an ideal case study for examining this hitherto unexplored benefit of leaderless resistance.

My central argument is that leaderless resistance allows the ELF to avoid ideological cleavages by eliminating all ideology extraneous to the very specific cause of halting the degradation of nature. In effect, the ELF's use of leaderless resistance creates an “overlapping consensus”¹⁶ among those with vastly different ideological orientations, mobilizing a mass of adherents that would have never been able to find unanimity of purpose in an organization characterized by a traditional, hierarchical, authority structure. In short, in using leaderless resistance, the ELF allows its adherents to “believe what they will,” while still mobilizing them to commit “direct actions” for a specific cause.

The Development of a Concept: Leaderless Resistance in America's Radical Right

Motivating Louis Beam's attempts to popularize leaderless resistance was his realization that the American radical right was reaching a low point in terms of its popularity and strength. He wrote *Leaderless Resistance* “in the hope that, somehow, America can still produce the brave sons and daughters necessary to fight off ever increasing persecution and oppression.”¹⁷ Because the essay is still salient

for understanding leaderless resistance today, I repeat a significant portion below. Beam writes:

The concept of Leaderless Resistance is nothing less than a fundamental departure in theories of organization. The orthodox scheme of organization is diagrammatically represented by the pyramid, with the mass at the bottom and the leader at the top

This scheme of organization, the pyramid, is however, not only useless, but extremely dangerous for the participants when it is utilized in a resistance movement against state tyranny. Especially is this so in technologically advanced societies where electronic surveillance can often penetrate the structure revealing its chain of command Anti-state, political organizations utilizing this method of command and control are easy prey for government infiltration, entrapment, and destruction of the personnel involved

This understood, the question arises ‘What method is left for those resisting state tyranny?’ . . . A system of organization that is based upon the cell organization, but does not have any central control or direction Utilizing the Leaderless Resistance concept, all individuals and groups operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction or instruction, as would those who belong to a typical pyramid organization.¹⁸

Thus, according to Beam’s original conception, leaderless resistance is only truly in effect when there is a *complete* absence of “top-down” authority structures. Simson L. Garfinkel later underscored this requirement by maintaining that “hub and spoke” organizations, in which partially independent cells receive commands from above, do not qualify as true leaderless resistance.¹⁹

Odinist David Lane also contributed to the development of the concept of leaderless resistance.²⁰ In his article “Wotan is Coming,” Lane describes his movement’s need for an aboveground political arm—the function of which is to disseminate propaganda—as well as an underground militant arm that he called Wotan (for “will of the Aryan nation”).²¹ Lane advised that Wotan should “draw recruits from those educated by the political arm,” thus ensuring that adherents are in line ideologically with the rest of the movement.²² He also stressed, however, that:

When a Wotan “goes active” he severs all apparent or provable ties with the political arm. If he has been so foolish as to obtain “membership” in such an organization, all records of such association must be destroyed or resignation submitted.²³

The benefits of this severance would be obvious to members of Lane’s movement, who know well the dangers associated with the FBI’s scrutiny.

Both Beam and Lane were ideologues with heavy personal commitments to particular streams of the racist far right, and it only makes sense that they would seek and endorse organizational strategies that would ensure the preservation and advancement of their respective ideologies *in toto*. Beam, for one, has no doubt that ideological purity is maintainable in non-hierarchical organizational structures,

stating, "It is certainly true that in any movement, all persons involved have the same general outlook, are acquainted with the same philosophy, and generally react to given situations in similar ways."²⁴ Such a generalization would raise the eyebrows of any serious student of social movements, and here the intellectually sophisticated Beam is uncharacteristically simplistic. Likewise, Lane's recommendation of a severance from Wotan "of all apparent or provable ties with the political arm" creates an organizational system that gives free reign to the centrifugal forces of ideological deviation that threaten all ideological groups, a fact that he either never realizes or chooses not to mention. As I will show below, this conduciveness of leaderless resistance to ideological diversity, which threatens to subvert the intentions of ideologues like Beam and Lane, has proven to be beneficial to the radical environmentalist movements like the ELF, whose sole aim is to mobilize many actions, the ideological justifications for which may be manifold.

Leaderless Resistance in the ELF

The ELF first began operating in the United Kingdom in 1992, started by a group of Earth First!ers who were frustrated by their organization's desire to abandon illegal tactics.²⁵ By 1997, actions were occurring in the United States, and the perpetrators began delivering communiqués claiming responsibility to environmental activists Leslie James Pickering and Craig Rosebraugh, first through their mailbox and telephone, and then through e-mail.²⁶ Rosebraugh and Pickering would then act as publicists for the perpetrators, conducting media interviews that would publicize the communiqués. Websites also play a major role in the ELF's exhortations of actions, by disseminating guidelines for action,²⁷ by reporting the various direct actions that ELFers commit, and by providing instructions about how to commit direct actions successfully.²⁸

The ELF's deliberate employment of the leaderless resistance strategy is evident from statements made on its website:

Because the ELF structure is non-hierarchical, there is no centralized organization or leadership. There is also no "membership" in the Earth Liberation Front. In the past . . . individuals have committed arson and other illegal acts under the ELF name. Individuals who choose to do actions under the banner of E.L.F. do so only driven by their personal conscience. These have been individual choices, and are not endorsed, encouraged, or approved of by the management and participants of this web site.²⁹

There appears to be no intra-movement communication between ELF cells, and demonstrations or events at which ELF adherents could congregate are markedly absent.³⁰

