

REVIEW ESSAY

On Radical Activism

Erica Wetter

Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement, Updated Edition*, Left Coast Press, 2006.

Amory Starr, *Global Revolt: A Guide to the Movements Against Globalization*, Zed Books, 2005.

Activists—their politics and tactics—are the subject of two recent left-leaning books: an updated edition of Rik Scarce's acclaimed 1990 text, *Eco-Warriors*, and activist/sociologist Amory Starr's primer to the anti-globalization movement, *Global Revolt*. While the former's in-depth account of radical environmental activism from its emergence in the 1980s to the present results in a revealing and valuable look at the philosophies that drive "eco-warriors," *Global Revolt* takes a similar approach to explaining the anti-corporate globalization movement for a less rigorous but still energizing effect. Paired together, the books unveil the strength of these two political movements.

When Scarce first published *Eco-Warriors* in 1990, the book garnered attention for offering significant insight into the motives of those who rely upon direct action and a "no compromise" philosophy to fight for the protection of "ecological diversity" (plants, animals, oceans, and land) from human interference [p. 5]. Scarce's logic, then and now, is that the activists' personal accounts "provide the best means to understanding this drive that propels them to fight with such vigor against the seemingly insurmountable Eco-Wall" [p. 14]—the Eco-Wall being that "philosophical, psychological, and tangible barrier" [p. 8] used "to keep out the alien force of nature both without and within us" [p. 7]. Thus the book avoids outside, academic interpretations in favor of the activists' own testimonies. Greenpeace, Earth First!, the Sea Shepherd, and Animal Liberation—Scarce profiles all the major players and groups that have helped to create a "radical" side to environmentalism as distinct from pragmatic, mainstream Group of Ten organizations like the Sierra Club. He also delves into several of these groups' major (and sometimes notorious) actions—including stories of tree-sitting, ship-sinking, and arson.

In fact, as Scarce comments, "[it] is this willingness by some to sabotage the tools of 'progress' which sets radical environmentalists apart from all of their predecessors in the environmental movement" [p. 5]. Although some might call these groups radical for their extremism—both in their tactics and their philosophy that humans are not more important than any other piece of nature—as Scarce points out, for the activists themselves, "the truly radical occurs when we break ecological bonds and destroy biodiversity" [p. 10]. While it may be difficult to condone some of these groups' more destructive actions, a case can be made that their direct action makes other environmental groups look reasonable; one of Earth First!'s founding rationales was to adopt the role of extremists in order to make the requests of mainstream groups like the Sierra Club look less demanding, allowing them to achieve greater levels of environmental protection [p. 7]. Further, although the legal compromises brokered by Group of Ten organizations have resulted in conservation and anti-pollution successes, this type of "muddling through," can just as easily result in watered-down environmental legislation, as happened with the U.S. Forest Service's Roadless Area Review and Evaluation II (RARE II), which, after the mainstream groups made their

compromises, recommended protecting only 15 million acres out of 80 million acres of roadless areas. Scarce quotes Earth First! Co-founder Howie Wolke on RARE II:

We played the game, played by the rules. We were moderate, reasonable, professional. We had data, statistics, maps, graphs. And we got fucked. That's when I started thinking, "Something's missing, here. Something isn't working." That's what led to Earth First! more than anything else [p. 24].

Mainstream groups might say that taking a hard-line, no-compromise position is unrealistic, that the political system forces compromise, and that potentially bad publicity generated by the radicals' actions can result in negative backlash for the environmental movement. However, evidence also suggests that radical groups have broadened the parameters of the environmental debate in a manner that has been productive for the movement as a whole. Either way, knowledge about radical environmentalism's history is key to understanding and evaluating the state of the movement today, and from this perspective, the book acts as a sympathetic and thorough guide for those who are too young to remember the eco-activism of the 1980s, or who are merely new to the movement.

To make this second edition more timely, Scarce has penned a new preface and completely rewritten the conclusion, bringing readers up to speed on the events and people that have shaped radical environmentalism over the last decade and a half. Comparing the tone of these additions with the original text suggests the extent to which radical environmentalism is now ensconced in the broader environmental movement. "Radical environmentalists present us with much to dislike. . . . It seems they don't speak the same language as the rest of us," commented Scarce in 1990's preface, adding that "their new world view may not be to our liking, and their actions often get in the way of their message" [p. xv]. More than fifteen years later, Scarce is well beyond tepid observations and is able to "marvel" at the movement's relevance, observing: "The radicals' warning screams from wilderness treetops and laboratory torture chambers call us to issues that otherwise would go unnoticed" [p. xiii]. Times have certainly changed.

