

## **Chapter 4: *EarthFirst!***

At a meeting on 4 November 1994 in the Department of Peace Studies, Alex Begg spoke of the work and perspective of the radical ecology group, *EarthFirst!*

*Present* at the meeting were Christina Arber, John Brierley, Howard Clark, Bob Overy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank, Andrew Rigby, Walter Stein.

### ***Presentation by Alex Begg***

Alex began by saying that he was particularly interested in the distinction discussed at the group's earlier meetings between coercive nonviolent direct action and conversion. He personally was drawn to the Gandhian tradition of conversion, but EarthFirst was basically about coercion. That was its *raison d'être* and essentially what set it apart from other environmentalist groups. It had been formed largely in response to what had been seen as the tendency of environmental groups to get involved in negotiations with governments and settle for small concessions. There was also a concern that direct action was becoming too much symbolic and too little 'actual'. It was felt that Greenpeace people, for instance, would put on their white suits and block up a drain when there were cameras present, but would show no interest at all when they were absent. Involvement with the local community had become particularly important for EarthFirst, especially in the UK, and, with that, a commitment to mobilise the largest possible number of people.

The previous week he had been at the anti-road camps aiming to block the M65 between Preston and Blackburn. A group of them sprinted along the canal tow path to try to prevent lorries from unloading cement into the foundations of the motorway. They reckoned it would cost the road builders a lot of money if they could do this, especially if the cement were to set in the lorries. On the journey to the site, they discussed the position of the drivers, many of whom were claiming that they were individual contractors who owned their own trucks and that the action would hit them rather than Tarmac itself. But while some of the protesters were concerned about this point, others who had been involved for a longer period said they had heard these stories before and that most of them were untrue. The general feeling was that although they were concerned about the position of individual contractors, it was more important at the end of the day to stop the motorway.

Twenty or so demonstrators managed to work their way through the lines of security guards and block the cement trucks. The police arrived after about half an hour and claimed they could show the protesters had caused criminal damage through reckless action if they continued to block the trucks. They responded that this line had been taken before in prosecutions and they did not believe it would stand up in a court of law. Negotiations followed; EarthFirst was prepared to negotiate with the people it encountered on demonstrations, and did emphasize conversion in such face-to-face situations. They realized that too few of them were prepared to risk arrest to achieve an effective blockade. They decided, therefore, to fudge the issue and say they needed more time to think about what they should do, hoping meantime that the concrete would set. Ultimately they managed to hold up work for about half an hour before beating a dignified retreat. Soon afterwards it began to pour with rain so they felt quite good about how things had gone. However, they did not know if the cement had set.

Alex explained that he was probably not a typical member of EarthFirst. He was a 'lay' pagan and less engaged with that side of things than many activists in the movement, and he was also less of an anarchist than many of them, being a member of the national executive of the Green Party and having various other responsibilities. Anarchism had been extremely influential, particularly its critique of the capitalist system. Economic sabotage was a frequent topic of discussion in EarthFirst circles. They would go away from demonstrations totting up on the back of an envelope how much the action had cost those whom they were opposing.

The importance EarthFirst people placed on coercion had much to do with the apocalyptic issues they were dealing with, and the sense of desperation they felt about them. They saw everything they valued being destroyed, steadily and irrevocably. Whilst the focus of their training was on remaining calm, 'keeping it fluffy', and using consensus-building and conflict resolution techniques, their actions were fuelled by this desperation and sense of urgency. Hence the strategy of coercion.

Why, then, did they stick to nonviolence? The answer was that they saw the Earth as a whole. One could not value just those parts of it that have leaves on them and not the bits wearing policemen's uniforms. This led to a further question, however. If they valued people, should they not also value their free will? How did a coercive strategy square with valuing the people as individual agents? Here indeed was a paradox. One possible answer was that they tended to intervene in situations where there was already a conflict of wills, and then aligned themselves with the community which was defending the eco-system. This was probably where the emphasis on solidarity with communities had come from. They were not anti-human. They saw the situation rather as a contest over the management of resources - ecological management versus unsustainable management. The anti-roads movement had assumed a particular importance for them. Firstly, roads were part of the industrial infrastructure; secondly, it was in the construction of roads that local communities found themselves at the cutting edge of the ecological crisis. Direct action undertaken by communities who were directly experiencing the effects of ecological destruction was a powerful force and had had a definite impact on public policy. Not that EarthFirst were particularly interested in accommodations and concessions; for them any concession was merely an opportunity to let rip on some new issue or to push things forward a bit further.

