

Unmasking the Animal Liberation Front Using Critical Pedagogy: Seeing the ALF for Who They Really Are¹

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We are a nonviolent guerilla organization, dedicated to the liberation of animals from all forms of cruelty and persecution at the hands of mankind.
—Ronnie Lee, ALF founder

Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough.
We have a higher mission—to be of service to them whenever they require it.
—St. Francis of Assisi

The current global political climate is steeped in fear and rhetoric about terrorism and security. The 21st century began with drastic shifts in U.S. policies in the name of national security, which has been used as a cover for the repression of nonviolent dissent and the violation of civil liberties. We have entered a neo-McCarthyist period rooted in witch-hunts against activists and critics of the ruling elites. The terms and players have changed, but the situation is much the same as in the 1950s: the terrorist threat usurps the communist threat, Attorney General John Ashcroft and Alberto Gonzalez donned the garb of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the Congressional Meetings on Eco-Terrorism stand in for the House Un-American Activities Committee (Best and Nocella 2004). Now as then, the government informs the public that the nation is in a permanent state of danger, such that security, not freedom, must become our overriding concern. As before, the state conjures up dangerous enemies everywhere, not only outside our country but, more menacingly, ensconced within our borders, lurking in radical cells. The alleged dangers posed by foreign terrorists are used to justify the attack on “domestic terrorists” within, and in a panic-stricken climate the domestic terrorist is any and every citizen expressing dissent. Within this environment, the Bush administration has unleashed an unprecedented surveillance machinery to monitor the communications of all Americans.²

Political Repression and Animal Liberationists

As corporations escalate their bloody and destructive assault on animals, biodiversity, and the Earth, so the FBI ratcheting up its attack on activists who defend the rights of nature. This is not a coincidence, but a strategic attempt to silence voices that speak truth to power, with the state doing the bidding of petroleum, gas, timber, dairy, cattle, and vivisection industries. What is beginning to unfold a mass political repressive environment whereby the state is targeting Earth and animal liberationists. Similar to the *Red Scare* of the 1950s, in which the U.S. government attacked communists, anarchists, and other political activists, there is currently a Green Scare, characterized by similar state tactics against those defending animals and the Earth from attack. History is repeating itself, such that one ideological scare is replaced by another, all ruses to protect capitalism from its critics and challengers.

It cannot be stressed enough that the Green Scare is being led not only by law enforcement agencies such as the FBI, but ultimately by corporations who are fearful of what these activists will convey to the public about their destruction and torture on the

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Earth and non-human animals. The Earth and animal liberationists are not going after people or the government, but rather they are going after the new super-power, the global capitalist market. They are conducting legal protests and illegal economic sabotage (the most dangerous but successful tactic against global giants such as Proctor & Gamble and ExxonMobil), engaging in tactics ranging from boycotting the GAP to breaking windows of McDonalds franchises. It is here that the FBI are mere street-line bureaucrats carrying out the job assigned to them by the U.S. Congress and their corporate paymasters.

As Congress is gathering up information on the Earth and Animal liberation movements to make their case to the public, other governmental agencies, and law enforcement in hearings, speeches, and press conferences, Earth and animal liberationists must counter-act and do the same. They must begin to undertake thorough research and critical analysis that examines the connections between corporations and Congress. They need to make those relationships as simple and clear as possible for the public, so when law enforcement agencies hunt down activists, people will not simply say that they are persecuting or framing activists, but also be able to grasp who are behind these acts of political repression and why.

Clearly, one of the most significant events of late and in the history of the animal liberation movement was the arrest and conviction of the SHAC7 (Best and Kahn 2004). In May 2004, police rounded up nonviolent activists Kevin Kjonaas, Lauren Gazzola, Jacob Conroy, Darius Fullmer, John McGee, Andrew Stepanian, and Joshua Harper. The government issued a five count federal indictment that charged each activist, and SHAC USA, the nonprofit 501 (c) 3 corporation, with violations of the 1992 Animal Enterprise Protection Act (changed in 2007 to the “Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act” [AETA]). That act was the first law explicitly designed to protect animal exploitation industries from animal rights protests. The AETA protects corporations that conduct business which tests on, kills for consumption (food or clothing), or uses for entertainment purposes nonhuman animals from public dissent.³

On March 2, 2006, the SHAC7 were found guilty of multiple federal felonies for advocating the closure of HLS. Today all are in prison.⁴ Many corporate industry hacks hope that convictions under the AETA will clear the way for the government to go after any activist that successfully campaigns against big business, regardless of the legality of their tactics. It is here again why we should focus on the relationship between corporations and Congress and not government and law enforcement. The Earth and animal liberation community must see and publicize the pivotal critique to capitalism that the SHAC7 and the Earth and animal liberation movements are addressing, it is not about turning people vegan or protecting the Redwoods as much as it is about conducting legal and illegal economic sabotage against animal and Earth exploiters and capitalism in general.

