

Thomas Zeitzoff

No Option But Sabotage: The Radical Environmental Movement and the Climate Crisis

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Why did clandestine sabotage recede in the United States just as climate change became more visible, destructive and politically urgent? This paradox drives Thomas Zeitzoff's *No Option But Sabotage*. Rather than treating radicalisation as an automatic response to environmental grievance, Zeitzoff argues that tactics emerge through subcultures, recruitment networks, repression and changing activist pathways. The book offers an accessible and empirically substantial history of American radical environmentalism from 1980 to 2025. It also bridges environmental history with research on protest, repression and political violence. That bridge is timely because scholarship treats protest outcomes as contingent and multidimensional. The primary contribution of this work is to contextualise sabotage as a socially learned and institutionally constrained repertoire.

The book contains nine chapters and a methods appendix, grouped around three rough eras. Chapter 1 establishes the book's conceptual and methodological foundations. Chapters 2–4 reconstruct Earth First!, its ideological divisions, punk and animal-liberation networks and the rise of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). Chapter 5 examines the Green Scare and Operation Backfire as the hinge between tactical escalation and decline. Chapters 6–8 follow climate justice, pipeline resistance, right-wing environmental currents and contemporary disruption. Chapter 9 concludes the book by outlining four contingent trajectories for radical environmentalism. More than 110 interviews, 1,331 publicly known direct actions and three surveys connect chronology, experience and public judgements about tactics.

In the opening chapter, Zeitzoff understands radical environmentalism through the language of direct action: not ordinary advocacy, but a willingness to put bodies, liberty and sometimes property at risk. One activist describes direct action as 'taking matters into our own hands' (p. 13), a phrase that captures the book's central concern with agency outside conventional politics. The chapter also introduces the event database covering direct actions in the United States between 1995 and 2022, which provides the empirical foundation for the book's account of tactical change.

Chapters 2–4 are especially effective as an intellectual history of radical environmentalism. Earth First! emerged from disillusionment with mainstream conservation and adopted 'No compromise in defense of Mother Earth!' (p. 23). Yet its ecocentric defence of wilderness never became a settled ideology. Disputes over population, immigration, labour, anarchism and hierarchy divided deep ecologists from social ecologists. Punk and animal-liberation networks later carried veganism, anti-capitalism and total liberation

into the movement. By Chapter 6, climate justice connected carbon reduction to Indigenous solidarity and land struggles, racial inequality and capitalism. The three periods work best as dominant tendencies, since forest defence, animal liberation and clandestine sabotage continued across their boundaries. This periodisation clarifies ideological change without reducing later activism to either decline or fulfilment.

The book's most original contribution is that subculture becomes historical infrastructure (Chapters 3 and 4). Zeitzoff argues that 'subcultures and recruitment networks are crucial' (p. 21). Music venues, zines, bookstores, forest camps and friendship networks generated trust, transmitted skills and established moral boundaries around risk. Direct action meant 'taking matters into our own hands' (p. 13), but its meaning depended on each activist's social world. Early Earth First! members disabled machinery, while ELF cells used arson to cause economic damage. Contemporary climate activists often employ blockades, occupations and staged disruption. The emphasis on infrastructure also clarifies why moral urgency alone cannot sustain escalation. Whereas Fisher and Nasrin (2021) map the targets and effects of climate activism, Zeitzoff asks how grievances are translated into particular tactical repertoires over time. His analysis redirects attention from isolated protest events to the movement ecologies that make particular tactics imaginable.

Chapter 5 offers the book's most compelling explanation of tactical decline. Operation Backfire and the broader Green Scare did more than remove individual activists. Repression corroded the trust on which leaderless organising depended through informants, grand juries, surveillance, terrorism enhancements and long sentences. The result was both organisational collapse and an intergenerational memory of risk. Security culture helped activists survive, but the habits of secrecy it encouraged could also deepen suspicion, isolate participants and weaken already fragile organisations. The most powerful revelation in the chapter is the idea that damaged relationships, as opposed to the number of arrests, form the long-term dynamic of repression. Zeitzoff convincingly shows that the decline of ELF-style action cannot be reduced to a strategic or ethical conversion to nonviolence.