Thus, the ELF does not recruit members to a pre-existing organization, but rather encourages people to start their own micro-organizations to further ELF's ends. In an introductory video to the ELF, publicist Craig Rosebraugh advises, "There's no realistic chance of becoming active in an already existing cell . . . Take initiative; form your own cell."³¹ Similar to Beam, Rosebraugh advocates the leaderless resistance strategy because, unlike pyramidal or hub-and-spoke organizational structures, "if one cell is infiltrated or captured by authorities, the members cannot

provide any information that might lead to the capture of other cells.”³² Earth First! leader Judi Bari’s praise of the development of the ELF in the UK is also reminiscent of David Lane’s recommendation of a separation between public and clandestine “arms” of his movement. Writes Bari:

England Earth First! has been taking some necessary steps to separate above ground and clandestine activities. Earth First!, the public group, has a nonviolence code and does civil disobedience blockades. Monkey-wrenching is done by [the] Earth Liberation Front (ELF). Although Earth First!ers may sympathize with the activities of elf, they do not engage in them.

If we are serious about our movement in the U.S., we will do the same. Despite the romantic notions of some over-imaginative Ed Abbey fans, Earth First! is in reality an above ground group. We have above ground publications, public events, and a yearly national Rendezvous with open attendance.

Civil disobedience and sabotage are both powerful tactics in our movement. For the survival of both, its time to leave the night work to the elves in the woods.³³

It is interesting that Bari does not advocate the abandonment of all sabotage *per se*. Rather, she advocates leaving it to the “elves” for strategic reasons. Thus, the ELF appears to exemplify the strategy of leaderless resistance outlined by far-right thinkers such as Louis Beam and David Lane, but under the auspices of an entirely different ideological framework.

Figure 1 illustrates how the leaderless resistance strategy differs from other forms of organization. The categories are ideal-typical, and any exemplars would therefore only be approximate. What is more, some groups clearly change their

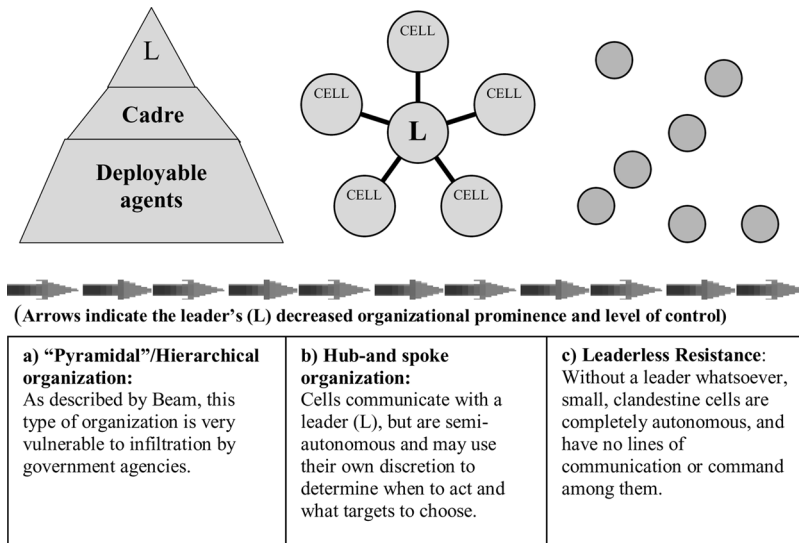


Figure 1. Leaderless resistance as compared to other organizational forms.

orientation towards leadership and thus may shift categories over time. A prime example of this would be Al Qaeda, which, at the time of September 11, 2001, was fairly pyramidal in its organizational structure. Since then, however, it has undergone a rhizomatic leveling such that it would now be best placed in either the hub-and-spoke³⁴ or leaderless resistance categories.

Radical Environmentalism as a Call to Action

It is clear that the core motivation for radical environmental movements like the ELF is a *call to action*—"direct actions" specifically. Radical environmentalists gauge the success of their movement not in terms of the number of adherents it is able to attract, or whether it manages to develop a cogent philosophy or "world-view," or even whether it is able to successfully lobby governments to pass environmentally friendly laws. Rather, because the radical environmentalist goal is *immediate* change, its standard of success is gauged by the number of "direct actions" it can mobilize, and the efficacy of these actions in putting a halt to the ongoing degradation of the wilderness.

Historically, this call to action was a consequence of frustration with the ineffectiveness of the traditional forms of environmental protest that organizations such as the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club were employing. By 1977, future Earth First! co-founder Dave Foreman had risen to become the Wilderness Society's chief congressional lobbyist, but his experiences in Washington soon served to disillusion him and he resigned his post.³⁵ He had come to see many environmental groups as "becoming indistinguishable from the corporations they were supposedly fighting,"³⁶ and he regarded the lobbyists alongside whom he had been working as "less part of a cause than members of a profession."³⁷ Thus, in 1980, he and five friends went hiking in Mexico's Pinacate Desert where they formed Earth First! The group's slogan, "No compromise in defense of mother earth!," meant to signal that within this organization there would be none of the "give and take" strategy of the Washington environmental lobby. The group Foreman envisioned would be committed to direct action—both in the form of civil disobedience and monkeywrenching³⁸—seeing it as the only viable option for staving off an ecological catastrophe.

Dave Foreman made clear his intention that Earth First! would give precedent to actions as opposed to ideas in his 1982 article "Earth First!," saying, "Action is key. Action is more important than philosophical hairsplitting or endless refining of dogma (for which radicals are so well known). Let our actions set the finer points of our philosophy."³⁹ To this day, Earth First! still holds to the ideal of allowing many divergent viewpoints as long as these different stances translate into direct actions:

While there is broad diversity within Earth First! from animal rights vegans to wilderness hunting guides, from monkeywrenchers to careful followers of Gandhi, from whiskey-drinking backwoods riffraff to thoughtful philosophers, from misanthropes to humanists there is agreement on one thing, the need for action!⁴⁰

Thus, *inclusion* and *action* are two ideals to which Earth First! strives. The history of Earth First! demonstrates, however, that at times these two ideals can be less than complementary.