Of course, as Scarce points out in the new conclusion, environmental issues aren't all that are gaining notice because of monkey-wrenching. Environmental actions are now labeled "eco-terrorism," "portrayed as the functional equivalent of Al Qaeda," and consistently reported by the FBI as being the nation's lead home-grown terror threat [p. 259]. Even if you take issue with the FBI's evaluation of radical environmentalism's threat, it is true that the newly formed destruction-focused groups Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front—"guided by an understanding of anarchy that condemns corporatist-state power in any form as oppression" and thus "denies capitalism and representative government any moral standing at all" [p. 275]—are increasingly responsible for a fair amount of damage. Scarce cites the FBI as estimating that these two groups alone committed 600 criminal acts and caused damages in excess of \$42 million between 1996 and 2002 [p. 274]. Meanwhile, governments and corporations are fighting back: using "strategic lawsuits against public participation" (SLAPPs) to cripple protest, in one case openly attacking the Sea Shepherd vessel *Whales Forever*, and increasingly arresting those who participate in civil disobedience. Scarce reports that although no official statistics on these arrests exist, judging from websites and the *Earth First! Journal* "thousands have been jailed in recent years in the U.S. alone for openly protesting timber cutting and animal experimentation" [p. 273]. In fact, Scarce himself was jailed for 159 days in 1993 for refusing to share with a federal grand jury his research for *Eco-Warriors*.

Despite the legal risks, radical environmental initiatives—whether they fight for land conservation or animal rights—continue, with the trend being toward a more global understanding

of environmentalism's implications. Scarce predictably cites 1999's chaotic and violent WTO protests in Seattle as the crucial moment when alliances between national environmental groups and seemingly disparate groups, including labor union members, human rights advocates, and others, were formed to fight against a common foe: unregulated corporate globalization. In short, Seattle made activists realize that there are "no exclusively 'local' environmental problems," that globalization is "everyone's problem," and that the power of multinational corporations can only be fought through multiple, coordinated fronts [pp. 272-273]. For this reason, Scarce concludes, the anti-corporate globalization movement is "the planet's best and final hope" [p. 285]. In the meantime, students, activists, and scholars will find in *Eco-Warriors* an informative and inspiring resource for understanding the radical side of environmental activism.

Picking up where Scarce's book leaves off is *Global Revolt*, Amory Starr's guide to the anti-corporate globalization movement. This slim volume bills itself as both "an accessible introduction to the movement, not an evaluation or quantification of it" [p. 9] and "an invitation to the global carnival against capital" [p. 16]. Breaking the book into four sections—History, Manifestos, Controversies, and Tactics—Starr glosses over the major ideological underpinnings of the movement as a whole and briefly touches on the many movements that further compose this "movement of movements." Starr is quick to point out that the anti-globalization movement is composed of much more than the activists who protested the WTO in Seattle. In 1985, the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil formalized the practice of large-scale land occupations [p. 22]; in 1992, the indigenous U'wa people of Columbia banded together against Occidental Petroleum [p. 24]; in 1994, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) emerged in Mexico, establishing autonomous political zones [p. 24]; in 1998, 24,000 people gathered to protest a major dam in India's Narmada Valley [p. 26]; and later, 70,000 people rallied in England to protest the G8 meeting [p. 27]. These highlights are all a way of saying that Seattle, as Starr argues, merely marked the entry of U.S. activists into a movement that was already well underway in other parts of the world, particularly the Global South [p. 30].

The rest of the book briefly summarizes the characteristics that link the individual movements that make up the larger movement, underscoring the diversity and breadth of their approaches to spurring social change. Starr does an admirable job of trying to squeeze a lot of references into a minimal word count. The section on tactics alone touches on everything from Food Not Bombs to property crime to Black Blocs to independent media centers. In the spirit of *Eco-Warriors*, "[c]ommentary by non-activists has been assiduously disregarded" [p. 10], but whereas Scarce's research was based on first-person interviews, Starr frequently gathers the book's activist commentary from the Internet. In a sense, this approach to research is very much in the spirit of the anti-corporate globalization movement, as the Internet has been a helpful vehicle in spreading the word about global struggles [p. 91]; however, it occasionally leaves a blank when it comes to identifying the individual voices and opinions behind some of the quotes Starr uses.

The largest dilemma that *Global Revolt* faces is one of audience. For although the book is supposed to "familiarize interested parties with the anti-globalization movement" [p. 3], the assumption is that these "interested parties" already have a fair amount of knowledge about globalization and what Starr calls its "machinations" [p. 3]; she comments outright that the reader has probably already read several books analyzing globalization's "egregious deceptions" [p. 3]. At the same time, the book is not necessarily directed toward the veteran activist, as it truly is an introduction and assumes the reader needs to be incited to action. That said, Starr does include copious resources (i.e. books and websites) at the end of each chapter, and these provide a useful

jumping-off point for readers of all backgrounds looking to get a more detailed understanding of the anti-globalization movement.

As both *Eco-Warriors* and *Global Revolt* underscore, messaging and getting the attention of the media and the public is a crucial component to activist actions. Whether it's Earth First! unfurling a banner across Mount Rushmore or anti-corporate globalization protesters culture-jamming billboards, reaching as many people as possible with a message of protest and outrage is undoubtedly crucial. Similarly, the importance and success of these books is in some respects dependent upon their ability to inform readers about these two movements in such a way that activists aren't seen as "eco-terrorists," but rather as citizens rightfully trying to call attention to issues they feel are important but neglected by the public and by government. Both of these books not only succeed at this task, but also make a strong case that direct action as used by both radical environmentalists and anti-corporate globalization protesters is making a difference. To put Scarce and Starr in conversation with one another: "Building 'another world' is well under way" [Starr, p. 256]. "It is a dangerous yet exciting time to be alive" [Scarce, p. xiii].