

# I predict a riot: green politics, environmental activism and socio-ecological despair

Gary R Potter considers the paths of engagement and active resistance to environmental damage

Environmental problems are the subject of much political debate. Yet meaningful action is limited. One response is an increase in direct action by environmental activists and an escalation of tactics used. As environmental problems seem ever more pressing, violence may well become a more prominent element of societal responses.

An increasingly dominant theme in contemporary sociological thinking is that of the 'Risk Society': the idea that modern social dynamics are best understood with reference to the creation and distribution of risks – especially those created by the scientific, economic and political structures of modernity. For Ulrich Beck (1986/1992) in particular, and for many others since, environmental harms are the key element of this risk society: as the human world damages the natural one, so we see environmental damage returning as significant social harm.

## Environmental harm as social harm

Decades after Beck (and long after environmentalists were giving similar warnings, albeit ungrounded in sociological theory) the significance

of environmental problems and their impact (potential and actual) on humankind is growing rapidly. Scientists continue to identify an ever-growing range of environmental harms caused by human activity; they are also mapping the ways in which environmental harms become social harms, detrimental to human health, social cohesion and economic, political and cultural wellbeing. The message is one of increasing urgency: negative effects are more severe than previously realised and are happening more quickly. We are warned we must act imminently before crucial 'tipping points' are reached. In some cases

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we are already too late to prevent or repair serious harms (although acting promptly may still limit the worst effects).

Christopher Williams (1996) presented an evolutionary model of 'victim responses to environmental harm'. Those that suffer because of environmental damage are unlikely to accept their lot, but instead will react (subject to the constraints of their social, economic and political situation). What is more, victims will escalate their responses as their exposure to harm increases, or lack of redress continues. 'Passive acceptance'

comes at the bottom of Williams' hierarchy of responses, escalating to 'confrontation and litigation' when available and desirable. Lack of success after engaging with formal legal and political channels may escalate to either 'non-violent community conflict resolution' or 'violence': if the system fails environmental victims they will try to change the system.

One of Beck's great insights, summed up in his phrase 'Smog is Democratic', is that we are all potential, arguably inevitable, environmental victims. Even when not, history is littered with examples of people responding in sympathy for those who are victims – especially when those victims cannot effectively respond for themselves. Global media increases our awareness of environmental harms and environmental victims. With actual, potential and 'sympathetic' victims thrown into an increasingly globalised mix, we have more and more environmental victims to respond – and to account for in Williams' model. Do they – and will they – progress down the community environmentalism path, or the one of violence?

## Within the body politics

Presumably most people would prefer the non violent option, and in democratic societies at least we might expect the initial reaction to be engagement with existing political and legal systems. Indeed, environmental issues are increasingly prominent on the political agenda. In the UK we have seen the election of the first Green MP and an increasing number of Green councillors in local government. More significantly, we have seen the main parties in the UK political system increasingly adopt green rhetoric. Whether this reflects genuine concern for environmental issues, or a cynical attempt to attract those voters who do have such concerns, is a moot point (although it is probably a mixture of both): green issues featured heavily in political campaigns for the 2010 general election. Conservative Prime-Minister David Cameron assured the country that his would be the greenest UK government ever.

This greening of political debate reflects similar trends around the world (with the UK arguably behind the international curve). Green parties and green politics are gaining influence across Europe, Latin America, Australasia and elsewhere. Even in North America the green

debate is increasingly central, albeit with the language of environmental denial more prominent than that of environmental action. In the realm of international politics, green summits are more frequent and more prominent.

But the greening of mainstream politics has proven to be frustratingly slow and ultimately disappointing. International summits are most notable for their lack of meaningful outcomes. In the UK, the Conservative-led coalition is noted for its apparent U-turns and prevarications – inaction on energy policy and on the international stage; apparent and threatened U-turns on protecting forests and the green-belt; a cabinet reshuffle in 2012 that placed a climate change sceptic in charge of the department for the environment in the same month that scientists reported record low levels of summer arctic sea ice. In a time of economic hardship, environmental issues return to the back seat. Internationally, global summits are noted for their failure to produce meaningful outcomes. If mainstream politics is failing to engage with the issues, where does this leave our current and future environmental victims?

### Outside the mainstream

Of course, voting and engagement with political parties is only one form of action available in democracies. We have seen an increase in membership of environmental NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, and a plethora of new organisations – like Plane Stupid –

emerge and engage in high profile campaigning. We have seen more people engage with non violent direct action (NVDA) than to try to use the existing legal and political systems to effect change. The Greenpeace action at the Kingsnorth power station in 2008 was notable

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for being the first high profile case where direct action involving criminal damage was seen as legitimate, successfully employing the legal defence of prevention of greater harm (the relatively minor damage to a power station was accepted as legal on the grounds it was meant to prevent the far greater damage to property that would be caused by unchecked global warming). But even here frustration abounds: the government response to the Kingsnorth court case was not to consider a change to energy policy, but instead a change to the law that would remove this legal defence. Peaceful protests are heavily (and heavily handedly) policed, and environmental protest organisations are infiltrated by undercover police officers and considered alongside terrorist groups by security forces. Community engagement and direct action – even when within the criminal law – seems more likely to be repressed by the state than to effect political change.

Rik Scarce (2006) researched the radical environmental protest movement in the United States in the 1980s and their use of 'direct action' methods of protest. Although most environmentalists prefer non violent direct action (NVDA), the more radical groups often resort to extreme tactics – 'eco-tage' – including the damage of property associated with the destruction of the environment (or harm to animals) and, in extreme cases, threatened or actual violence to the human actors behind such harms. Violence (to property, or to people) is justified by these activists on a number of levels: failure of and

frustration with mainstream legal and political systems; ineffectiveness of 'legitimate' methods of protest; prevention of the greater harm associated with those issues being campaigned about; the need to resist oppression and speak up for the voiceless (with violence being a form of shouting when other actions go unheard); a desperate last stand in a war to save the environment.

I talk to a lot of environmental activists. The sense of desperation and of frustration is palpable; the numbers willing to engage in some form of direct action seems to be increasing. Of course, not all environmentalists will turn to violent means – expect both political organisations like the Green Party, and NGOs like Greenpeace to continue to swell in numbers and to become more active both within the established political and legal systems, and to be using some form of direct action (including civil disobedience and minor acts of criminality). But with legitimate political engagement ineffective, and non violent direct action increasingly criminalised (and even met with violence by the state), is it any wonder that violent direct action is increasingly discussed – and used – by the more radical campaigners (whose numbers are swelled as the sense of urgency increases)? Of course, the other possibility is for more and more people, reflecting the sense of despair, to revert back to inaction – resignation to the view that the battle is already lost. But this does nobody any good: the neo-capitalist driven destruction of the environment will continue unabated, and we will all lose in the end. ■

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