Factions Rather than Actions

Keeping in mind the thesis of this article, namely that the radical environmentalist movement enjoys an increased ability to mobilize actions because of the ideological inclusiveness that leaderless resistance fosters, we would do well to recognize some of the difficulties that the movement suffered *before* certain parts of it evolved to shed its leaders. As Earth First! grew, ideological cleavages would indeed compromise its ability to keep actions—not ideas—in the forefront of the movement. A seemingly constant source of internal ideological discord within Earth First! was its eponymous journal. In its early years, *Earth First!*'s small format meant that there was room for the works of members of Earth First!'s governing body, "The Circle of Darkness," and little else. Thus, initially there was a certain level of ideological purity within the journal. The waters began to muddy, however, between December of 1981 and February of 1982, as the number of letters to the editor that the journal published went from "four to thirty one per issue. In its new format, the paper disseminated not only the leadership's beliefs but also the often divergent beliefs of the membership."⁴¹ This tolerance for the expression of divergent beliefs and values is a source of pride for Earth First!, but as the group grew in size, these newly-influential members "exerted a centrifugal force on the group's structure."⁴² The *Earth First!* journal thus became the forum for many ideological debates very early in the organization's development.

Often these disputes would become strikingly apparent when representatives from various Earth First! chapters congregated at national conferences. These meetings had a tendency to devolve into hostile and unproductive debate among various factions. Attempts to make sure that each participant had a chance to voice his or her own opinion also took away from the meetings' constructiveness. Illustrative of this is Bari's recollection of a meeting at which Earth Firstler Karen Wood proposed to change the structure of *Earth First!*'s editorial board. The meeting style was clearly far from productive. Bari recalled that after Karen Wood's proposal:

The facilitator said, "Okay, that's one proposal, now let's have another." And she recognized another person with another proposal, then another, then another. If someone tried to just make a comment, the facilitator said, "Let's turn that into a proposal," until finally there were 23 proposals simultaneously on the floor, and the entire group was thoroughly confused.⁴³

Ethnographer Jonathan Purkis also has commented on Earth First! meetings he visited in Manchester, UK. He noticed that much of the meetings' inefficiency derived from the anti-authoritarianism that made potential leaders within the movement unwilling to step forward, give direction, and set rules. In his experiences, he noted that:

The meeting would start rather haphazardly . . . Someone, usually one of the core group, would spread the mail which the group had received out on the floor, and start the meeting with a remark such as: "these are the things we should discuss/do something about." . . . The lack of group

minutes to refer to from one meeting to another certainly reduced the effectiveness of how meetings were carried out. The informality of these meetings was striking, sometimes including interruptions such as telephone calls to (or from) other “northern” groups and off-the-point remarks, which often went unchecked One of the core group—Owen (pseudonym)—had joked that group discussions were made on the basis of “a great deal of aimless discussion and banter.”⁴⁴

It is clear that this egalitarian meeting style, combined with the ideological diversity of Earth First!’s adherents, at times severely compromised Earth First!’s ability to *delineate* its goals—let alone to work towards them.

Eventually, Earth First! split into two main factions. One faction, led by Judi Bari, Mike Roselle, and Darryl Cherney, focused on social justice issues and renounced treespiking and other forms of monkeywrenching, in part because the practices were potentially dangerous for loggers. The other faction, led by Foreman and Christopher Manes, remained focused on protecting biodiversity and supported the use of all forms of direct action. In Bron Taylor’s analysis, the Foreman/Manes faction are given the nickname “Wilders” because they believed “that tying environmental protection to other issues, such as social justice, anti-imperialism, or workers rights, alienates many potential wilderness sympathizers.”⁴⁵ The other faction viewed Foreman’s focus as being far too narrow ideologically, and believed in a more holistic (Taylor terms them “the Holies”) approach to environmentalism.⁴⁶ A detailed account of this process of factionalization is beyond the scope of this article, but ultimately Taylor contended that the reason for the schism can be “traced to small but significant differences in beliefs about human nature and eschatology.”⁴⁷ As this factionalization progressed, more energy was diverted towards debates about ideology and away from performing the direct actions that Foreman had envisioned as being Earth First!’s *forte*. He lamented, “Disagreements over matters of philosophy and style . . . threaten to compromise the basic tenets of Earth First!, or make [it] impotent.”⁴⁸

Foreman eventually left Earth First! altogether and started *Wild Earth*, a journal more in line with his specific ideological orientation.⁴⁹ The *Earth First!* journal continued, but still caused discord within the organization, airing a multitude of ideological disputes, which led to further instability in the movement and journal. One Earth First!er lamented,

Now, Dave [Foreman] & crew are gone; and the new Earth First! marches on with its shining vision We have advanced so far that we have reached the point where Dave Foreman stood nearly ten years ago: We realize that not everything fits in one journal.⁵⁰

Thus, ideological cleavages were a constant problem for Earth First!, the first major radical environmental group in the United States. These cleavages diverted the movement’s focus away from its initial goal of planning and instigating actions that would protect the wilderness from degradation. Despite this, Earth First! remains a potent—though less radical—force in the wider environmental movement milieu, and continues to have its own successes and failures in relation to its current goals.

