Beyond Civil Disobedience
Snap Dragon
1998

Retrieved on 11 April 2010 from www.angelfire.com
from *Earth First! Journal* March-April, 1998

en.anarchistlibraries.net

Snap Dragon

Beyond Civil Disobedience

1998

If someone broke into your home, tried to kill your family and steal everything you had, what would you do? A: Make a banner and call the media. B: Call a lawyer and file for a restraining order. C: Chain yourself to the front door. Such reactions seem ridiculous because they would be completely ineffective. However, this is exactly how we respond to the homicidal mania of industrial society, and it is no less inappropriate. The most sensible response is to fight like hell. Passive resistance, civil disobedience and related strategies don't work, not as a long-term strategy for transforming society nor as short-term stopgap measures.

Our problem is larger than endangered species or plunder of public lands. Our solution will not be found in a piece of legislation or a better management plan. Industrial collapses, an end to corporate capitalism and a complete transformation in the way our culture relates to the environment are necessary to stop this assault on the planet. On this, most agree. Our movement, however, has become dominated by the rhetoric and tactics of civil disobedience (CD), which are incongruent with this necessity. CD has never been a strategy for revolutionary change but a way to reform ex-

isting institutions. Because of this inconsistency, these actions will continue to be largely ineffective.

Civil disobedience is an established part of the political process that has defined and modified the American empire for over 200 years. It is widely accepted as legitimate, regardless of its legality, because CD attempts to pressure government to remedy the situation through legislation, administrative action or court ruling. However, there is enormous pressure to maintain the status quo or shift it in favor of corporations. This pressure is generated by bureaucratic momentum, industry and government collusion, good ol' boy networks and systemic tendencies (such as how laws are written to uphold the interests of property). Government, industry and technology are inextricably linked, forming institutions that make the wholesale destruction of the biosphere possible and profitable. Government consistently rushes to the aid and defense of industry, unless specifically forced to do otherwise by massive public outcry. To this end, nonviolent resistance tries to elevate consciousness and gain public sympathy. However, the assumption that the public will someday rise to the defense of other species denies the reality of modern society.

Biocentrism is necessarily opposed to almost everything the American people know; their lifestyle, the technology they use every day, the way they relate to the world. Their values and beliefs are molded by a mass media owned by exploitative global corporations and controlled by the advertising demands of other corporations. Television, radio, magazine, newspapers and other media outlets teach people who they are, what is going on in the world and what they should think about it. This corporate conditioning and the perspective it promotes are practically inescapable. As people become more dependent on technology and the infrastructure that makes it possible, life without it becomes not only undesirable but unimaginable. The success of all forms of nonviolent resistance depends on substantial public support, and citizens of an affluent industrial society are not going to demand radical change.

Although nonviolent resistances not going to get us from where we are today to where we need to be, it can be argued that until the political climate changes or industrial society collapses (whichever comes first) CD can temporarily slow habitat destruction. We can sometimes achieve environmental victories using CD by appealing to human-based concerns such as pollution, recreation and economic efficiency, but we must realize what we give up in this process. In doing so, we compromise our vision to gain public support. This is the same compromise mainstream environmental groups make to gain political clout, and it is a mistake for the same reason. Cooperation with destructive institutions by engaging in the political process grants them legitimacy through complicity. We accept a limited realm of debate and become co-opted and incorporated into industrial culture. We create the illusion that the system works, both to the public and to ourselves, which only masks the real problems.

Making these compromises would be justified if we were getting something significant out of it, but we don't. We have our successes, but these small political gains are always temporary. They are tolerated only as long as they don't threaten corporate interests, and then they are systematically ignored, circumvented or dismantled. The entire saga of the spotted owl injunction, Option 9, the Salvage Rider and now the Quincy Library Group is evidence of the transitory nature of political solutions. Old-growth logging, roadless area incursions and habitat destruction continue; the only thing that changes is the political framework that justifies these travesties.

Most CD campaigns require enormous amounts of time and resources but achieve very little. In the absence of effective methods of nonviolent resistance, we need to consider more militant strategies. The most common objection to more radical tactics, of any kind, is that they are equated with violence and thus inherently oppressive and immoral, and "good" ends cannot be achieved through "evil" means. This analysis is based on the extremely unbalanced

morals of modern human civilization. We know that we are part of the Earth and that the web of life which allows for our survival is imminently threatened, but we often forget the moral implications of this biological fact. We are fighting in self-defense, a situation in which violence is almost universally accepted. In the natural world, when animals are attacked, they run or fight back. To claim moral superiority in nonviolence separates us from the natural world. We are animals with nowhere to run. To think that we have somehow evolved to higher consciousness is naive at best.

The fear of more radical tactics triggering a backlash against environmentalism is unsubstantiated. Popular support for environmentalism is a reaction to the continued degradation of the human environment, which will be unchanged by the public's perception of "extremists." For example, the current efforts to cut emissions of greenhouse gases are not based on altruistic concern for delicate ecosystems but on the very real economic and social consequences of global warming, a cause for no matter what you think of radical environmentalists.

There simply is no moral or strategic imperative to adhere to nonviolence and engage in civil disobedience. We don't need to convert the public; we need to protect wild places. Without its symbolic underpinnings, CD is a terribly inefficient way to stop logging, road building and development. Every day 137 species become extinct and 176,000 acres of forest are lost forever. We don't have the luxury of civility. We must do whatever is necessary to defend our home and protect our ecological family. Once it is gone, we can only wish that we had done more.