It would be hard, Alex continued, to claim that undermining governments and the authorities was the main objective of EarthFirst. The general feeling was that this was well and good, but that there was liable to be another government to take the place of one that was overthrown, or for there to be further ecological problems. The focus therefore was on tackling the problems themselves.

To what extent, then, did EarthFirst see its activity as contributing to the creation of a different social structure founded on nonviolence rather than on violence and exploitation? They were concerned with ways of broadening the base of nonviolent direct action. Cooperation with communities in resistance had been crucial here, bringing them into contact with people from entirely different social backgrounds. The people who had started EarthFirst had been university students or drop-outs with a fairly homogeneous background. But now at the M11 protests, for example, you heard a lot of East London accents - and also a lot of Geordie accents because of the flowerpot tribe who had decamped south after they had wound up their action in the middle of Newcastle. There were also a lot of people from Winchester whose involvement had begun at Twyford Down. Thus although EarthFirst had begun as very much a middle class movement, it had now spectacularly broadened its base. This caused certain

tensions. People of working-class backgrounds tended to be more into the mystical, pagan side of things, whereas people like himself tended to take a more rationalist approach.

The M11 was the best example to date of a community in resistance. Over a large area, covering a radius of some three and a half miles, there was absolute support from the local people. When they had been occupying buildings prior to the evictions, about half the people were nonviolent activists, and half local residents, including the local lollipop lady in full uniform waving a banner saying - Stop! Children! An entire municipal arrangement had evolved. You'd walk down the road and you'd have your office building busy sending and receiving faxes, while a little further on you'd have the cafe with people preparing food for the activists, - taking donations at one end and handing out free food at the other. Further still down the road, you'd have the bicycle workshop, since people needed a means of getting around in such a large area. Sometimes you couldn't tell the difference between the EarthFirst activists and the local people. Alex had talked to one man whom he assumed to be one of the outside activists but who turned out to have lived for three years in one of the nearby houses they were squatting. The man explained that he used to be a typical 'doley' veging out in front of the telly. Now he was a professional activist. It was fascinating the way in which the protest had transformed people's lives, brought together communities and turned them into models of an alternative society. Obviously these things were fragile. We could expect the people in Claremont Road to be evicted within the next month now that the Criminal Justice Act had come in.

This Act had, however, brought EarthFirst into contact with a wider culture. The problem with trying to be a prefigurative political movement when you were engaged principally in oppositional activity was that it bred a sense of negativity and a lack of responsibility, allowing you to dodge difficult questions about meeting people's needs. The Act had brought together a range of different communities - people like those involved in Local Agenda 21, in exchange-trading schemes, in housing and worker cooperatives. The hunt saboteurs, too, were involved. The previous day when EarthFirst had sent a load of people down to the M11 for their Carry-on Trespassing action, it was mainly 'hunt sabs' in the van, and the van itself had been borrowed from Leeds hunt sabs. But the involvement of the hunt saboteurs caused some tensions too because their commitment to nonviolence was always rather more wobbly than that of EarthFirst. The raves and parties had also introduced a culture dimension into the protests.

EarthFirst were starting to shift the terms of the debate about radical political strategies. The trotskyist groups had tried to move in on the Criminal Justice Bill protests, but were finding it very difficult to get a purchase. This was largely because their culture and their strategy of political violence has been utterly at odds with a general perception among the protesters that nonviolence is not only right but an approach which works. Some people in the Freedom Network were saying that the Socialist Workers had been left behind; they did not understand how radical politics worked in the 1990s. It was interesting that political strategies based on political violence looked increasingly anachronistic and marginalised.

The last question he had considered was whether people in EarthFirst were 'peaceseekers' or 'pacifists'. He thought there was an ambiguity in EarthFirst's position. Many of them had done work in solidarity with campaigns in Sarawak and Bougainville where the struggle over access to the forests was becoming a virtual civil war. It was not been fought out with bulldozers but with guns. Many people in EarthFirst felt that they had to side in this civil war with those defending the forest. Moreover sabotage had played an important role in

EarthFirst's activities. EarthFirst in the US had always had an emphasis on 'monkey-wrenching'. This was not sabotage in the more symbolic sense in which Ploughshare's activists engaged in it. The intention of EarthFirst saboteurs was to conduct sustained systematic attacks on property and to get away with it. EarthFirst had come up with some fascinating new terms related to conflict resolution - such as 'fluffy'. But their rhetoric was also thick with terms like 'eco-war', 'trash this', 'trash that', 'mobilise', 'blockade'. They might be very nice to the people they met, and they were gaining insight into the powerlessness of people within systems. But for all that there was no enemy, there was a widespread belief in the movement that this was war, - 'eco-war'. He was therefore interested in reading in our papers the idea that nonviolent action might constitute a 'functional equivalent' of military activity - perhaps a way of conducting a war if you didn't have an enemy.