Benefits of Leaderless Resistance for the ELF

Bron Taylor gives the most authoritative account of the emergence of the ELF in his *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, citing various Earth First! sources which claim that the ELF began as a radical offshoot of Earth First! in England.⁵¹ Taylor thus includes both Earth First! and the ELF under the same encyclopedic heading, signaling—what was in the beginning at least—a fundamental *indistinctness* between the movements. Clearly, today the ELF has outgrown this association with Earth First!, partly through its use of leaderless resistance, a strategy of recruitment that is well-suited to reaching beyond traditional ideological boundaries. The divergence of the two movements has meant that, while Earth First! has continued to moderate, looking less and less distinct from other formerly radical groups like Greenpeace, the ELF has produced ever-more extreme actions which have captured headlines around the world.

Both Ackerman and Taylor⁵² argue that “prolific intra-movement debate”⁵³ decreases the likelihood that members within a movement will begin to commit violent acts because debate tends to have a moderating effect on the extreme members and/or elements of organizations. Thus, for movements predicated on endorsing violent actions, the best strategy would be to limit opportunities for debate while being inclusive of a wide range of ideological positions. Below are some of the specific ways that leaderless resistance has enabled the ELF to be more ideologically inclusive.

First, the ELF moniker itself increases the range of ideological positions to which adherents can remain sympathetic, by enabling adherents to *interpret* the name in a way that suits their ideological orientation. For example, some radical environmentalists choose to conflate the animal liberation movement, represented by aboveground organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), with the radical environmentalist movement. For them, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the ELF are merely different expressions of the same underlying ideology, and they see this unity represented by the similarity of the two movements’ names. Other radical environmentalists, however, protest this union because they regard the actions of animal liberationists—who in the past have “liberated” exotic animals by releasing them into the wild—as being harmful to ecosystems. So, while some choose to see ELF and ALF as twin movements, others—for whom this pairing would be distasteful—can choose to see the ELF as entirely autonomous. Thus, when adherents of the ELF decide to engage in direct action, they can choose with whom they wish to associate ideologically.

The ELF moniker also lends itself to interpretations that are favorable to both sides of another prominent debate within the environmentalist movement, concerning the role that religion and/or myth ought to play in protest. Philosopher Kate Soper noted that there is a

Spectrum of positions in the green movement ranging from those who would dismiss any recourse to myth or magic as a capitulation to irrationalism that can only discredit its forms of protest, to those who would insist that these forms of thinking offer the most powerful and effective antidote to instrumental rationality.⁵⁴

While primarily political/rational-minded or secular adherents will read “ELF” as an acronym for “earth liberation front,” those who have an affinity to the more

mystical, pagan aspects of radical environmentalism will be more likely to read the ELF appellation in terms of its pagan symbolism, seeing themselves as mischievous “elves” who come to wreak havoc in the night.⁵⁵ By being interpretable, the ELF moniker appeals to both ends of the sacred/secular spectrum, reducing the likelihood that someone will abandon his or her adherence to the movement because of disagreements about the role of religion and myth in environmental protest. Thus, the ELF name allows the movement to “cast its net wide” for adherents with very different ideological orientations.

Second, the ELF’s ability to attract *young men* is enhanced by its limitation of ideological content on its website and in its publications. An overwhelming proportion of young men in an organization’s constituency will provide a motivational predisposition for a general transition to more violent behavior.⁵⁶ This is a result of simple and measurable tendencies of young and male demographics. For example, a survey of U.S. district courts found that 92.9% of all defendants convicted for violent crimes in 2001 were male, while 78.4% of defendants convicted were between sixteen and forty years of age.⁵⁷ Thus, given that violent actions are most likely to be perpetrated by those who are young or male, movements like the ELF which seek to instigate violent actions do best when their propaganda targets these demographics.

Since, however, young males do not tend to adhere to any *particular* ideology, and are distributed evenly throughout society, it would be difficult to provide an *ideological* basis for attracting young men specifically. Indeed, Chip Berlet, a senior analyst from the left-wing think tank, Political Research Associates, sees the ELF website as appealing more to young males’ desire for glory rather than to any specific ideological beliefs they might hold. He sees the website as “a framework for recruiting young men to do this kind of stuff You come up with an exhortation of what a hero will do, and some person comes out and says ‘I want to be a hero.’”⁵⁸

The wording of ELF communiqués is often rebellious and playful, using themes such as Christmas in an irreverent way that would be appealing to young, disgruntled would-be heroes. Particularly striking in this regard was the communiqué sent to Rosebraugh after the burning of a U.S. Forest Industries office in Medford, Oregon in 1998:

To celebrate the holidays we decided on a bonfire. Unfortunately for US Forest Industries it was at their corporate headquarters office.

On the foggy night after Christmas when everyone was digesting their turkey and pie, Santa’s ELFs dropped two five-gallon buckets of diesel/unleaded mix and a gallon jug with cigarette delay; which proved to be more than enough to get this party started.

This was in retribution for all the wild forests and animals lost to feed the wallets of greedy fucks like Jerry Bramwell, USFI president. This action is payback and it is a warning to all others responsible, we do not sleep and we won’t quit.⁵⁹

What strikes one about this communiqué are not powerful ideological arguments—indeed, the ideological justifications are quite vague. Clearly of more impact for potential youthful recruits would be the almost comic-bookish *style* in which the communiqué was written. The arson is depicted as a mischievous “party” carried out by elfish subverters who act under the cover of darkness.