Where in the 1960s and 1970s, the FBI hunted down radical social groups such as the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, and anti-war activists (Abu-Jamal 2000; Churchill and Wall 2002a; Churchill and Wall 2002b; Churchill 2003; Jones 1998a; and Jones 1998b; Peltier 1999; Shakur 1987), in the last decade or so they have begun targeting the animal liberation and environmental movements, particularly anyone supportive or suspected of involvement in the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) (Best and Nocella 2004; Best and Nocella 2006), which the state has termed the top “domestic terrorist” threats.⁵

The ALF is an effective, decentralized, autonomous network that in its actions provide a clear and compelling critique of corporate capitalist society. The ALF is any individual or group in any area of the world who at any time decide to strike against animal

exploitation in the name of animal rights while following ALF Guidelines.⁶ Given the decentralized and anonymous nature of ALF actions, the ALF in principle is not about authority, ego, heroism, machismo, or martyrdom; rather, it is about overcoming hierarchy, patriarchy, passivity, and politics as usual so that creative individuals can dedicate themselves unselfishly to the cause of animal liberation. The structure and philosophy of the ALF thereby has some key affinities with anarchism and radical feminism.⁷

It cannot be denied that ALF actions have caused millions of dollars of damage in economic sabotage, and thus, the group represents a threat. A threat to what? A threat to business as usual, where people of color and the poor, non-human animals, and the non-domesticated world are exploited for the mighty dollar. The ALF represents no direct or overt threat to the U.S. government or to people, like the many right-wing groups that have virtually disappeared from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) terror lists, despite their violent philosophies and tactics. Rather, ALF actions threaten corporate abusers of the land, water, air, and animals. Every time they act, the lies and inequities contained within our current system of economic governance are laid bare.

If one is looking for groups with which to compare the ALF, the proper choice is not Al Qaeda, but rather the Jewish anti-Nazi resistance movement and the Underground Railroad. The men and women of the ALF pattern themselves after the freedom fighters in Nazi Germany who liberated war prisoners and Holocaust victims and destroyed equipment—such as weapons, railways, and gas ovens—that the Nazis used to torture and kill their victims. Similarly, by providing veterinary care and homes for many of the animals they liberate, the ALF models itself after the U.S. Underground Railroad movement, which helped fugitive slaves reach free states and Canada. Whereas corporate society, the state, and mass media brand the ALF as terrorists, the ALF has important similarities with some of the great freedom fighters of the past two centuries, and is akin to contemporary peace and justice movements in its quest to end bloodshed and violence toward life and to win justice for other species.

A False Perception

For too long opponents of illegal political property destruction tend to uncritically define sabotage as violence and reject it as inherently wrong on this ground.⁸ Their argument assumes the form of a classic syllogism: (i) property destruction is violence, (ii) violence is always wrong, (iii) therefore, property destruction is wrong. These critics rarely define what they mean by “violence,” they dogmatically cling to the pacifist positions of Gandhi and King, and they make unqualified universal judgments that violence is always wrong and never works politically to achieve the goals of liberation.