Chapters 6 and 8 resist simple verdicts on contemporary disruption. Zeitzoff neither assumes that nonviolent protest always succeeds nor argues that property damage necessarily alienates every audience. Surveys reveal a hierarchy of legitimacy, with civil disobedience receiving much greater support than arson or destructive attacks on infrastructure. Recent research supports this conditional approach. Nylund, Thai and Hornsey (2025) identify a dilemma: although extreme tactics diminished support for the group, they increased public concern about climate change and intentions to act. Ostarek et al. (2024) find positive spillover effects from radical protests to more moderate organisations. Berglund, Davis and Finnerty (2026) find little evidence that Just Stop Oil weakened support for net-zero policy. Taken together, these studies complicate the familiar activist's dilemma. Public dislike, agenda salience, policy

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support and spillover effects can move in different directions. Zeitzoff's history explains why no tactic carries a fixed political effect. However, his small and demographically narrow activist survey cannot support broad claims about the movement as a whole.

Chapter 7 broadens the argument by tracing environmental vocabularies across the political right. Its account of ecofascism connects racist conservation, population anxiety and contemporary violence. The discussion of raw-milk networks then follows ideas of purity, self-sufficiency, resistance to government oversight and distrust of expertise. Nature does not appear as an intrinsically progressive political category, instead, environmental language can sustain sharply different projects of authority, community and exclusion. The chapter strengthens current debates about right-wing appropriations of environmental concern. It also invites environmental historians to track how concepts migrate across political communities, rather than assigning them fixed ideological homes.

The book exhibits exceptional sensitivity in tracing the genealogical evolution of radical ideologies. Zeitzoff shows how subcultural networks, shared spaces and activist communities shaped political identities, transmitted tactical knowledge and established norms of commitment and risk. Such cross-disciplinary perspective moves beyond the narrow focus often seen in environmental history, providing robust empirical and historical reasoning for understanding why many contemporary youth climate activists connect ecological crises with broader liberation struggles, such as Black Lives Matter or Palestinian solidarity. This offers a vivid account of how oppositional ideas and activist identities are forming in underground networks, zines and music scenes and how they migrate to broader political mobilisation for policy makers and organisers seeking to make sense of the diverse worlds of contemporary climate activism.

The emphasis on the United States is not only warranted but yields good results, for Zeitzoff is able to re-create the Pacific Northwest tableau and the growth of the ELF and the impact of post-9/11 repression with a fair amount of detail. However, this national frame also narrows the book's reach. It would have been helpful for the reader to see to what extent the lessons learned in this case extend beyond the U.S. by comparing it to other European and nations, such as Germany, Britain and France, as well as Indigenous land defence in the Global South. Another limitation concerns environmental history itself. Zeitzoff historicises activists, organisations and tactics within their historical context, but not the environment with the same consistency. While forests, rivers, pipelines, animals and fires continue to be significant to the conflicts Zeitzoff illustrates, their ecological histories are sometimes overshadowed by the more compelling story of activist mobilisation. The gap matters for the book's future-oriented argument, since climate change is a material process. Landscapes do not simply provide a passive backdrop to protest: ecological change determines when activists mobilise, which issue they look at, and how they convey urgency. Greater attention to forest management, watershed

transformation, species relations and changing fire regimes would connect material change more directly to grievance and strategy.

There is a very solid – although not uniform and complete – evidentiary base. It's hard to verify clandestine actions and news coverage is skewed towards more spectacular violence and only a small number of people are granted access to interviews through trusted introductions. Zeitzoff acknowledges the likelihood of 'systematic undercounts' (p. 189), classifies actions by tactical intensity and standardises annual totals. While such deliberate processes result in more uniformity, they will not compensate for actions that did not leave any public record or make a month-long tree-sit equal to an arson attack. Not interviewing or directly asking about illegal acts is ethically sound but makes it difficult to verify exact quotations and to triangulate some retrospective accounts. But the diversity of sources is a great strength of the book in the face of these unavoidable limitations. It is therefore best seen as a story of what can be seen and recovered, not of all that happened, in the case of the decline of sabotage.

Chapter 9 presents 'Situation Normal: Status Quo', 'Deescalation and Demobilization', 'Escalation and Radicalization' and 'Pro-Democracy Fusion' as four possible futures. Zeitzoff cautions, 'I am not going to make a hard prediction' (p. 177). This restraint is one of the book's strengths. Rather than assuming that ecological crisis naturally produces militancy, Zeitzoff shows how urgency is channelled into collective action through networks, resources, political openings and memories of repression. *No Option But Sabotage* is lucid, humane and analytically ambitious. The book would be valuable to environmental historians, political scientists, sociologists of social movements, teachers of climate politics and graduate students seeking a model of field-work-based, publicly readable scholarship.

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