Concluding he said he had not spoken about the range of campaigns that EarthFirst was involved in at the present time. However, he had some published material that people could take away with them.

## ***NARP Discussion***

### *Symbolism and Coercion – a further debate*

Carol asked if the fact that EarthFirst were not too bothered whether or not the media were present indicated that the actions were essentially a witness to their beliefs rather than an attempt to spread the news to others. Alex replied that in his experience there really was not much interest in taking the message to a wider audience, and influencing the general public. The main audience for their actions were the contractors, the planners, the developers. These were the people they were talking to, and talking to in very blunt language. They were saying: 'We are going to completely wreck your financial plan for this project.'

John Brierley said he had always placed importance on symbolism. If you blockaded a military base, you might close it for a day if you were lucky, but actually that was still symbolic. Alex agreed but said that EarthFirst were dealing with the planners and developers whom they were trying to affect economically. In a sense, EarthFirst's refusal to do actions that were purely symbolic was in itself a powerful symbol of what they were about and of their intransigence.

In the M11 campaign, the protesters had gone furthest in terms of obstructive direct action and launched an 'operation roadblock'. They announced that on March 31st they were going to do actions on the site every day. In practice it didn't quite come off, and after a few weeks they were down to just two or three not very big actions a week. Still daily obstruction was the direction they were moving in, and they hoped that, given time and more people, and they would make a better job of it.

Walter said that getting more people would itself be essentially a result of the symbolic force of the action. He was interested to see how much emphasis Alex placed on the distinction between the coercive and symbolic resonance of the actions. He had always been frankly sceptical about this kind of direct action. There were two levels to his misgivings. The outcome of 'eco-war' into which people were slipping was built into the kind of campaign being waged. The campaign appeared to be inherently irrational, not merely because one could only be doing obstructive direct action for so many days a year, but because it was

dependent on winning a propaganda war. Even on the practical plane, the campaign was dependent on converting more and more people to become anarchist, otherwise the anarchism would be totally ineffective. Thus in some sense they were necessarily having to rely on conversion as a tactic, quite aside from moral reasons.

There was another kind of danger which bothered him even more, namely that this kind of direct action was bound in the long run to undermine direct action focussed upon really apocalyptic issues. The public would not be able to draw distinctions between direct action in very different circumstances; they would simply see it as a lot of people being bloody-minded in various contexts. That was the deepest level of unease he felt about the activities Alex had described.

Alex agreed with many of Walter's comments. Given the importance of numbers to the strategy of coercion, it was indeed extraordinary that EarthFirst hadn't placed more emphasis on conversion. In some places it had been happening. The newsletter 'Roadbradker' which the M11 protesters distributed free to household in the area used symbolism in a big way. There was an emphasis too on the way road issues affected other aspects of community life. Part of the success of the M11 campaign was due to the fact that the campaigners had spent a lot of time in this kind of campaigning.

#### *The local and national community*

Walter said that in all forms of community building, the issue had to be of *national* relevance, although it manifested itself locally. It was not about NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) interests, but primarily about national decisions. This must apply even more in the case of strategic nonviolence. Any form of action, whether it was conventional political propaganda, demonstrations, or direct action had to be aimed at the conversion of the national community. Anything that was incompatible with this, and that tended to be counterproductive from the point of view of converting the national community, was dangerous.

Andrew countered that you could convert people in a sense by coercing them. If the cost was high enough they might have to think again. Walter said this was true only if, at least tacitly, they were made to feel that there was something in what the protesters were saying, otherwise there would be no difference between the kind of action we had been discussing and the direct action of the National Front against Indians or blacks. They too were involved in direct action, not necessarily always involving violence. Nonviolent campaigns needed to address the wider community in the name of some shared or universal values. Unless this was part of the carefully guarded purpose of the actions, you were simply dividing the community in the same way racists did by asserting their presence against the rest.