Advocates of the principled critique believe that illegal actions and “violence” are unnecessary for a cause strong enough to prevail on the logical arguments supporting it. Peter Singer, for example, affirms “animal liberation” as a just cause, so long as it remains “nonviolent.” Violence can only beget more violence, he argues, recommending that animal liberationists emulate Gandhi and King in their goal to divest themselves of hatred, anger, and the will to revenge. Singer thinks that direct action is most effective when it brings results other tactics cannot, and uncovers evidence of extreme animal abuse that awakens public understanding about the plight of animals. As an example of a just and effective raid, he points to the ALF break-in at the University of Pennsylvania head injury research laboratory, which exposed a truth never meant to be seen by the public. Singer argues that to stop or reduce animal suffering “we must change the minds of reasonable people in our society. . . . The strength of the case for Animal Liberation is its ethical commitment; we

occupy the high moral ground and to abandon it is to play into the hands of those who oppose us. . . . The wrongs we inflict on other species are . . . [undeniable] once they are seen plainly; and it is in the rightness of our cause, and not the fear of our bombs, that our prospects of victory lie.”¹⁰

In Defense of the Animal Liberation Front

While Singer and many others appeal to the “minds of reasonable people,” the ALF believes that far too many are unreasonable and closed-minded, rendering the force of reason and moral persuasion insufficient. Industries and the state have strong institutional and monetary biases against justice for animals that no amount of debate or education is likely to change. Those who champion education and legislation as the sole tools of struggle project a rationalist belief that discounts the irrational forces often ruling the human psyche, the sadistic pleasure all too many derive from torture and killing, the deep psychological mechanisms human beings use to resist change and unpleasant realities, the mechanisms of detachment and compartmentalization that allow them to ignore the enormity of animal suffering, the vested interests they have in exploiting animals, and their identities as members of a species they believe is the preordained master of the Earth.

Unavoidably, animal liberationists are caught in a war of publicity and propaganda, and they must defeat the mendacity of the state and animal exploitation industries to fight for the hearts and minds of the people. While public opinion may indeed be secondary to the impact direct action can have on an industry, and potential negative media coverage should not deter activists from sabotage operations, it is a tactical mistake to act as if public thinking were irrelevant.¹¹ If negative images of ALF actions prevail, industries will win support, liberationists will lose sympathy, and few will protest when the state pounces on the ALF with fierce repression.

Unfortunately, many people believe that the ALF is a violent organization that grew out of anger and hate. In order to understand the ALF, one must sidestep this and other stereotypes, generalizations, and preconceived mindsets that for the most part have been developed and re-enforced by mass media, capitalist ideologues, and legal authorities. Through a more open and informed approach, one will find that the ALF grew out of love for all life, a perspective strongly supported by the “ALF Guidelines,” which state that it is crucial “...to take all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human.”¹² The misconception that the ALF is a “violent” group can be avoided by understanding the group’s origins and the reasons and motivations for their actions. I suggest a process the public can use to better understand the ALF and their actions.

Learning to Understand the Animal Liberation Front

To truly understand those labeled as “terrorists,” we must go beyond this fear and rhetoric of the “War on Terrorism” (which is nothing more than a war on ideas which resist oppression in all forms and global capitalism) propagated by the Bush and Blair administrations and seek a true understanding of these groups labeled as terrorists, in this case the ALF. We must seek to understand their goals and agendas, and to find out how to relate and engage in their struggle for liberation, which the powers that be fear and wish to destroy. The complex issue of terrorism in the 21st century calls for complementary approaches of analysis and transformation, therefore we must seek an optic that can unmask not only the ALF (to show its true motivations), but also dethrone and stand down the multi-billion dollar propaganda machine of the “War on Terrorism.” This method stresses Jacques Derrida’s point that language is a field of social control and to deconstruct it one

must understand the relation terms have to each other, for nothing exists separate and on its own. Derrida stresses the complexity and interconnectedness of this so-called “War on Terrorism” as being not a binary (of Good vs. Evil), but a multinary, - a plethora of perspectives that must be examined from a diversity of vantage points, for each position or lens will show and discover something new and important (Derrida 2001).

What better approach to fight and unveil the complex and interwoven lies of the global capitalist machine than one that fights for the oppressed, adopts a critical methodology, and promotes education as a non-violent form of radical social change. *Critical pedagogy* is a radical education method and process for liberation. (Freire 1997; Kanpol 1999; Kincheloe 2004; Lather, 2001; McLaren 2006). Critical pedagogy owes much to the founder of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, an internationally renowned educator who bridged the gap between revolutionary politics and the process/system education.