Ackerman points out that, of the few suspects who have been arrested or indicted for connections to ELF actions, “all but one have been male and most are teenagers or young adults.”⁶⁰ When one looks at these individuals, they are surprisingly bereft of long-standing and deep environmentalist commitments. For example, *New York Times* writer Al Baker had suspicions about how ideological were the motivations of Matthew Rammelkap (16), George Mashkow (17), and Jared McIntyre (17), all of whom plead guilty to arson conspiracy in 2001. He wondered if their ELF-claimed actions were “the work of a smart, devoted band of eco-terrorists or young vandals merely blowing off adolescent steam?”⁶¹ Then there are Craig “Critter” Marshall (twenty-eight) and Jeffrey “Free” Luers (twenty-two). Marshall, who is now serving a five-and-a-half-year sentence for fire-bombing a Chevrolet dealership in Eugene, Oregon, admitted to *New York Times* reporter Bruce Barcott that growing up, he “held political beliefs that weren’t so much pro-environment as anti-authority.”⁶² Similarly, Jeffrey Luers, now serving a twenty-two year and eight-month sentence for his participation, remarked in an interview with *Earth First!* that “originally I was radicalized by anti-authoritarian, anarchist beliefs, as well as animal rights,” and that his environmental radicalism came only in 1997.⁶³ Thus, one could question whether the ELF would have been able to mobilize these young males if it were more ideologically specific in its propaganda.

Another example of this strategy of limiting ideological content is the ELF’s thirty-seven-page manual, *Setting Fires With Electrical Timers: An Earth Liberation Front Guide*.⁶⁴ While it gives very detailed instructions on how to engage in acts of arson, this manual is nearly devoid of references to environmental issues or ideology. On the second page are instructions to copy and distribute the manual to “book-stores that specialize in animal rights, environmental and anarchist literature.” After this very brief mention of the broad ideological orientation of its authors, the rest of the manual is devoted to technical issues such as creating a clean room to avoid leaving DNA evidence and soldering a digital timer for an incendiary device. By not explicitly stating ideological precepts, the manual lends itself to use by anyone, regardless of the person’s ideological orientation. This open use is of little practical concern for the ELF, however, because, as Garfinkel (commenting on the Vail, Colorado arson) writes:

Even if the ELF was not responsible for the Vail fire, ELF’s claim of the fire gives it a powerful propaganda tool: a photograph of what appears to be the burning hotel appears on the front page of ELF’s Web site. Even if people believing in ELF’s ideology were not directly responsible for the fire, the existing of ELF and its ideology may have given the arsonists the additional motivation or cover to carry out the crime.⁶⁵

Today, actions from the ELF are very common, and fear of terrorism is rampant. In this climate, there may be no safer way to commit insurance fraud, or revengeful arson, or just go thrill-seeking, than to follow the ELF’s guidelines, spray paint “the elves were here” at the site, and lead authorities up the garden path. Thus, the *definition* by the public and law enforcement of many of the ELF’s acts as exclusively motivated by environmental concerns is *itself* part of the ELF’s mobilization strategy. That the ELF gains notoriety and influence through the actions of those whose true motivations are far from certain underscores a foundational truism of

sociological inquiry expressed poignantly by William Isaac Thomas: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."⁶⁶

Politics as a Contentious Issue Amongst Radical Environmentalists

We have seen how leaderless resistance is beneficial to the ELF specifically, but there are many areas of debate that can be fractious for environmental organizations in general. Before closing this article, I consider just one of these areas—environmental politics—below.

Conventional wisdom is prone to seeing environmental concerns as existing primarily within the domain of left-of-center political interests. The presence of conservative anti-environmentalist organizations such as the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise (CDFE), the "wise use" movement, along with the lack of concern for environmental issues by the Reagan⁶⁷ and both Bush administrations reinforces this perception. John Gray summarized the conventional characterization of the relationship between conservatism and environmentalism:

It is fair to say that, on the whole, conservative thought has been hostile to environmental concerns over the past decade or so in Britain, Europe and the United States. Especially in America, environmental concerns have been represented as anti-capitalist propaganda under another flag.⁶⁸

Today, the idea that environmentalism is an exclusively liberal cause continues to be popularly held despite some recent developments that would challenge such views.⁶⁹ Thus, for many, the recent attempts by the Bush administration to open Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling represents merely another incident in continuance with a long legacy of environmental irresponsibility by conservatives in America.

Though it is true that those who hold positions of power within conservative movements have largely been unsympathetic to environmental causes, a conservative political orientation *itself* is not necessarily antagonistic to environmental concerns. Those not in power in the right wing (and thus of more interest for the study of leaderless resistance) are more likely to have interests and beliefs that are divergent from the mainstream of their movement. As Bruce Pilbeam showed, an environmental consciousness can be consistent with the general political philosophy to which conservatives subscribe. Furthermore, Pilbeam outlined how conservative thought may have an affinity even with many qualities of deep ecology—the philosophy that guides the thinking of many radical environmentalists.⁷⁰

This potential affinity between conservatism and deep ecology makes the fact of Dave Foreman's Republican Party membership, his support of the Vietnam War, and his work as campaign manager for Barry Goldwater⁷¹ seem less surprising. Although the liberal Earth First!er Judi Bari saw "an inherent contradiction in Dave Foreman,"⁷² in fact, his example shows how conservative thought can be combined with radical environmentalist concerns to form a cogent worldview. Thus, Foreman's orientation is not merely an anomaly, a quirky exception to the general rules of where environmentalist concerns ought to fit within the political spectrum. Rather, he exemplifies how the politics of environmentalism often are incommensurable with the traditional left/right distinction that usually shapes political thought.

