

Ideology as Material Force

Earth First! and the Problem of Language

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“When you’re taking on a bulldozer, you don’t worry about the flies buzzing around your head.”

—Dave Foreman, editor, *Earth First!*, Yule 1987 edition

Words have consequences and, knowing their power, Dave Foreman uses them skillfully and manipulatively.

The *Fifth Estate* is one of the flies, along with Murray Bookchin and the social ecologists, Ynestra King and the eco-feminists, Alien-Nation—anyone who has criticized the deep ecology philosophy and its most militant exponent, the Earth First! (EF!) group. They’re “warriors” on a sacred mission to defend the Wilderness, with barely time to “squabble” with “anarchists-leftists-marxists,” who are “academics,” “anthropocentric” and “wimps” given to “whining.”

They do everything for the planet; we do nothing except get in their way. Or, so go the responses in the last two 1987 Earth First! editions to the spate of criticisms it and its pugnacious editor have received for their opposition to Central American refugee sanctuary, their neo-Malthusian population theories (including a celebration of the spread of AIDS as a population control) and for their failure to understand the social basis of the ecological crisis.

The temptation is (and it is very tempting) to let Earth First! go its own way. Why bother with their off-the-wall social theory, some have asked us? Why not recognize that its leadership and perhaps some or many of their followers are self-defined misanthropes and let their actions speak louder than what we may see as silly and sometimes stupid words?

The answer lies in the recognition that words and ideas have power as the ultimate shapers of actions. Foreman likes to contend that EF! has gone “beyond the worn-out dogmas of the left, right, and middle of the road,” but if his words hold sway (and they always seem to), EF! is developing not only an ecological agenda, but also a right-wing social and political ideology with a style to match.

If such a contention sounds alarmist or like a product of sectarian rivalry (as EF! contends), it is instructive to compare them with the strange odyssey of Lyndon Larouche’s U.S. Labor Party. Beginning as a labor-oriented sector of the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the late 1960s, Larouche and company soon metamorphized into its current paranoid, right-wing cult form. It originally manifested opposition to capitalism and a combative style, but the preponderance of a charismatic leader and lack of internal democracy set the stage for its organizational transformation from left to right. Could EF! make a similar shift? Mostly it depends on whether the politics of the Tucson inner core (Foreman, et al) hold sway or if the widespread support EF! commands can alter its increasingly right-wing slant.

Part of the problem emanates from what can be described as an organizational style. In general, there is a self-congratulatory tone to the *Earth First!* newspaper coming from Foreman and other writers that produces a boundless arrogance in their frequent self-descriptions and defenses of their basic tenets. They are continually patting themselves on the back for their commitment, how “rowdy” and “redneck” they are, what a sense of humor they have, and how it is deep ecology alone, as defined by them, which can stop industrialism’s assault on the planet.

While perhaps easily dismissable as organizational exuberance or the arrogance of a dynamic group, much of their macho posturing is exactly what eco-feminists have been concerned about for at least a decade and a half. Foreman and other deep ecologists claim to be expressing a “new paradigm”—one which has gone beyond the Western ideology of conquest, dominance and production—but they appear never to be willing for a moment to relinquish their male centrality.

Eco-feminist Ynestra King, in a December 12, 1987 letter to *The Nation* (available from the FE for postage), describes Earth First! as “...a bunch of guys who have set themselves up as the self-appointed protectors of another virgin—the virgin wilderness. While romancing the wild (they’re fond of backpacking in to where no man has gone before), they claim it as their own...Foreman and his macho crowd represent nothing more than the Daniel Boone mentality in ecological drag.” Janet Biehl, a social ecologist states in the Winter 1987 *Kick It Over* (Box 5811, Station A, Toronto, Ontario M52 1P2, Canada), “Deep ecologists, by single-mindedly defining the human problem as anthropocentrism—the centrality of all humans and their ‘domination’ of nature—ignore millennia of patricentric history...”

As early as 1974, Francoise d'Eaubonne stated in her book, *Le Feminisme ou la mort*, that no male led revolution—one that had not resolved the question of patriarchal domination—could counteract the horrors of the planet's destruction. She coined the term “eco-feminist” when Foreman was still a lobbyist wearing three-piece suits and a necktie while clinking glasses with Congressmen in Washington. Mary Daly, in her angry 1978 book, *Gyn/Ecology*, succinctly states the function of male style and language in her support for d'Eaubonne's contention: “Phallic myth and language generate, legitimate, and mask the material pollution that threatens to terminate all sentient life on this planet.”

These eco-feminist criticisms begin to tie together when Foreman and other EF!ers define their role in the world. “My job is to be a warrior,” Foreman told *The Animals' Agenda* (Box 6809, Syracuse, NY 13217) in their December 1987 issue (and also, that he is a hunter and a meat eater). The warrior appellation is problematic, to say the least, given its historic role in the origins of warfare and the nation state, but its attributes of male rage and violence are exactly what eco-feminists and others point to as the attitudes and styles which undercut the ability to get to the root of what has made the destruction of the earth permissible.