In examining Freire’s seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1997), one can understand the importance of striving for an engaging educational experience in the classroom or even learning about the revolutionary/liberation groups, societies, and collectives. Critical pedagogy seeks ways for the “teacher” to step out of an authoritarian position, while holding onto a leadership role as a facilitator and facilitate a process of engaging social ideology and experience. This approach demands one to be critical of history, social organization, authority, mass media, advertising, and so on (Bigelow, 1990a, 1999b; Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1988; Giroux 1997; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Irwin, 1991; Kanpol, 1999; Kincheloe, 2004; Loewen, 1995; Parenti 1993; Shor, 1992; Zinn 1999; Zinn & Arnove 2004).

Furthermore, critical pedagogues stress the active and concrete rather than detached and abstract engagement of history, in order to understand the social construction of power and experience. Critical pedagogy is not merely about researching social problems, but also engaging them and fighting for social justice; therefore stepping out of the safety of the classroom (or ivory tower) with one’s students and into the streets (Gramsci 1989).

To understand radical groups like the ALF, it is best to engage in a critical pedagogy approach that breaks down the rigid barrier of “objectivity.” “Critical pedagogy’ is that form of education which emerges from critical compassion; a transcendence of the emotional and the intellectual; the heart and mind learn to see and know in new ways.”¹³ In examining Freire’s book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one will find that educating is not just a technique one applies to achieve certain results. Critical pedagogy involves the dissolution of formal boundaries between teacher and students and requires a relationship of sharing and dialogue. The formal roles of the “teacher” and “student” relationship are the “syllabus of experience.”

The ALF are unique in that they are decentralized and made up of disparate cells with their own organizational structure, ideologies, and socio-political positions. They have only one thing in common: their guidelines and goal to liberate animals. In understanding the ALF one must know that they do not act solely on emotions, but engage in critical thought to find the best step to achieve liberation; one sees, moreover, that they are motivated by an acute sense of justice that, in principle at least, informs Western “democracies.” To understand the ALF is to grasp their history, culture, and mission. When one understands not only his/her own position, but also the position of the ALF member, one will truly be able to understand the motivations and reasoning of why the ALF exists. This approach does not necessarily suggest that the actions of the ALF are right, but rather that if the person uses a critical pedagogy approach he/she is more likely to understand the ALF member’s perspective.

In addition, it is not enough to physically experience the “subject,” it also is important to have one’s mind and spirit involved in the experience. bell hooks notes that Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh approaches this kind of pedagogy by emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit (1994). An infiltrator of the ALF might be in a cell for a number of years and feel that he or she understands the ALF, but the essence of critical pedagogy is what Hanh explains as the necessity of the union of the mind, body, and soul, which all have to be engaged in the experience of understanding. One can begin to understand and appreciate ALF actions either through an intellectual understanding of justice, an emotional understanding of animals’ suffering, or a spiritual understanding of the unity of all life. When all of these powers are engaged, critical pedagogy becomes possible.

Freire seems to suggest that critical pedagogy leads to the educator’s or researcher’s own liberation (Freire 1997; Freire and Macedo 1998; McLaren 2000; and McLaren 2006) through an experiential form of education that strives for enlightenment, or what Gandhi might refer to as the state of seeking truth. Gandhi believes that the search for truth is the ideal purpose of life. He explains that the struggle to free India was in fact a search for truth on a mass level, and he suggests that it is only possible to be in a state of truth if one is willing to give up one’s own freedom to stand up to an unjust act or law, or to save or free another being. Such people as St. Francis of Assisi, Henry David Thoreau, and Martin Luther King Jr. would also favor this perspective. Dr. King stated it best: “I became convinced that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good” (2001).

When the oppressed animals—to whom the ALF member is connected in a holistic and emotional manner—are freed, then part of the body and spirit of the ALF member is freed as well. For example, after a liberation by an ALF cell, not only do the animals experience freedom, the ALF members also experience emancipation—*from* fear, alienation, and perhaps guilt (over not doing enough), and *for* spiritual development. That is why it is common for a member of the ALF to cry with happiness after liberating an animal. The liberated animals and the ALF member all achieve a piece of the truth of wholeness and union.

The essence of performing an act in the name of the ALF is that love must be present in one’s heart. This love allows one to act with respect for all life (even those who exploit animals) and to use one’s intellect to its fullest potential. Have acts been committed in the name of the ALF by people in a negative or hostile state? Yes. Should activists in the wrong frame of mind be questioned by animal liberation and rights advocates? Yes. How would one prevent such acts? One should never let go of the true meaning of the ALF, which is to respect all life (the fundamental principle of the animal rights movement as a whole), to the extent that one feels oppressed due to another’s oppression. While many say that activists should use their anger and hate toward the enemy, I say it is better to emulate individuals like Jesus, Gandhi, Cesar Chavez or other great peacemakers, and redirect anger and hatred into a state of love.