Recognition of this incommensurability also provides insight into the motivations of Canada's most prominent ecoteur, Wiebo Ludwig. On April 19, 2000, Ludwig was convicted of bombing a gas well and encasing another wellhead in concrete along with three other explosives-related charges in northwestern Alberta,⁷³ crimes for which he spent twenty-one months in jail. Two of these counts were for mischief by destroying property and possessing an explosive substance.⁷⁴ Interestingly, when committing direct actions, Ludwig used ideas that he gleaned from Dave Foreman's book, *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, such as covering his shoes with socks to avoid leaving tracks.⁷⁵

A former Christian Reformed Church preacher,⁷⁶ Ludwig was intensely conservative on social issues. While pastor of Goderich Christian Reformed Church, his strict views about male "headship" and the roles of women caused much dissension among his congregation. According to Nikiforuk, "He asked working women why they weren't home caring for children, and women with one or two offspring why they hadn't begotten 'a full quiver.'" ⁷⁷ For a time in 1999, rumors were circulating that Ludwig might run for leadership of the ultra-conservative Social Credit party in Alberta.⁷⁸ The late Green activist, Tooker Gomborg, who was a prominent liberal, spent some time camping with Ludwig, and summarized his feelings about the man as follows:

I find myself staring into the fire for relief, trying to work through the paradox that, although this man is a patriarchal diehard, a fundamentalist, anti-gay—and arrogant—we have few differences on the ecological front. Dare I say I admire him? A few years back I stayed at his rambling farmhouse, where I marveled at the family's self-reliance. But he remains an imperfect hero.⁷⁹

Thus, if one were to gather together a group of radical environmentalists, one can only assume that their discussions of politics would be lively, if not mutually vitriolic. Only with a leaderless resistance strategy could people with political ideologies as divergent as Ludwig and Gomborg be mobilized to commit acts for a similar cause.

Conclusion

Social movements as different from one another as the American radical right and radical environmentalism are able to employ the strategy of leaderless resistance. The radical environmentalist movement's use of the strategy illustrates how it is conducive to *intra*-movement ideological diversity as well. Although the progenitors of leaderless resistance in these two social movements seek to assure potential followers (and perhaps themselves) that what coheres their respective movements is a shared ideology, the organizational structure (or lack thereof) of leaderless resistance means that there is, in fact, no way of determining if such a shared ideology actually exists. Once a social movement leader implements leaderless resistance, the movement becomes, in a sense, a "creature unto itself," and those who commit actions do so of their own ideological volition, completely separate from the wishes of those who are at times considered to be the movement's *de facto* leaders.

There is no doubt that, initially, the impetus for the ELF's adoption of the leaderless resistance strategy was the same as that of the American radical right: to

avoid state detection, infiltration, and prosecution by powerful government agencies. Once implemented, however, it became clear that leaderless resistance also allows the ELF to avoid ideological cleavages by eliminating all ideology extraneous to the very specific cause of halting the degradation of nature, thereby *eliminating opportunities for ideological debate*. In effect, the ELF's use of leaderless resistance creates an overlapping consensus among those with vastly different ideological orientations, mobilizing a mass of adherents who would have never been able to work together in an organization like Earth First!, which is characterized by a more traditional organizational structure. In short, in using leaderless resistance, the ELF allows its adherents to "believe what they will" while still mobilizing them to commit many direct actions for a specific cause.

Since the initial writing of this article, there has been a rash of arrests and indictments against suspected ELF adherents.⁸⁰ Based on the thesis presented here, one recommendation to investigators of terrorism is a caution against relying too heavily on ideological linkages among perpetrators of leaderless resistance actions. In leaderless resistance, the reasons for the formation of a new violent cell may have much more to do with group dynamics at the micro level⁸¹ and the psychological makeup/personal histories of violence-prone individuals rather than with the particular ideology to which perpetrators happen to subscribe or the sub-cultural milieu that they inhabit. An over-reliance on ideological linkages in investigations of leaderless resistance is not only ineffective, but it can also elicit perceptions of harassment,⁸² contributing to persecutory ideation which in turn may serve to further radicalize fringe elements of movements that employ leaderless resistance.

Notes

1. Tom Burghardt, "Leaderless Resistance and the Oklahoma City Bombing" (San Francisco: Bay Area Coalition for Our Reproductive Rights, 1995); Jeffrey Kaplan, "Leaderless Resistance," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 90–93; Andrew Mitrovica, "Droege Is Gone, But The Hate Lives On," *The Walrus* (online version 2004), accessed at <http://www.walrusmagazine.com/article.pl?sid=05/04/22/1928218>, retrieved on April 22, 2005.

2. Louis Beam "Leaderless Resistance," *The Seditonist* 12 (February 1992) accessed at <http://www.solargeneral.com/library/leaderlessresistance.htm>, retrieved on April 22 2005; Louis Beam "Leaderless Resistance," *Inter-Klan Newsletter Survival Alert* (May 1983): pages not numbered.

3. Mitrovica (see note 1 above).

4. Beam (see note 2 above).

5. Throughout the article I refer to "the ELF," but by this phrase, I do not intend to convey a sense that the ELF is characterized by significant levels of organizational unity or social cohesion. As this article will illustrate, rather than a "group" or an "organization," the ELF should only be seen as a collectivity in the most limited and virtual sense. Likewise, the concept of "membership" implies merely that one (or one's cell) has performed actions "under the ELF banner" (Retrieved from www.earthliberationfront.com) on April 1, 2005). Any conceptions of membership that are more robust than this would be misapplied in the case of the ELF.

6. Simson L. Garfinkel, "Leaderless Resistance Today," *First Monday* 8, no. 3 (March 2003): e-text, pages not numbered; Stephan H. Leader and Peter Probst, "The Earth Liberation Front and Environmental Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 4 (2003): 37–58; Jeremy Pressman, "Leaderless Resistance: The Next Threat?," *Current History* 102, no. 668 (December 2003): 422–425.

