

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**David Naguib Pellow**, *Total Liberation: The Power and Promise of Animal Rights and the Radical Earth Movement*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780816687763 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816687770 (paper)

David Pellow's research on radical environmental and animal right movements in the United States commenced in 2008; by early 2010 it had already come to the attention to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. A business card was found in his university mailbox, and was followed by a phone call. The stated reason for the FBI's inquiry was that one of Pellow's advisees and research assistants was under investigation for being part of the radical animal rights and environmental movements and hence, by extension, so was the research that would form the basis of *Total Liberation: The Power and Promise of Animal Rights and the Radical Earth Movement*. Rather than responding to the FBI's call, Pellow telephoned a lawyer and then local activists. On 18 June 2010, the Department of Justice requested his research files, interview questions, list of participants, and the names of students employed on the project. The university complied in part but kept the research assistants' names private. Pellow's argument for not cooperating with the FBI or DoJ is as follows:

Aside from the clear historical documented evidence that the FBI has done its best to destroy nearly every freedom movement that I have ever researched, taught about, and supported, the real issues here are ensuring the protection of our study participants—particularly those who requested anonymity (a small percentage of my sample), ensuring our ability to do future research and grant participants the

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right to confidentiality, and standing up for the integrity and future of the social sciences. (p.xx)

During a period when university tenure is at risk in Wisconsin and the Steven Salaita affair still haunts newly minted academics (the University of Illinois, in response to his pro-Palestinian tweets, withdrew Salaita's offer of employment), those who do critical work and/or consider themselves radical should be quite concerned by these threats to intellectual freedom. As an endowed chair of sociology at the University of Minnesota, Pellow retained his position. Would early-career scholars or graduate students have the same resolve? Would tenured faculty risk funding or prestige? Whatever the answers, the FBI's role in disrupting and repressing social movements is possibly of greater importance to the future of radical intellectual production and politics.

Herein the insights offered in Pellow's *Total Liberation* are coupled with a necessary inquiry into how academics ought to document and participate in contemporary radical movements. Before addressing these movements or the text itself, a bit of context is required.

While the Earth Liberation Front, a British import, announced itself in 1996 by gluing locks at a gas station in Eugene, Oregon, and its sister organization, the Animal Liberation Front, predates it by 17 years, *Total Liberation* documents the wave of militant direct action by underground groups that followed the Seattle WTO protests of November 1999. In the late 1990s and early 2000s radical environmentalists, animal liberationists, and the "new anarchists" simultaneously developed above- and underground groupings. The militancy and magnitude of the Seattle protests, along with the ELF and ALF, surprised the state. Hence the US government has indicted, arrested, and

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imprisoned radical environmentalists and animal liberationists since the early 2000s in what is commonly referred to as the “Green Scare” (Potter 2011). Though the DoJ and FBI have deemed these radicals “ecoterrorists”, thus far little scholarly attention has been given to the country’s “number one domestic terrorist threat” (Committee on Environment and Public Works 2005).

*Total Liberation* is the product of a hundred interviews, content analysis, fieldwork, and informal conversations with members of the animal liberation and radical environmental movements. Consisting of six short chapters, the book begins with the pre-history of Earth First!, the ALF and ELF, Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty, and similar organizations. The first chapter notes that sectors of the anti-slavery movement, feminists, and those concerned with the rights of children often included animal welfarists and environmentalists. According to Pellow, the “concept of total liberation stems from determination to understand and combat all forms of inequality and oppression. I propose that it comprises four pillars: (1) an ethic of justice and anti-oppression inclusive of humans, nonhuman animals, and ecosystems; (2) anarchism; (3) anti-capitalism; and (4) an embrace of direct action tactics” (p.5-6). To conclude the volume, he dedicates two chapters to the Green Scare. In effect, this is the first substantive academic treatment of the subject and he sets a high standard: protect research subjects, examine state repression of liberation movements, resist repression, and support movements.

