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Earth First Means Social War: Becoming an Anti-Capitalist Ecological Social Force

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Glossary of Terms

affect: 1. A material influence or alteration that produces empowerment. 2. To act upon (as a person or a person's mind or feelings) so as to provoke a response; influence. Affective struggle changes those struggling, as well as the world around them.

effect: The power to produce external results. *Her protest had no effect.*

desire: A productive force; the information that circulates through bodies and produces action. *We don't have desires, we are produced through and as vessels of desire.*

social war: The narrative of "class struggle" developed beyond class to include the complexities and multiplicities of all social relations. Social war is conflict within all hierarchical social relations.

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This is another contribution to the ongoing discussion about evolving EF! — perhaps beginning again, from a different angle.

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I intend to present a modest argument in favor of an Other Earth First!. What has made EF! powerful is not a particular ideology but rather a network structure based on affinity and, in most cases, cultural codes, rituals and customs. It follows that evolving EF! will continue to stand on and operate within that infrastructure. However, there are new maps we must examine and difficult topics that demand our immediate attention. The first and foremost is a question of *we*: Who are *we*? The second is a question of our current world or conditions: capitalism, the global ecological crisis and its social consequences. The third is a notion of possibility and uncertainty: How we will contribute to not simply defending ecosystems, but also to circumventing green capitalism and tendencies toward fascism with a green angle, and how we will usher in a total transformation of society?

It is not my intent to argue in favor of collapsing ecological struggle into a broad movement of movements. *Au contraire*, ecological struggle is special *but only as a social force*.¹ A powerful ecological struggle against industrialism and capitalism is the only social force that can prevent the catastrophic future of eco-fascism, and that can attack and destroy the reigning system of capital.

While it is clear that the global ecological crisis we've struggled to prevent is becoming a component of daily life — something mentioned in the news, over

¹By social force, I mean a social phenomenon that is intentionally directing society. While in the past "social movement" would have sufficed, today, very few movements have genuine power or agency. Rather, they simply are allowed to exist because what they produce has little to do with totally transforming society.

the phone with family, in passing with acquaintances — our current modes of struggle are making little headway, either in mitigating the constant expansion of capitalism, or in reaching the hearts and minds of a significant portion of the population. Unfortunately, this is predictable.

Currently, capitalism produces the conditions under which we act. Capitalism, not EF!, currently has the intelligence and labor-power to fantasize about and reorganize society. It is no wonder that when we point at the world on fire, a product to temporarily extinguish the flames becomes available or a movie with laughable solutions is made. However, ours is a problem of neither capacity nor consciousness, but rather of memory and imagination. When polemicists on the topic of civilization, such as Derrick Jensen, inform us that we will never be a popular movement, the myths of our lack of power and of our need for heroic true-believers become more palatable.

Although these myths about how the world works are seductive and consistent with the popular narrative of defeat, they prove incorrect when we more deeply examine the world. Capitalism is not merely a political-economic order but an edifice developed throughout history to structure all human relations. Despite all its anti-social pretensions, capitalism is a *social* structure. This means that the nightmares of capitalism are not caused by special individuals but by a complex system of social relations. The hypothesis of an Other narrative is this: Given the right circumstances, a complex system of social relations could materialize our *dreams*.

Capitalism may have just about every power relation to defend and enforce it. However, it is important to remember that it was our labor and knowledge that imagined and constructed the geometry of the gears, the logic of the advertisements and the cartography of deforested land. Furthermore, it is our urge for utopia, not that of bureaucratic systems, that has always provided an alternative.

EF! would do best to reimagine what becoming powerful might feel like. It would benefit us to experience our power intimately embodied in spaces where capitalism is being called into question. This means we would not continue to exist as a mere protest movement but rather as criminals experimenting with ways to survive. We would notice that a similar fabric runs throughout society, connecting us not solely to other predominately white social movements but also to many people who survive without compromise in this world on fire. We are not individuals acting on our moral impulses; we are a social force becoming aware of its power. Becoming powerful is a matter of making our story a place to inhabit — making our story material. We dream in the face of nightmares, not as an escape into an alternate reality but as a weapon to change this one.

Who Are We?

Within activist circles, the question of “Who are *we*?” causes vertigo. Some attempt to define themselves not simply by *what* they do but by *how* they do. This is an interesting divergence but ultimately a meaningless one. Can *we* be described by a technique?