7. Actions of radical environmentalists are less severe in that they aim not to kill human beings but rather to cause fear and to destroy property.

8. Leader and Probst (see note 6 above): 38.
9. ELF quoted in Craig Rosebraugh, *Burning Rage of a Dying Planet: Speaking for the Earth Liberation Front* (New York: Lantern Books, 2004), 60.
10. Gary A. Ackerman, "Beyond Arson? A Threat Assessment of the Earth Liberation Front," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 4 (2003): 143.
11. "Ecological Resistance from Around the World," *Green Anarchy* 22 (Spring 2006): 30.
12. The FBI has consistently conflated the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) with the ELF. Although the ELF and ALF did release a communiqué claiming solidarity of action in 1993, it would be more precise to regard the two movements as separate for a number of reasons. The ALF is much older than the ELF, having formed in 1979, and most communiqués from the ELF in the U.S. do not specifically give credit for their actions to the ALF (for many examples of these communiqués, see Rosebraugh (see note 9 above)). Also, as we shall see below, there are points of contention between animal liberationists and radical environmentalists that call into question the feasibility of a long-lasting alliance between the two movements (see p. 15).
13. Lewis quoted in Henry Schuster, "Domestic Terror: Who's the Most Dangerous? Eco-terrorists are now above ultra-right extremists on the FBI charts," August 24, 2005 (available at <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/08/24/schuster.column/index.html>)
14. Garfinkel (see note 6 above); Kaplan (see note 1 above); Leader and Probst (see note 6 above): 39.
15. For an excellent description and analysis of the ideological diversity within the radical environmentalist movement, see Bron Taylor's articles, especially, "Diggers, Wolves, Ents, Elves and Expanding Universes: Global Bricolage and the Question of Violence within the Subcultures of Radical Environmentalism," in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, Jeffrey Kaplan and Helène Löw, eds. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 26–74; Bron Taylor, "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part I): From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism," *Religion* 31 (2001): 175–193; Bron Taylor, "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part II): From Earth First! and Bioregionalism to Scientific Paganism and the New Age," *Religion* 31 (2001): 225–245; also, for a good description of the controversies surrounding Earth First!'s appropriation of elements of Native American spirituality, see Bron Taylor, "Earthen Spirituality or Cultural Genocide?: Radical Environmentalism's Appropriation of Native American Spirituality," *Religion* 27 (1997): 183–215.
16. Although John Rawls, in his work *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 15, used the term "overlapping consensus" to describe an agreement about political justice between citizens who hold different religious and philosophical views, I seek to avoid this association and intend for it to have an independent meaning within the context of this article.
17. Beam (see note 2 above), 12.
18. Ibid., 12–13.
19. Garfinkel (see note 6 above).
20. Kaplan (see note 1 above), 89–90.
21. David Lane, "Wotan is Coming," (April 1993), e-text, no page numbers. Reprint retrieved from <http://www1.ca.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/people/1/lane.david/ftp.py?people/1/lane.david/wotan-is-coming> on April 22, 2005.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Beam (see note 2 above).
25. Bron Taylor, "Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bron Taylor and Jeffrey Kaplan, eds. (London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 521.
26. Rosebraugh (see note 9 above), 20.
27. The ELF's three main guidelines, posted until recently on its website, are: a) To inflict economic damage on those profiting from the destruction and exploitation of the natural environment; b) To reveal and educate the public on the atrocities committed against the earth and all species that populate it; c) To take all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human or nonhuman (Sandy Liddy Bourne and Matthew McNabb, *Animal & Ecological Terrorism in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Legislative Exchange Council, 2003), 10; Leader and Probst (see note 7 above), 40).

28. One feature on the ELF website for a time was the thirty-seven-page instruction manual *Setting Fires with Electrical Timers: An Earth Liberation Front Guide* (see note 64 below).
29. Retrieved from <www.earthliberationfront.com> on April 1, 2005.
30. Garfinkel (see note 6 above).
31. Rosebraugh is quoted in Bruce Barcott, "From Tree-Hugger to Terrorist: How Critter became part of a shadowy, increasingly violent radical environmental movement," *New York Times Magazine* (April 7, 2002), 56–59 and 81.
32. Rosebraugh (see note 9 above), 182.
33. Judi Bari, "Monkeywrenching" in *Timber Wars* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), 285.
34. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 140–141.
35. Taylor (see note 25 above), 518.
36. Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman, *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*, Steve Chase, ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 38.
37. Dave Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (New York: Harmony, 1991), 14–15.
38. Dave Foreman defined monkeywrenching as "nonviolent resistance to the destruction of natural diversity and wilderness. It is never directed against human beings or other forms of life. It is aimed at inanimate machines and tools that are destroying life. Care is always taken to minimize any possible threat to people, including to the monkey wrenchers themselves" (quoted at <<http://www.reclaimingquarterly.org/81/rq-81-earthfirst.html>> retrieved April 10, 2005).
39. Dave Foreman, "Earth First!," in *Earth Ethics: Introductory Readings on Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics*, James P. Sterba, ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000 (originally published in 1982)), 349.
40. Accessed at <<http://www.earthfirst.org/about.htm>>, retrieved on April 11, 2005.
41. Martha F. Lee, *Earth First!: Environmental Apocalypse* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 59.
42. *Ibid.*, 59.
43. Judi Bari, "Showdown at the Earth First! Corral" in *Timber Wars* (see note 33 above), 207–208.
44. Jonathan Purkis, "Leaderless cultures: the problem of authority in a radical environmental group," in *Leadership and Social Movements*, Colin Barker, Alan Johnson, and Michael Lavalette, eds. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 160–177.
45. Bron Taylor, "Earth First!'s Religious Radicalism" in *Ecological Prospects: Scientific, Religious, and Aesthetic Perspectives*, Christopher Key Chapple, ed. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 199.
46. *Ibid.*, 199.
47. *Ibid.*, 200.
48. Foreman quoted in Lee (see note 41 above), 106–107.
49. *Wild Earth* ceased publication in 2004.
50. "Matthew," letter to the editor, *Earth First!* 13, no. 6 (1993): 3.
51. Taylor (see note 25 above), 521.
52. Bron Taylor, "Religion, Violence and Environmentalism: From Earth First! to the Unabomber, to Earth Liberation Front," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 4 (1998): 14.
53. Ackerman (see note 10 above), 145.
54. Kate Soper, "A Green Mythology," *CNS* 7, no. 3 (September 1996): 120.
55. Taylor (see note 52 above), 9.
56. Ackerman (see note 10 above), 148.
57. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002. *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics online*. Table 5.18. Retrieved from www.albany.edu/sourcebook/pdf/t518.pdf on April 22, 2005.
58. Berlet is quoted in Garfinkel (see note 6 above).
59. Quoted in Rosebraugh (see note 9 above), 72.
60. Ackerman (see note 10 above), 148. It should be noted, however, that contrary to this trend, among those named in the January 19, 2006 indictment of eleven suspected ELF members were six women.
61. Al Baker, "A Federal Case in Suffolk: Eco-Terrorism or Adolescence in Bloom?," *New York Times* (February 18, 2001), 33.

