

**Book Review: *Igniting a Revolution: Voices in Defense of the Earth*, Best, Steven, and Nocella, Anthony J., II, ed. (AK Press 2006)**

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*Igniting a Revolution* is a contemporary anthology that argues for a new wave in the history of environmentalism that its editors Steven Best and Anthony J. Nocella, II claim as revolutionary environmentalism: a collective movement that seeks total liberation by building expansive alliance networks and understanding between all radical social struggles. The book is both a reflection of the new multi-issue-alliance-based politics that emerged during the 1990's and a call and catalyst for their intensification. It provides a platform for revolutionary voices from all different camps—Black liberationists, Native Americans, eco-feminists, queers, people with disabilities, animal liberationists, anarchists and many more. Offering academic analyses and activists' accounts in over 40 diverse essays, *Igniting a Revolution* roots out and explores solutions to today's global environmental crises.

As a grassroots collaboration, *Igniting a Revolution* is appropriately published by AK Press, a collectively owned and independent book publisher and distributor. Books and other media distributed by AK press are published by independent presses rather than corporate giants. Their goal is not to make a profit but rather to supply radical information to as many people as possible. This is reflected in the Friends of AK Press program where for \$25 a month members regularly receive a package filled with books, videos and CDs. Likewise, the objective of *Igniting a Revolution* is to provide radical ideas to a large audience and to give support to those in the movements with profits going to political prisoners and prisoners of war defense committees as well as aboveground environmental and animal liberationist organizations that support revolutionary environmentalism.

The book is organized into several sections that explore issues the editors feel are essential to the study of revolutionary environmentalism. These include the topics of environmental history, sustainability and consumption, religion and spirituality, critiques of civilization, government repression, direct action and militancy, social movements and alliance politics. Interwoven with each section are collections of somber and beautiful poetry by renowned activists such as political prisoner Marilyn Buck, which make a powerful contribution to the book's holistic compilation.

In their introduction, Nocella and Best provide a useful overview of the western environmental movement starting from its conception in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the modern environmentalism of the 1960's to the emergence of revolutionary environmentalism in the 1990's. They lay out the framework of revolutionary environmentalism. A collective multi-issue movement, its support of illegal tactics ranging from economic sabotage to guerrilla warfare is what sets revolutionary environmentalism apart from other approaches. While the authors may not support such tactics as a first choice, they recognize that in the reality of today's global ecological

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crises “the violent methods of resistance are often appropriate against fascist regimes and right-wing dictatorships” (Best and Nocella 20).

Throughout *Igniting a Revolution* its contributors emphasize the connection between deep ecology, social ecology, animal liberation and revolutionary action. All of the authors reject environmental activism that views nature as a resource to be maintained and fails to see it as intrinsically valuable. With environmental destruction rapidly escalating, extreme approaches that accept “no compromise” are often viewed as most effective. While the essays in this book highlight a variety of opinions and objectives, the authors appreciate that the current capitalist system is inherently unsustainable and unjust and their essays favor an alternative of decentralized and autonomous communities guided by ecological and anarchist principles.

Compiled during an era of ecological devastation and intense repression from the industrial state complex, many of the book’s contributors now sit imprisoned for their actions defending the Earth. Contributions from current and former political prisoners like Free, Critter, Ashanti Alston and Josh Harper, to name a few, outweigh any book I have seen. And their stories are some of the most endearing. As Bron Taylor, author of the foreword writes, “with a little imagination, this book may provide the next best thing to joining radical activists in the trees, urban neighborhoods, prisons or what Edward Abbey called “nightwork”—that is, sabotage under the cover of darkness” (3).

One of my favorite essays is “Armed Struggle, Guerilla Warfare, and the Social Movement Influences on Direct Action,” written by past political prisoner Ann Hansen that tells the story of the Canadian guerilla group that bombed power sources and pornography stores in the 1980’s. While groups like Direct Action intersected concerns such as feminism and ecology, it wasn’t until the 1990’s with the emergence of groups such as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) who actively sought to bridge alliances with other movements that revolutionary environmentalism really came into its own. Crossing gender, class and species lines, the ELF encouraged debate about the need for the liberation of people, animals and Earth and called for solidarity with struggles in developing countries.

