Terrorism and Political Violence

ISSN: 0954-6553 (Print) 1556-1836 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftpv20

From Environmental Action to Ecoterrorism? Towards a Process Theory of Environmental and Animal Rights Oriented Political Violence

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To cite this article: Michael Freeman (2019) From Environmental Action to Ecoterrorism? Towards a Process Theory of Environmental and Animal Rights Oriented Political Violence, Terrorism and Political Violence, 31:2, 424-425, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2019.1581507

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1581507

Published online: 12 Apr 2019.

TERRORISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE
2019, VOL. 31, NO. 2, 424–425

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

From Environmental Action to Ecoterrorism? Towards a Process Theory of Environmental and Animal Rights Oriented Political Violence, by Gerry Nagtzaam, Cheltenham, U.K., Edward Elgar, 2017, 353 pp., $150.00 (Hardback), ISBN 978-1-84980-119-5

For those studying terrorism and political violence, our attention is usually drawn to the deadliest and most current groups, like the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Hezbollah, the FARC, and others. As a result, our understanding of the phenomena of terrorism and political violence is heavily influenced by our understanding of these groups. But what about other groups, groups that are not as prominent, that are not as deadly, that subscribe to more of a fringe ideology? How should we think about these "edge" cases?

One possibility is that we should simply dismiss these edge cases as less relevant. After all, groups like the Earth Liberation Front have been responsible for zero deaths, only millions of dollars of damage, and relatively few attacks. Conversely, another approach would be to convince us that these edge cases really are important by inflating the threat they might pose. Perhaps, though, instead of dismissing or inflating these cases, the better way to think about them is to study them for what they are. The spectrum of political activism, violence, and terrorism is a broad one with examples and cases of varying types. Learning about them for their own sake is worthwhile.

Gerry Nagtzaam, in his book on environmental activism, violence, and terrorism does just that. By focusing on environmental groups, he clearly does not want to dismiss them as irrelevant, nor inflate the threat they pose. Instead he objectively analyzes the groups. Surely the book would sell more copies if it were titled, "The Coming Tidal Wave of Environmental Terrorism," but this would be inconsistent with the book's analysis and findings. Nagtzaam rightly takes a very measured and objective look at the past and future possibilities for violence throughout the book.

This book is valuable to all audiences eager to learn more about the range of radical environmental groups. After the first chapter that describes several models of terrorism and political violence, Nagtzaam organizes the remainder of the book into three main sections, focusing on: 1) the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), 2) Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), and 3) the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS). In each, he describes how the groups were formed, the types of activities they engaged in, how they were organized and led, how they gained recruits and finances, and where they seemed to be headed going forward.

The value of this book, though, goes beyond just understanding the nature of these types of groups. Studying these edge cases also helps us understand the larger scope and range of political activism and terrorism. Additionally, they help us understand why these edge cases of groups failed to became more mainstream and why mainstream groups succeeded. To be successful as a political movement, whether violent or not, or engaged in terrorism or not, all groups must overcome some common hurdles. They must organize, develop an ideology, mobilize new members or participants, raise finances, develop tactics, achieve strategic objectives, maintain control of activities, and avoid state countermeasures aimed at dismantling them.

The groups described in this book overcome these hurdles in different and sometimes consequential ways. For example, Earth First! and the SSCS were founded by charismatic leaders Dave Foreman and Paul Watson, respectively. This led to some early cohesion and

control but also made them vulnerable if the leaders were removed, arrested, or had a change of heart. Conversely, a group like the ELF has no leader or centralizing authority, which has the converse set of tradeoffs and probably limited their potential to grow or achieve any strategic objectives.

All of the groups described in this book struggled with the question of whether violence should be used at all, and more divisively, whether violence should be used against people. For ideological reasons, these groups were predisposed against harming any life on Earth, whether human or otherwise. Some, like the ELF, more or less kept their violence aimed at property, while others like the SSCS and especially the ALF were more willing to at least threaten humans with violence. For all these groups, many members recognized the strategic challenge of being unable to affect change without resorting to violence, especially against other people. A group like the ELF, for example, could never resolve this tension and would have had to sacrifice their ideology for their strategic goals or their strategic goals for their ideological consistency. This is in contrast to a group like ISIS, who has found ways to marry their strategic objectives and means (large-scale terrorism) with ideological justifications for them.

Many of the groups described by Nagtzaam intentionally formulated their ideological vision in very broad and unspecified ways. New participants in these movements agreed with some general ideological principles (the importance of all life, put simply), but because the ideology remained broad, Nagtzaam describes members as anarchists, hippies, nihilists, millenarians, deep ecologists, social ecologists, and more. This led to consequences—while the groups offered a broad tent to those agreeing with their cause, they also suffered from internal divisions and rifts that arose because of their ideological diversity. Again, this provides a useful counterpoint to other, more mainstream terrorist groups that at least try (sometimes less than fully successfully) to craft and propagate a common ideology across members—an ideology that defines the enemy, their goals, and ethically justifiable tactics.

While this book is useful for understanding environmental radicalism and violence and how these movements compare to other groups, it is also not without fault. The book is better as a descriptive and analytical study than as one proposing or testing theories. The introduction reads like a laundry list of theories of radicalization and mobilization, yet readers are unlikely to be reading this book as a test or model of these theories. Along these lines, Nagtzaam could have also skipped the end of each chapter where he shows how a particular group fits into Sprinzak's delegitimation process theory. Additionally, the book suffers from multiple instances of repetitive writing.

Ultimately, this book is useful for audiences looking for two things: understanding these environmental movements that are on the "edge" of how we think about terrorism; and more profoundly, as a tool for comparisons to other groups and a better understanding of how some groups have overcome hurdles of strategy, ideology, organization, etc. to become more deadly, relevant, or mainstream.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1581507