But one should never confuse nonviolence with weakness. King and Gandhi, though promoters of nonviolence (King 2001; Gandhi 1993), did not favor cowardice or walking away from conflict. The ALF acts with strength and daring, yet stops at violence, because it acts from love. One should not be confused by the propaganda of media or law enforcement; the ALF promotes nonviolence and freedom for all. Their actions are revolutionary and sometimes “extreme” in resorting to property destruction and breaking the law. But to the right-thinking person these acts should pale in comparison to the truly extreme actions that involve injuring and taking life and profiting from killing and death—as

manifest in the routine actions of animal exploitation industries such as vivisection laboratories, zoos, circuses, factory farms, and slaughterhouses. It is only when all people understand that love will create love, and hate will only create hate, that all will be liberated. As the Quakers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, and the ALF believe, love will light the path to liberation (West 1992; King 2001; Gandhi 1993).

Motivated by Love and Acting Nonviolently

Resolved not to harm living beings, motivated by love, empathy, compassion, and justice, animal liberationists are the antithesis of the “terrorists” that government, industries, and mass media ideologues impugn them to be. They are not violent aggressors against life, they are defenders of freedom and justice for any enslaved species. They uphold rights not covered by law, knowing that the legal structure is defined by and for human supremacists. The goal of the ALF is not simply to liberate individual animals here and there; it is to free all animals from every form of slavery that binds them to human oppressors. The ALF, like the animal rights movement as a whole, is attacking the entire institutional framework of animal exploitation along with the domineering values, mindset, identities, and worldviews of the human species.

Thus, if one wants to understand the ALF, one must transcend the false rhetoric of “terrorism” and approach the real purpose of its struggle—animal liberation—through the method of critical pedagogy (Freire 1985). One can thereby strive to understand the liberators’ motivations as rooted in a concern for the suffering of nonhuman animals and for peace. For when you engage in understanding the ALF, you will understand the need for the liberation of all life.

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¹ Parts of this article have been taken from the Introduction of *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters? Reflections on the Liberation of Animals* (2004) co-edited by Anthony J. Nocella, II and Steven Best.

² <http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/12/17/bush.nsa/>, February 15, 2006.

³ <http://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/legislat/pl102346.htm>, February 15, 2006.

⁴ See www.shac7.com for more details.

⁵ http://judiciary.senate.gov/testimony.cfm?id=1196&wit_id=3460, April 10, 2006.

⁶ *Animal Liberation Front Guidelines* (reprinted from *The ALF Primer*)

- To liberate animals from places of abuse, i.e., laboratories, factory farms, fur farms, etc., and place them in good homes where they may live out their natural lives, free from suffering.

- To inflict economic damage to those who profit from the misery and exploitation of animals.

- To reveal the horror and atrocities committed against animals behind locked doors, by performing nonviolent direct actions and liberations.

- To take all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human.

- Any group of people who are vegetarians or vegans and who carry out actions according to ALF guidelines have the right to regard themselves as part of the ALF.

⁷ See patrice jones, 'Mothers with Monkeywrenches: Feminist Imperatives and the ALF', in *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters? Reflections on the Liberation of Animals* (Nocella and Best 2004).

⁸ <http://animalliberationfront.com/Philosophy/BringItToTheTable.htm>, February 16, 2007.

⁹ See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

¹⁰ *Animal Liberation*, pp. xii–xiii. Singer, of course, is a utilitarian, and so his main line of reasoning against ALF tactics logically would be that they could have negative consequences for the movement; thus he might push the pragmatic objection.

¹¹ “Our aim is to destroy property and force laboratories to close—publicity is neither here nor there.” Interview with a former ALF activist in “Terrorists or Altruists?” *New Internationalist*, Issue 215, January 1991.

¹² See *The ALF Primer*, www.animalliberation.net.

¹³ Ledwith, M. (2001). *Community work as critical pedagogy: Re-envisioning Freire and Gramsci*. *Community Development Journal*, 36(3), p. 181.