Sadie’s SFB defends her anti-political assertion. “I am not an activist,” she claims (see *EF!J* March-April 2008). “I don’t think I ever was. Arsonist, yes. . .” She alludes to an important point. As activists we express things to those who

manage the state, not to those exploited by the state. Activism is the division of labor that specializes in social change. When we engage in activism, our struggle is transformed into “issues,” becoming political capital for politicians. From this perspective, the poodle-assed behavior of Al Gore and the Sierra Club is not surprising. How will more militant tactics redefine ecological discourse if we are still communicating through political means? Even if we eschew the activist label, our communiqués are not an affirmation of our power as much as thinly veiled pleas for inclusion in the political discourse.

Presently, we are working toward only a radicalized version of the solutions presented in *An Inconvenient Truth*. Gore says, “You, individual, can use more compact florescent light bulbs, reduce your carbon dioxide emissions and recycle.” We say, “You, individual, can ride a bicycle, eat trash, give up things and even punish those who don’t.” Although we have added a more militant moral character to our argument, the story remains the same: Individuals making moral choices will transform society. What’s hidden within that narrative is an assumption that history and social change have been made by individuals. But we are not one story; we are a multiplicity. We are not made up of heroes and bystanders; we are the combination of those who created capitalism and those who are oppressed by it.

The Individual and Activism

The (Western) individual is the protagonist of Western civilization, a construct of values developed during the Enlightenment and a story set into motion by the rise of capitalism. The individual expresses a person disjointed from the social; it produces a story where freedom is individual choice and individual agency.

The EF! tradition contains an affirmation of the individual and utilizes an activist methodology of social change. Even during the times when rowdy red-necks who really appreciated wilderness were putting the fictions of Edward Abbey into practice — a golden age for some — EF! was not able to birth itself outside of politics-as-usual. Instead, it attempted to develop political capital and credibility through publicity stunts and public land proposals. Over time, the sociality, camaraderie and affect that were cultivated through a collective practice of sabotage, were replaced by the urgency and moral impulse for direct action, which became increasingly a specialized practice of our heroes alone. Eventually, the urgency and moral impulse that demanded, “Something must be done!” pushed us back to sabotage, but this time it was the underground component of a dwindling movement. Like the Weather Underground component of the 1960s anti-war movement, our friends and co-conspirators who spray “ELF” on burned-out developments still essentially practice nonviolent direct-action activism. Direct action gets the goods and all, but shall the rest of us just watch or fill “support” roles? We have exhausted ourselves as individuals specializing in social change; we need collective confrontation.

What would attention to the needs of the environs that we are attached to be if it were not framed as “individuals making ethical choices”? And what would our we be if not activists? Furthermore, what if we was based on our experiences, identities and desire, rather than simply on what we currently do?

History is not only the history of class struggle. Let’s be clear: If Marx and the classical anarchists were right, and there was an easy answer called

the proletariat, our task would be much easier. We could take a long look around, notice the simple fractures in society and recognize ourselves based on our class interests. Those of us who work, and who work to avoid it, would see ourselves as the majority of the global population. We could simply raise consciousness and get organized on class lines to fight capitalism, not merely as a structure that exploits us but also as a structure that threatens all life on the planet. We could act in our own self-interests to destroy capitalism and construct utopia. I would personally be less stressed out about alienating my friends and would probably spend far less time at cafés obsessing over radical ecological theory. Clearly, it would be better for everyone except an incredibly wealthy one percent of the population, who would lose everything they’ve placed meaning in. However, our struggle is more complex than the demand for better material conditions. This does not change the fact that we are also workers under capitalism, it simply means our narrative and direction cannot embrace easy answers to complex questions. To develop class struggle beyond its limits we will locate social war.

As a matter of strategy and rhetoric, some have started using the term “climate justice” in reference to the global ecological crisis. Although this is largely yet another savvy way to gain political attention, it does reflect an important development. It hones in on the social consequences of the global ecological crisis. It gestures to an anti-capitalist ecology as a social struggle, and it is in this gesture that we can extract meaning. Although what begins as an effort to connect to more people is deflected by our own use of activism. What if we can illuminate the inclination to think in terms of the social instead of the political? It is this inclination that entices everyone who chooses petty crime and subcultural identity — who chooses the army as a way out and who chooses religious formations — over a political identity.