Alex said he had mixed feelings about which community it was they were trying to build. On the one hand, one of the reasons that the anti-roads campaign had become so successful was that different NIMBY campaigns around the country had had to talk to each other and learn from each other. And in order to have a common language for that dialogue, they had had to shift from their NIMBY position into a 'NOPE' (Not on Planet Earth) position. This was an evolution in the direction of building a national community of resistance. However, the kind of communities which EarthFirst had been working with successfully had been those based on a geographical locality or regional identity.

He saw a problem with trying to appeal to values shared with people in corporate or government positions because he sensed their values were fundamentally at variance with his own. In a deep ecological sense, they did not recognize the intrinsic value of non-human living things. Walter said that if you pushed that argument far enough, it was a recipe for despair and could have no other outcome than civil war. Alex responded that you could oppose totally the values of certain other people yet continue to respect their status as living beings.

Howard said you had to judge the social impact of direct action in terms of the groups next to it, so to speak - next in sympathy to the activists. He himself had been very critical of the anti-vivisection direct action campaign which had begun in the 70s with rescuing animals from vivisection laboratories, escalated into burning the laboratories, and finally reached the point of actually threatening and attacking vivisectionists. This was an example of the kind of escalation which you had to avoid and which could happen all too easily if you started to rely on a cost-benefit analysis in judging the success of demonstrations. Nevertheless what had also happened parallel to that were things like the Body Shop (even if its credentials were now being called into question), and many other initiatives, so that now virtually every major store had its beauty-without-cruelty line of cosmetics. You'd had a real shift in the attitude towards vivisection and animal testing for cosmetic purposes. Moreover, the people who got into bombing the vivisectionists quickly became marginalised. Certainly direct action campaigns had to be looking at the area of common values, but they also had to have regard for the effect on people next to them.

Walter said he agreed with that in principle. The problem was what to do if there was in fact some conflict between these two aims. How far should you go in trying to win over the people next to you if this was at the cost of alienating the nation as a whole in a fundamental way? Unless there was a recognition that in some ultimate sense people as people were open to adapt their values in the light of the challenge that was being offered to them - that you were helping them to see in the way people learn to see in *King Lear* - then one was left with a movement whose logic would lead predictably to ecological cleansing.

Bob said Walter assumed the existence of a single system. In fact that wasn't the situation. You had EarthFirst doing one thing and their action had certain consequences. But you also had other people acting in different ways on the same issue. Thus on a lot of the ecological issues you did not have to worry, for the moment anyway, about EarthFirst having potentially the kind of impact on the whole system which Walter feared. Some of the others would be acting from within the values of the national community. What Walter was saying was potentially true, but in fact things were moving in the opposite direction. People were getting more worried about the car, and more inclined with a kind of liberal instinct to support the protesters.

### *Problems of strategy*

Bob said he had get the impression from Alex's talk that EarthFirst lacked a coherent strategy. It seemed they had a kind of scattergun approach. However, given the burn-out and the fact that our experience over many years suggested that only a small number of people would be prepared to dedicate themselves full time to this kind of action, it was important to try to find the areas that would be pivotal - as perhaps they had managed to do in the US with nuclear power.

Alex agreed there was a problem with EarthFirst's strategy. Some in the campaign hardly seemed to know the meaning of the word. There were some strategies, he thought, that EarthFirst was capable of adopting, others that were probably beyond their capability. He was not sure that they could pursue a strategy of identifying key issues and focussing on them. However, where its 'scatter-gun' approach revealed a weakness, EarthFirst was good at recognizing this and pouncing - for instance over Twyford Down which had helped to spark off anti-roads campaigns up and down the country. The main forum for developing a strategy had been the EarthFirst gatherings, but keeping them going on a regular basis was a struggle in itself. There had been some significant achievements in terms of working with the local community, and communicating with workers on the site. Thus the organisers of a blockade at a Liverpool dock when a shipload of tropical timber was coming in managed to persuade union leaders to promise that all the workers would down tools if there were activists on any of the machinery. That was wonderful because EarthFirst only had to get one person onto the machinery for the whole place to grind to a halt.

Bob said that it was hard to see how the direct action of organisations like EarthFirst related to their ultimate goals. Pacifists, he noted, faced a similar dilemma since their personal refusal to participate in war had no direct or obvious connection with the task of abolishing it. The direct action related to the ultimate goals only in some prophetic way. It was hard to see how their actions related to larger movements and forces in society that could really stop the things they were opposing.