The last person I heard describe himself as a warrior was a member of an outlaw motorcycle gang who was screaming it at a woman sitting by a peace literature table right before he slugged her. I don't want to accuse Foreman of woman beating among everything else, but that occurrence was vividly brought to mind by a different literature table incident, this time recounted in *Earth First!*

The 1987 Yule edition of the paper carried an abusive, hysterical letter from Paul Watson, the famed defender of the whales, who was enraged that anyone (“wimps,” he called them) had dared to criticize EF!, deep ecology, or Dave Foreman, particularly the Alien-Nation people whose charges had appeared in their previous issue (also in the FE deep ecology special). Watson ended his chest-thumping diatribe by threatening to “piss on their (literature) table” if Alien-Nation dared to show up at another EF! Rendezvous. This letter was prominently and uncritically displayed, making its support by the editor no secret. The politics of violence (threats or their commission) is the tactic of both the right and the authoritarian left, and rather than being abjured by Foreman and Earth First!, it is embraced.

Foreman says in the EF! Samhain 1987 edition that he supports and understands the Earth First!ers who, at their June Rendezvous, chanted “Fuck the human race,” but this is so close to the fascist call of “Long live death!,” that its implications must be examined. This cry puts the bearer of such self-denigration in grave psychoanalytic peril internally, but externally it is the psychology of concentration camp guards. “Fuck the human race!” is nothing but an extension of what the dominant judeo-christian ethos already implants in Western consciousness and what has created the mindset which permits everything from the genocide of Native peoples to the devastation of the environment.

Foreman states in the above-mentioned *The Animals' Agenda* that he wants to “go beyond good and evil.” This pseudo-Nietzschean obliteration of ethical boundaries resembles fascist demagoguery which allows the advocate of such a philosophy to be the ultimate arbiter of what is permissible. As the self-ordained representatives of nature, Foreman and a few macho cronies decide who lives, who dies, what is “anthropocentric” (bad) and what is “biocentric” (good).

Ultimately, it boils down not to “fuck the human race,” but fuck the other—the other with less status and power. Foreman’s tender concern for the environment becomes a well-crafted Ayn Rand-like rationale for the selfishness of those who possess privilege. Foreman’s callous disregard for human hunger quoted in the last FE (“let the people there [Ethiopia] starve there”) really rates his group the name, “Us First!” or, in the case of their celebration of the spread of AIDS to limit population, “You First!” As George Bradford pointed out in his essay last issue [FE #327, Fall, 1987], one can only speculate what Foreman’s position would be towards the growing millions facing homelessness and starvation in this country; perhaps their fate should be that of the Ethiopians.

Howard Wolke, one of the EF! founders, writes in the Yule 1987 EF! that their movement is made up of many diverse elements—“...leftists, rightists, anarchists...” and that the only thing they agree on is defense of the Wilderness. This sounds good, but it doesn’t appear to be the way Foreman sees it. In the Litha 1987 EF! he lays out a number of “things that define us as Earth First!” After running through a laundry list of concepts, he says if you don’t agree you “are probably in the wrong bunch and ought to join some other outfit.” Note his frequently-used dude ranch, pseudo-cowboy lingo designed to give himself that “authentic” quality. (Foreman lives in an urban, middle-class Tucson neighborhood according to his articles, which is fine, but why not cut out the Riders of the Purple Sage crap?). In any event, so much for diversity—toe the party line or get out.

A lot of the party line even sounds good on paper with its strident denunciations of industrialism and civilization, but once his radical pronouncements leave the sagebrush and intersect with the world, a different picture emerges. Foreman has been called to task on the question of sanctuary for Central American refugees from the U.S.-sponsored violence in the region. Mike Roselle, another EF! founder, assured us personally and publicly in Ann Arbor last Fall that Foreman supported sanctuary, but the EF! editor came out four-square against it in an article entitled, “Is Sanctuary the Answer?” (Samhain 1987). Well, it isn’t for this white, well-fed son of the middle-class.

He states quite clearly, “Halt—as humanely as possible—the continued immigration into the United States. The would-be immigrant will go back to an unfortunate and, in some cases, bloody fate...” Here it all is, the campesino gets the death squads, while Foreman goes rafting (his favorite hobby). This one statement is so rife with selfish contempt for the suffering of others, and so blind to the fact that the privilege we enjoy here is a direct result of the misery others suffer, that it is almost staggering in its revelation about the cold ethical center of the man (“Me First!” in this regard).

In one paragraph, he affirms not only his willingness to enjoy luxury while others are tortured and executed, but also the sanctity of nation-state borders and the cops who defend them (the hated migra, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS] which agrees completely with Foreman’s view and states unabashedly, despite evidence to the contrary of its brutal and illegal tactics, that it is halting immigration “as humanely as possible”).

Earth First! constantly, and quite accurately, berates the U.S. Forest Service (“Freddie Gestapo” read a recent EF! headline) for their complicity in permitting logging and other rapes of the Wilderness, but the border guard Freddie has Foreman’s stamp of approval for securing “his” country (the one stolen from Mexico, he forgets) against the brown hordes who will further overload “the resources we have in the USA.”