We must recognize ourselves as a part of those who will be impacted by the social consequences of global ecological crisis and who already are impacted by capitalism. Only then can we imagine what it would look like to be a part of a social force that is not an expression of a moral impulse, but a need for survival and desire for utopia. What if “climate justice” meant seizing the means of distributing clean water and producing clean water systems in autonomous zones? What if environmental anti-racism meant the liberation and destruction of prisons? This is what will occur when we examine the realities we are attached to but arm them with fantasy.

Political identity and its limited effects have reached their expiration date. What little autonomy we carved out by producing EF! as an activist approach is being taken from us. Whether we call it “climate justice” or whether we relate our notion of we to a philosophy of biocentrism, we are still failing to draw lines that are based in reality. Reality: We will die without clean water, and we will go to prison if we get caught breaking the laws that we are going to break — laws we must break if we are going to survive. Reality: Extinction of most life on the planet includes the ecosystems that we rely on and are intimately attached to. Reality: We are components of capitalist society, which transforms everything into capital including our relationships, desires and self-interests.

We are currently the *we* of our *conditions*; we seek to cultivate a *we* of our *direction*.

The *we* of our conditions is the *we* of a position within a capitalism, but it is also the *we* of the capitalism itself. If we are not the *we* of activism and not merely the *we* of arson, then what use are the communities we associate with? The point is not to denounce our communities, our identities, but to reveal the true power of those communities and identities if they were liberated from the hand of politics. We are alienated, isolated and disempowered when we are no longer at the Summer Rendezvous, the gathering, the potluck. We are weak without a community of support.

However, the weakness, sadness and alienation, are where we spend most of our time and where most of the human population spends its time too.

If we deconstructed our old selves, our old communities, what would we have left? Social relations, customs, rituals? Exploitation at work, structured gender relations, racialized power, reproductive systems of control, so many prisons? Thus, we will not have class struggle as our objective but social war. What if we recognized ourselves as the *we* of our conditions, and then attempted to meet and communicate with others who share similar conditions? What's more, what if we attempted to not merely understand ourselves as a community of capital but to direct our struggle in a way that is intended to make us powerful? This would cause us to inhabit social war — with a clear understanding of our experience as a component of a total system of social relations. Social war can then become both the fruit and the path of an anti-capitalist, ecological social force. Once we've cast off the shell of our political identity, a real *we* will be illuminated. Only then can we talk about rewilding and going feral. It is precisely there — when our *we* is a mirror to the rest of the human population — that such “escapism” becomes a real force.

The only *we* of our direction is made up of those of us who are searching for an Other *we*. It is this Other *we* that makes social war its object, that will appropriate all knowledge from all existing culture and that will also be appropriated by the aesthetics, sciences and social environments produced through culture. The *we* of our direction — an anti-capitalist and ecological direction — becomes powerful when it is attached to realities. Thus, the *we* of our direction is biocentric because it understands itself as inseparable from its conditions. Our anti-capitalist, ecological social force is the union of our need to exist on the Earth as participants in an ecosystem and the desire to edit, transform and play with what being human means.

The *we* of our direction is both a parallel structure, existing within our current conditions, and an adversarial structure that seeks new conditions. Today, one sojourns to Cascadia, to Katúah, to the Sonoran Desert to feel at home, to feel powerful. Tomorrow, we will recognize ourselves in the centers of the cities, as well as in the mountains. The evolution of EF! must traverse these new paths.

Seizing the Means to Produce Existence

If we intend to genuinely change society, we must have space to experiment. It follows that our task is to locate the cracks in capitalism and exploit them — to

materialize our social force, both through actions and insurgent gestures, while laying down physical foundations. As the economy begins to melt down, the need for inhabitable spaces will grow. We can open up the doors of possibility by literally opening up doors to locked buildings and by producing autonomous territories with ecologically sustainable systems, giving permaculture teeth. When our “nice” projects are recognized more objectively for what they can achieve, we can begin to really understand their power. An Other EF! understands quite clearly why the old EF! Rendezvous occupied national park land: sociality and social war.