#### *A prefigurative strategy*

Alex said the counter-culture and communities in resistance prefigured possible futures. This did not necessarily undermine one's ability to reach a wider audience, and might provide some reassurance since it indicated that the campaign did have some answers to the questions people raised about how you would feed yourself in this brave new world, and so forth. He thought it was important to live out your principles in your lifestyle and tended to mistrust people who had the idea of a great utopia but didn't believe in it enough to start living it in the present.

Walter said that in all the large projects that we might have in mind - whether concerned with war and peace, or social justice of various kinds, or ecological objectives - you were dealing with issues which could not be lived out in anything like a full sense until social change had come about. You were working towards some extremely long-term product, but you could not actually in the here and now live that future - except in some symbolic or prefigurative sense; it was what Christians meant by 'sacramental'. You were doing something in the present which did not in itself literally have the meaning that you gave to it; it related to an event which hadn't yet taken place. All we could be asked to do to the best of our ability was to try to live a life which was in this sense prefigurative, and indeed to try to anticipate the future that hadn't yet come about. It was a very odd undertaking. How were you going to live in the present as though the future had already arrived? There was a risk of creating a highly dangerous state of affairs through relying on a kind of 'anarchic Micawberism' - you engaged in direct action in the expectation that what was going to turn up would be the right thing out of the hundreds of thousands of possible things that could turn up. If you lit a fire in certain circumstances, you did not really know what would happen as a result, but you did have some responsibility to consider what it was that you were beginning. You had to justify the degree of social risk that attached to the activity you were engaging in with some proportionate and clearly defined social hope. It might never happen, but you must have some rational ground for thinking that

what you were doing in the here and now was likely to contribute to at least a certain direction of development.

Bob said that precisely this point could be made about the people who were building the roads. They too were engaging in 'anarchic Micawberism'; they were building roads right across the universe in the hope something would turn up. It was not in fact going to achieve anything. Walter said this was not anarchic though it might be damaging. Its minimal justification was that the choice had been arrived at by some communally agreed procedure. Howard said that the legitimacy of those procedures was one of the issues at stake - the secrecy surrounding decision-making, the lack of public consultation. Since the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, or the report of the Club of Rome, we had been getting all these warnings, and the response had been totally one of 'Micawberism'; something would turn up to solve the problems. Walter said we were talking here about different levels of procedure. He was talking about simple constitutional processes. There might be all kinds of objections either to the constitution itself or to the way in which the constitution was being worked in practice; and one would certainly be entitled to try to change that second level. But if one resorted too readily to a kind of anarchism in reformist activities one was throwing out totally the whole business of trying to control complex social decision-making by received procedures and substituting for them a purely ad-hoc process which no one could control.

Alex said that the fact they were able to adopt these prefigurative strategies - which he saw as necessary but not sufficient - had much to do with the particular programme they were trying to advance. It would not be possible to prefigure a society if they were talking about some global vision; it was the fact that they were talking about locally based institutions that made the prefigurative approach possible. It was also related to their belief in the congruence between means and ends - that if they could get the means right they were far more likely to get the ends right. But it had to do as well with a deep scepticism about the ability to reach common decisions, and adopt a programme on a scale beyond that of the town meeting. They did not believe that national planning could be carried out humanely because it was necessarily remote from the consequences of the decision, because it was so much subject to manipulation, and because an agenda had to be set and this in turn raised the question of who was to set it. The green movement in general, from its green anarchist forms to the more reformist wing of the Green Party, regarded the notion of national planning and cohesion as a dangerous myth. Walter said he would not want to deny the truth in much of what Alex had said. But we did not have a choice between living in the present society or in a Greek city-state. We were actually living in an overpopulated world in national communities of 50, 60, 70 million upwards, and to try to jump at one go back into a kind of Greek city-state was appallingly irrational.

Alex, responding, referred to the work of Radical Roots - a cooperative of cooperatives - with members in housing coops, worker coops and so forth. Individually members were pursuing radical prefigurative lifestyles. They were living simply, adopting the values they would foresee in their future societies, and performing socially useful tasks. However, Radical Roots also used all the techniques of building credibility and advertising their approach which any of the more established investment funds would use. So you had the radical prefigurative end with important points of contact with the existing system. That suggested all sorts of strategic possibilities for linking radical principled action with society as it existed.