62. Barcott (see note 31 above), 58.
63. Interview available at <http://www.spiritoffreedom.org.uk/profiles/free/ef.html> accessed April 10, 2006.
64. Fireant Collective, *Setting Fires with Electrical Timers: An Earth Liberation Front Guide* (2001).
65. Garfinkel (see note 6 above).
66. William I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas, *The Child in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1929), 572.
67. Especially reinforcing of this perception was Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. In fact, during his tenure, "mainstream environmental organizations experienced remarkable growth in membership as a direct result of Watt's policies" (Hal K. Rothman, *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The American Ways Series, 2000), 170). Earth First!er Christopher Manes also wrote that there was an "influx of people frightened into environmental activism by the retrograde policies of President Reagan's maladroit and messianic secretary of the interior, James Watt." (*Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of a Civilization* (Boston, Toronto, and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 49). Watt, reportedly speaking in Congress, refuted arguments for conserving natural resources by saying, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns" (quoted in William Martin, "Waiting for the End: Growing Interest in Apocalyptic Prophecy," *Atlantic Monthly* 249 (June): 35).
68. John Gray, *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment* (London: Routledge, 1993), 124.
69. For example, in February of 2006, 86 evangelical leaders, including Rick Warren, author of the best-seller, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and 39 presidents of evangelical colleges, signed an "Evangelical Climate Initiative" calling for federal legislation to combat global warming—a development that would have been unthinkable even during the 1990s. Also, Rod Dreher outlined the emergence of what he termed the "Crunchy Con"—Republicans in the U.S. who share many lifestyle preferences—including environmentally conscious living—with those on the "hippy" left (*Crunchy Cons: How Birkenstocked Burkeans, Gun-Loving Organic Gardeners, Evangelical Free-Range Farmers, Hip Homeschooling Mamas, Right-Wing Nature Lovers, and Their Diverse Tribe of Countercultural Conservatives Plan to Save America [or at Least the Republican Party]* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006)). Thus, among social conservatives, at least, there seems to be a newly-opening space for environmental consciousness. These developments are still often seen, however (perhaps rightly), as exceptions that prove the rule as to the overall relationship between conservatism and environmentalism.
70. Bruce Pilbeam, "Natural Allies? Mapping the Relationship between Conservatism and Environmentalism," *Political Studies* 51 (2003): 490–508.
71. Lee (see note 41 above), 27.
72. Judi Bari, "Review: Dave Foreman's *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*," in *Timber Wars* (see note 33 above), 104.
73. James Brooke, "Radical Environmentalist Convicted of Gas Well Blast in Canada," *New York Times* (April 20, 2000), A11.
74. Andrew Nikiforuk, *Saboteurs: Wiebo Ludwig's War Against Big Oil* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 2001), 247.
75. *Ibid.*, 110.
76. After being expelled from the Christian Reformed Church, Ludwig formed his own church that he named "Our Shepard King" (Nikiforuk (see note 75 above), 3).
77. Nikiforuk (see note 75 above), 2.
78. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "Program Summary for 13/10/99" (1999), retrieved from http://www.cbc.ca/insite/CANADA_AT_FIVE_TORONTO/1999/10/13.html on April 22, 2005.
79. Tooker Gomborg, "Flawed Messiah: Lost In The Wilderness With Wiebo Ludwig," *Now* (September 5–11 2002), accessed at http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2002-09-05/news_story3.php on April 22, 2005.
80. Most notably, on January 19, 2006, a 65-count indictment was brought against eleven members of a cell referred to as "the family" alleging their involvement in ELF arsons and attempted arsons that occurred from 1996 through 2001 (Michael Janofsky and Carolyn Marshall, *New York Times*, January 21, 2006, A9).

81. Especially helpful for this type of analysis is Stark and Bainbridge's "Subculture-Evolution Model of Cult Innovation" which explains how "cults can emerge without authoritative leaders, and . . . points out that even radical developments can be achieved through many small steps." Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 183.

82. For examples of these perceptions, see www.greenscare.org, a site that has been set up to support ELF prisoners and to criticize the ways in which grand juries have been used to against those with suspected connections to the ELF.

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