*Total Liberation* draws its analysis from the interconnectedness of forms of oppression and illustrates the adherents’ desire to go beyond single-issue campaigns, non-profits and NGOs, and the “loyal opposition” of the American Left. These are “radical movements that reject structured, bureaucratic approaches to target what they believe to

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be the roots of the problem” (p.31). Hence the movement’s veganism and animal liberation agenda, anarchism, direct action, illegalism, attentiveness to oppression (of human and non-human beings), and concepts of anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and anti-statism. This seemingly broad and jumbled combination of concepts and positions is seen as a singular expression of “liberation” in the minds of its devotees. Pellow is not completely celebratory as he notes the dangers of the “non-human nature first” argument, the possibility of creeping xenophobia and white / gender / heteronormative privilege, or viewing total liberation as the “ultimate liberation struggle”.

Pellow utilizes his own concepts in addition to movement-generated theory to examine these complex genealogies and dynamics. He views socioecological inequality, for instance, as “the ways in which humans, nonhumans, and ecosystems intersect to produce hierarchies—privileges and disadvantages—within and across species and space that ultimately place each at great risk” (p.7). This account builds on recognizable concepts such as environmental justice and political ecology and moves toward illustrating how these hierarchies are intersectional and mutually reinforce one another. In the latter chapters on the Green Scare, Pellow describes four attributes of repression: (1) ecologies; (2) a general culture; and (3) the science *of repression*; in addition to (4) cultures *of resistance*. The first refers to the ecosystems and relationships affected beyond the primary targets of repression; second, the concepts and languages used to undermine public support for targets; third, in addition to force, the knowledge and surveillance needed for repression; and the self-understanding and notions utilized by activists to resist repression.

*Total Liberation* offers much to scholars in general and radical geographers in particular. Underground direct action and the Green Scare are noticeably absent in

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current academic discourse as they require access rarely available to researchers outside of these movements. I suggest that contemporary radical movements in the US should be conceptualized as functioning both overtly and clandestinely. Thus far the academic literature in Sociology, Political Science, and Geography only explores repression at or around the site of protest and hence is remiss in documenting this most recent period of repression and these underground networks. Scholars who limit their research parameters to examining the contentious relations between state forces and activists over the use of public space miss the bulk of activity, which takes place outside of, alongside, or in addition to public actions. Rather, a multiscalar and situated approach to examining mobilization and repression, one that centers the Green Scare and related disruptions, provides the possibility of a scholarly and organized response to the attempt to identify, stagnate, fragment, and prevent challenges to neoliberalism, resource extraction, and current environmental policy.

Since the Green Scare is a recent, if not ongoing, period of repression it is necessary to raise the problem of confidential and identifiable information as part of the protection of research subjects and the movements of which they are part. Considering the deficiency in the academic scholarship this is a necessary aside. While *Total Liberation* sets a standard by which future research can be judged, questions remain: How do scholars produce work that allows insurgents and social movement participants to appear intelligible to themselves and each other while remaining illegible to the state? It is implied in *Total Liberation*, and I want to draw out this implication toward a research principle: the level of risk, anonymity, participation in research, and disclosure of details needs to be determined by those directly facing repression or the possibility of repression. Further, the balance between political content and scholarly objectivity,

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supporting movements and criticizing them will have to be weighed *in situ*. By co-producing research and utilizing feedback mechanisms, research subjects along with the movements they are part of can be protected. These concerns—surrounding confidentiality and the possibility of the state utilizing academic research toward repressive ends—will need to guide fieldwork and the production of future scholarship on these movements.

The questions that radical geographers are left with are obvious: What *actual* role do we have to play in contemporary radical movements? What *risks* to our own careers and liberties are we willing to take? In the words of a former ELF prisoner, “why are we being so gentle?”

### References

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*Kevin Van Meter*<sup>1</sup>

*Department of Geography, Environment and Society*

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a participant in the Team Colors Collective: <http://warmachines.info/>

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*University of Minnesota*

*vanme016@umn.edu*

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