An anti-capitalist, ecological social force needs money and resources. We are not yet connected through a network of hook-ups, petty crime and embezzling. We need structures in place that both produce portals into our world and bring in cash. Each issue of the *Journal* needs nearly \$10,000 to go to print and pay expenses. If we intend to keep this as our mouthpiece, then we need to come up with creative and destructive solutions to keep it funded. Moreover, imagine what other tools we could have at our disposal if we had solutions improving both the *Journal's* material conditions and improving ours as well. One of the primary achievements of the radical labor movement at the beginning of the 20th century was its ability to provide an option of survival that allowed its participants to exist in capitalism but also against capitalism. If one was fired due to participation in a strike, one could travel to another node of the union and find work, as well as affective struggle and camaraderie. Similar things can be said about those who eat trash, ride bikes and reuse objects. We need to take seriously our input in EF! projects. They are the deeds and opinions not only of our humble editors nor of the loudest, craziest person at our gatherings. We can produce knowledge and reveal our experiences but only if we appropriate these tools collectively.

With an attention to our senses, a multiplicity of environs may spill out of the containers of our political identities and emerge inside the doors of nonprofits in the West, the free states of the Northwest, the publications of the East and West Coasts, the abandoned epicenters of yesteryear's industry, and the cafés and culture-production factories of today. These are some focal points of social war, and this is where we will begin the process of seizing the means to produce existence.

The wisdom that compelled those who act in the night to leave the single-issue campaign or protest shouldn't go unnoticed. Our social force is not the sum of urgent calls to defend this or that place, or to protest the next big thing. However, this is not to say we would do best to leave such places to those who are still held hostage by politics. An anti-capitalist ecological social force is interested in power. Therefore, we will manifest our force in places where we are powerful and where we have the capacity to achieve our objectives. The old saying, “A losing battle is the only one worth fighting,” no longer enchants us. We must point to the burn-out and depression of those who were trying to lose the battle of anti-globalization and to the banality of the current anti-war movement. We will riot when we can destroy everything we wish to. We will blockade when it interrupts capital. We will test our capacity and power without regard to those who say “hurry up” or “slow down.” We will do as benefits us.

No Compromise

Those who cheer on the consequences of collapse, those who would foolishly sign peace treaties with pragmatism if it offered a more sustainable entrée, and those who will be the next Julia Butterfly or the next German Green Party,² we will politely show to the door. “No compromise” still has meaning.

The future is uncertain. On the one hand, life on Earth and the human species as we know it are already being fundamentally altered and may simply go extinct. On the other hand, life may survive and proceed to an even more terrifying nightmare. Both futures determined by capitalism will result in a world where people must fight one another for access to resources. It sounds so familiar. It is these futures that an anti-capitalist ecological social force will circumvent. Conversely, it is an Other future that our social force will precipitate.

Circumventing Fascism and Destroying Green Capitalism

Green capitalism is the process by which the economy will attempt to reconcile its desire for constant expansion and extraction of resources with the finite ecosystems that all life relies on. At first, as we’ve seen, it will raise a green banner, but in the end it will exclaim, “Long live death!” Green capitalism will not be possible without a fascist element.³ Already on the horizon, the *nouveau riche* are getting organized. Many are developing for themselves eco-mansions — ones that look, smell and feel like plantations. Neoliberalism is the *corporativismo* preceding this, putting into place a diffuse global state that is no longer the main actor in producing culture and controlling the economy.⁴ It is no coincidence that many clean water reservoirs are now owned by Coca-Cola and Pepsi, following the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The transfer of all access to life-support resources to the rich and the inability of a significant portion of society to survive without capitalism has been set in motion. There are more prisoners than farmers in the US; there is more production of culture than food. Green capitalism will be complete when we are neutralized and the first car that runs on salt water is sold. It is our task to make this impossible.

²The German Green Party, although coming out of the anti-nuke and anti-war movements of the 1970s and 1980s, has aligned itself with the extreme right, and actively suppresses radical ecological discourse. As the governing party in 1990s and 2000s, it deployed troops in defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization programs it was created to stop.

³Fascism is often the shock-troop of capitalism. When there is a crisis that causes instability in the social order, fascism will be instated. Because it already exists within certain confines of the state, such as the military, it will have more ease in its re-emergence into popular support. The Minutemen were considered public enemy number one only a decade ago, when the state was ridding itself of the militia movement. Why now, are they lawfully deputized? And what will the green-shirts look like? Who will they be in a decade?

⁴Corporativismo (Corporatism) was the economic structure put into place to reorganize Italy’s economy when Mussolini came to power. The corporation is a model to “incorporate” all interests into, superseding both private individuals and public interests. The corporate structure in fascist Italy was used to maintain a capitalist system by expanding the power and definition of the state to include everything. Contemporary neoliberalism maintains the state but expands capitalism to include everything.