One great example that *Igniting a Revolution* provides of alliance building is the partnership between the ELF and ALF. These sister groups often work together on behalf of animals and the Earth. The largest ELF action to date (the igniting of the Vail Colorado ski resort that cost \$14,000,000 in damages (Molland 57)), was aimed at preventing the destruction of sensitive lynx habitat and was fueled in part by outrage at the fur industry that cares “only about fur equality and maximum ‘production’ and death” (Becker 81). Expanding the alliance further, Rod Coronado (whose ALF activism is linked with his identity as an indigenous North American) explains that “the fur trade today is the modern incarnation of those very same people who murdered and destroyed my people and my homelands” (Schnurer 357).

Throughout the book, the writers often use themselves as points of reference in their own understanding of revolution. In his article “Mojo Workin’” political prisoner Ashanti

Alston of the Black Liberation Army writes movingly of his experience crossing the lines of animal liberation and Black liberation. While Alston had “never really thought about [animal liberation] in such a way against the background of my own people's struggle,” he resonated with the “vision that expanded ones understanding of the kind of world we wanted to create out of this madness. It was a call to the simplicity of indigenous folks world view. Yet, it is almost the direct outgrowth of the insanity of this over technologically developed capitalist systems drive to manufacture all forms of life as it deemed profitable” (224).

Articles such as Robert Jensen’s “What is a Morally Defensible Level of Consumption?” explores questions that those living in a capitalist system are inclined to ask, and provides useful philosophy for daily living. Other articles analyze past social justice movements using biographies or communiqués to better understand their role in society.

Maxwell Schnurer’s article—They Took Ulrike Meinhof’s Brain: A Comparative Study of the Causes of and Justifications for Militant Direct Action—looks at the case of the Red Army Faction’s Ulrike Meinhof, a woman reporter-turned-urban guerilla whose brain was studied for 30 years in order for scientists to find biological justification for the “social pathology” of an armed extremists (348). Likewise, often labeled as “crazy terrorists,” Schnurer explains how today’s misunderstood radicals are also deemed as pathological. His work helps to counteract the terrorist rhetoric from state officials and corporate media.

*Igniting a Revolution* challenges the reader to go further. What actions are most effective to bring fundamental change? Some stress the need for radicals to build a strong vision to articulate to society. Mark Somma writes that “while tactics such as direct action and ecotage may be “radical,” they are not revolutionary because they cannot by themselves bring about a qualitatively new social system. Such transformation requires a *new social movement* and a *positive vision of a new society*” (38). Former ELF press officer Leslie James Pickering now focuses on building a revolutionary community that educates the public, and Adam Weissman writes in “The Revolution of Everyday Life,” “...if revolutionary environmentalists ever hope to radically alter human society, we must do more than simply resist ecological destruction—we must demonstrate new and better ways to survive and thrive, as we actively begin to create a new and better world” (127).

While the revolutionary environmental movement has not been articulated in such a way to educate the general public, *Igniting a Revolution* provides a perfect starting point for this dialogue. Yet, while the book has a lot to teach, looking around today’s predominantly mass-consumer, ipod-generation, I must ask, “Who’s to listen?”

Things are further complicated with the advent of the internet, evolution in different technologies and formidable state powers. A lot has changed since the inception of groups like Direct Action and the Red Army Faction. Do the tactics espoused by revolutionary environmentalism stand a chance in today’s Orwellian society? Conversely, activist methods can be adjusted to fit the culture around them. “The tools of resistance are changing fast, with *hacktivism* and other technological methods becoming more

frequent in undermining corporatism and government policy within the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Garland 69).

A collection of Earth Liberation Front communiqués are found at the end of the anthology. Following in the footsteps of all those who have acted on a natural intuition to defend the Earth, the ELF is one group whose actions reflect the kind that must escalate against the destructive forces of capitalism. One ELF communiqué states: “Welcome to the struggle of all species to be free. We are the burning rage of a dying planet.”

With its amazing bridge-building approach, fascinating academic as well as activist voices and articulation of a multi-issue global movement, *Igniting a Revolution* is a one of a kind work in its field. The book explores what it means to be a revolutionary, the emerging manifestations of revolutionary environmentalism and the future potential. The authors’ consensus seems to be that a diversity of tactics are necessary: education to foster understanding, building organic communities and engaging in protest and extreme activism which for some inevitably include armed struggle. With daunting obstacles ahead, only time will tell if revolutionary environmentalism will succeed. Still, it is the most promising and increasingly necessary progressive social movement in history.

In stressing the need for solidarity, strategic direct action and encouraging a powerful eco-resistance, *Igniting a Revolution* fuels the fire. Well deserving of a place in every progressive library and social justice classroom, and fittingly published by the radical publisher AK Press, *Igniting a Revolution* is an exceptional contribution to environmental studies, the pursuit of animal liberation and anarchist literature.