Foreman even attempts to let the U.S. off the hook for the wars and oppression wracking Central America by saying that one cannot ignore the role of the “caballero juntas” (a little gringo-fractured Spanish thrown in for flavor) in maintaining the conditions of misery in that benighted region. Does he really believe that the stooges running countries like El Salvador and Guatemala would last out the month if it wasn’t for their U.S. client-state status? Is he really that ignorant of the constant intervention over the last 150 years in Central America any time a government or movement tries to alter the calculus of imperial looting? If he is aware of what is happening there, why doesn’t he do more than shed crocodile tears for the people he wants to send back to the tender mercy of the Salvadoran Treasury Police, and link his wing of the ecology movement with those who are trying to depose the juntas?

Also, consider Edward Abbey, author of pro-Wilderness books and EF! icon (boy, do they get mad when you criticize him). When Abbey talks about immigration, he sounds like a small-town Rotarian stumping for office on the Republican ticket. In the FE deep ecology issue, George Bradford cited the views of Abbey on Mexico and its relationship to the U.S. as enough to “reveal his utter racism and historical stupidity.” I thought perhaps this was a bit harsh, but given a letter by Abbey in the Yule 1987 EF!, Bradford may have been too kind.

Abbey denies that his statements warning the U.S. not to “allow our country to become Latinized” is evidence of racism on his part. (1) Instead, he says, “I am guilty of cultural chauvinism—I prefer life in the USA to that in any Latin American country; and so do most Latin Americans.” Another EF! yankee doodle dandy who on one hand crows that he is an “anarchist” (see Utne Reader, Nov.-Dec. 1987) and on the other wants to erect rigid, national boundaries defended by government men with guns. Either phrase—racist or cultural chauvinist—fits Abbey’s imperial view, both of which are equally despicable.

However, the man is a fool to think that any but a handful of Latinos would venture across this border to a land of factories, office buildings and shopping malls had they not been driven there by war and U.S.-induced poverty. Reading any of Abbey’s books (many of which contain vividly compelling descriptions of the desert) you realize what a misanthrope he is, fitting perfectly comedian Richard Pryor’s classic line about white people who are upset about population growth because “there are too many people on earth and I have no room to ride my horsie.”

Earth First!’s self-described radical environmentalism has attracted a great deal of support, and their willingness to militantly defend Wilderness through direct action and sabotage is admirable and sometimes effective. Their departure from the inadequate strategies and perspectives of mainstream environmental groups, who depend solely on the hopeless tactics of legislation and lobbying, is an encouraging step. The *Earth First!* paper comes virtually bulging at the seams each issue with accounts of their exploits while defending the wolf and grizzly, scaling a dam to paint a crack on it, or climbing old growth trees to stop their being logged.

Nevertheless, Earth First! may be at a crossroads, although Foreman and the others would probably never admit it. To him, his critics are only a nuisance providing an opportunity to re-state his ideology while humbly employing the demagogue’s technique of offering to resign. An article authored by Foreman in the Samhain 1987 EF! may have posed the most important question in its title, “Whither Earth First!?” Foreman and his “bunch” will only lead it down an increasingly slippery path to the right, insuring isolation from potential allies (such as the large sanctuary movement in the Southwest). The ultimate direction of the movement will depend greatly upon the rank and file of Earth First! and whether they are willing to let their aspirations be defined by a right-wing caudillo. If so, this would be a sad ending to what has the potential to be a vibrant part of the widening revolutionary ecological and social movement in this country.

Note

1. Actually, what appeared in EF! is a somewhat sanitized version of what he had written to *The Bloomsbury Review*. His letter there read (as we reprinted last issue), “If we allow our country—our country—to become Latinized...” (original emphasis). It’s as if he realized that the second “our country” made him sound just a bit too rabid. “Our country,” according to Abbey, “however imperfectly realized, is a product of northern European civilization.” (Some would call it “Aryan.”) Its “Latinization,” he writes from former Mexican territory, incredibly, would mean “a more rigid class system, a patron style of politics, less democracy and more oligarchy, a fear and hatred of the natural world, a densely overpopulated land base, a less efficient and far more corrupt economy, and a greater reliance on crime and violence as normal instruments of social change.” Remember, dear reader, that Abbey is describing what the U.S. allegedly will look like with the dreaded Latinization, not its present character. When questioned about Abbey’s letter (as well as Foreman’s comments) in Ann Arbor last summer, EF! leader Mike Roselle alluded to a sinister campaign against EF! and responded that Abbey’s letter had been “tongue-in-cheek.” Perhaps this is the kind of humor that EF! spokesmen and followers complain that nobody else appreciates.

Correction

In our last issue we listed incorrectly the address of Alien-Nation, a dissident group of Earth First!ers who had published a pamphlet on the group (partially reprinted in the FE). Our apologies for this error. Their actual address is: Alien-Nation, P.O. Box 10122, Olympia, WA 98502.

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