We are still capitalism's most important infrastructure. While it is true that massive self-reductions of consumption have contributed to destabilizing and precipitating a crisis in the economy, it is also true that our deeds have little meaning without a social context. To cause a crisis in green capitalism, a significant portion of the culture-producing population must refuse to be a market demographic but also work to undermine the influence of green production. This means producing memes — contagious ideas based in a shared experience — against green capitalism.

But it also means stealing products and destroying green capitalist manifestations — for example, looting Whole Foods or destroying hybrid cars. It means developing techniques such as fare-dodging, shoplifting, seed-sharing and collectivizing survival practices in the workplace, as well as smashing the false harmony of current green techniques by illuminating the fractures within green sciences and green design. These acts may seem fantastical in the present, but the crises already in progress are producing the conditions where people will very soon think in more elaborate terms about their material conditions. Because there are already mechanisms at play that provide fertile ground for pro-capitalist and pro-fascist political programs, it is important that an anti-capitalist ecological social force articulate itself in rhythm with such changes.

It has been noted before that conflicts at and because of borders should beckon our unwinking eyes (see *EF!J* September-October 2006). Considering capitalism's tendency toward fascism, this is an important site of conflict. The Minutemen point to an already existing discourse within our society — one that is framed in ecological terms. If we can prove the meaninglessness of borders, then we can reduce their appeal to those who have made the mistake of viewing the geography of the Earth through nation-states. Moreover, we can undermine the next fascism's use of borders and anti-immigration as selling points, and constitute our anti-capitalist ecological social force as concretely anti-fascist.

Because of the existing distribution of resources and production of knowledge, food and water will be the most contested, followed by social spaces and inhabitations. Many within *EF!* have accumulated some very helpful special knowledge. However, this is usually used for accumulating capital, maintaining a nonprofit status or impressing friends. This knowledge must be liberated from its current form. An anti-capitalist, ecological social force will have the means to produce knowledge, and it will seize ways of distribution. In our workplaces, in our subcultures, in our many environs, we should produce and share this knowledge. We need our day laborers and our baristas to be connected with our beet-harvesters and Conservation Corps workers in a circuit of information.

The Anti-Capitalist Ecological Social Force Becomes Material

To become powerful, we need to locate in that circuit a kernel capable of seizing and maintaining space. Revolt is not a military operation but a social affair. However, this does not negate the very real necessity that space plays. We need social spaces, places for us to get organized, places that can sustain life, places worth calling home. In the metropolis and in the mountains, in the small towns and in the desert, we will produce a village within the city

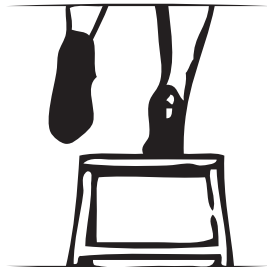
and a city without walls. We need material structures and thread to weave them together. The material structures will, at first, be social centers, radical neighborhoods, appropriated land, but will transform into autonomous rebel communities, archipelagos of revolt, and experiments in food and water acquisition that develop beyond organic farms and water conservation. The thread to weave them together will be our capacity to cultivate portals of communication that say, “We need this, do you?” in rhythm with our material and existential conditions that have been only recorded so far over beer or coffee, or in blogs and journals. As we grow more powerful these portals will become faultlines on a planetary scale — connecting us to older worlds and ones yet to exist.

With ink and dagger, curse and irony, cheer and uncertainty, we will continue to walk and converse — breaking bread, asking questions, making love, growing old, and contributing to the overall creation and reproduction of life on the planet. We are always seduced into walking; it’s the fabric of our creative urge, the thumping of our hearts, that directs us to accelerate, to become robust and networked. It is likely that no matter what happens, we will continue to experiment with living.

The constitution of EF! as an anti-capitalist ecological social force is a matter of the magical tendencies that link all humans as social critters. But furthermore, it is a matter of our new desire, liberated from politics and put into motion as social war. Social forces will destroy capitalism and deindustrialize the planet, but we will not stop there. Let our stories intoxicate us with a profound meaning. Let us seize the means to produce existence. Let us usher into being an age of uncertainty, leaving behind the old world and opening up the doors to all possibilities. We want bread, blood and roses too.

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