

ANARCHO-ENVIRONMENTALISTS: ASCETICS OF LATE MODERNITY

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I will be working full-time away from the University from the 5th of November to 25th of December. However, I will still check the above email address and will be contactable on my home phone number.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores experiences of environmental activism from the viewpoint of members of a radical environment group. It is based on data collected during eight months of participant observation and through semi-structured interviews with ten core members and two ex-members. Working on personal feelings, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (self work) was central to the strategy for social change employed by this group. Drawing on Weber's sociology of religion, this paper explores the way the high expectation the activists had of themselves matched Weber's typification of the rationally active ascetic. It is argued that asceticism is an enduring element of Western culture that takes different forms in response to historical conditions. In this case, we see a form of secular asceticism that responds to the conditions of late modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

This research article grew out of my own experiences in the environment movement. As a teenager and through my early twenties, I was involved in the environmentalist subculture in my hometown, attending and organising rallies, blockades and other 'actions', living in communal share houses and conscientiously applying my political beliefs to every aspect of daily life. Almost ten years after my first engagement with the environment movement, I had acquired sociological training and set about trying to understand my own experiences as part of this subculture. The existing social movement literature didn't get at what I was really interested in - the lived experience of movement participation. Whilst the European strain of social movement theory looks at identity, culture and values, there were few studies that examined the way that movement participants articulated, negotiated and lived alternative identities and attempted to build an alternative culture around, in this case, valuing the natural environment (exceptions are Benford 1993, Groves 1995 and Licterman 1995). In this paper I have sought to illustrate the experiences of members of an anarcho-environmentalist¹ group as they grappled with the difficulties of living up to their ideals both within their organisation and in everyday life. I have attempted to explain their commitment to personal change through Weber's (1968) sociology of religion, in particular, his work on rationally active ascetics. Though the members of the group are an extreme case, they illustrate the way that global concerns can be incorporated into the lifeworlds of people who are far removed from many of the consequences of environmental destruction. They also illustrate the way that in late modernity/post industrial society, what it means to be a person is no longer a given, and decisions about identity must be made. The

indeterminacy of what Beck (1992) terms reflexive modernisation leads some individuals to orient their lifestyles around a critique of techno-economic progress. This paper documents the way members of a group approached this reflexivity and used it as a tool to help them achieve their aims of bringing about a more ecologically sustainable society.

All environmentalists question the proper relationship between humanity and the natural environment (Eckersley 1992: 20). The way this question is answered distributes people and organisations along the spectrum of environmental politics, from the reform of state institutions associated with conservationist's demands to anarcho-environmentalists demand for a stateless society that exists in harmony with the natural environment. Those who reject the statism of reformist groups turn their focus to a more personal realm, such as the development of an "environmentally friendly" lifestyle. Berking (1996) refers to this process as the 'politicization of the private'. This lifestyle addresses issues once taken care of by tradition: it connects individual action with a moral framework and gives meaning to human existence (Giddens 1991:204).

Globalisation processes and the successes of the Green movement has lead to an increase in the awareness of global problems in the general population in the industrialised West (Beck, 1992). Some people respond to this awareness by developing a sense of extended solidarity with, and a sense of moral obligation to, for example, people of the Third World or other species. This sense of morality is what Giddens (1991: 202-8) terms the return of the repressed. He argues that in modernity, aspects of life that raise existential questions, such as death, madness, sexuality or religious experiences are hidden from view. By reinvigorating a sense of identity and building a lifestyle around concerns of the environment, morality can be reincorporated into the

lifeworld. Giddens calls “life politics” any political platform that demands a return of morality to everyday life. The agenda of life politics centres on questions of how we should live our lives, and calls for a remoralising of social life.

New Social Movement theorists, including Giddens, argue that the link between personal and political action is a characteristic of late modernity. However, Calhoun (1995) clearly articulates how features of ‘new social movements’ such as the politicization of everyday life, the importance of identity, autonomy and self-realisation, the use of unconventional means, and the importance of self-exemplification were also part of nineteenth century movements, that is, in ‘early modernity’. Weber’s sociology of religion shows that a revolutionary desire to transform the world through the rigorous application of virtue has its roots in asceticism, which according to Harpham (1987) is universal to all cultures. Foucault’s work on the Genealogy of Ethics also suggests that what he terms ‘technologies of the self’, namely “reflection on modes of living, on choices of existence, on the way to regulate one’s behaviour, to attach oneself to ends and means”, was prevalent in the philosophical activity during the Hellenistic and Roman period (1997:89). It is clear then, that such a use of the technologies of the self is not a unique feature of late modernity, but what is characteristic of this time in history is the way that concerns for the environment are used to orient choices of existence and regulation of behaviour. In this paper, I argue that the importance of achieving consistency between behaviour and green ideology that I observed during fieldwork was a contemporary form of an enduring strategy for worldly moral transformation often, but not always, associated with religious movements. The particular form it takes at this historical moment, responding to the threat posed to our environment by industrialisation

and mass consumption, is a revival and exaggeration of the vestigial ascetic elements of Western culture.

METHODOLOGY

New Social Movement theorists such as Melucci (1989) and Offe (1985) focus on the importance of meanings, lifestyles and personal and collective identities associated with participation in environment, peace and women's movements. Their approach resonated with my own experience of participation in the environment movement. There seemed to be a natural fit between drawing on the New Social Movement theorists and a methodology which places meaning at the centre of social inquiry, such as Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer 1969). I used participant observation and in-depth interviewing to tap into the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and behaviours of members of a small anarcho-environmentalist group in Brisbane, Australia. Its activities were aimed at raising public awareness, involving local people in campaigns, and encouraging people to change their lifestyle to minimise their impact on the earth.

Negotiating Access

I was acquainted with most of the members of the group through my own participation in the subculture of environmental activists in Brisbane. I was involved in the Fraser Island protest against logging in 1990-1, spending a number of months living on the island in the blockade camp. The campaign was successful and logging ceased in 1991 and World Heritage status was granted in 1992. This participation gave me a certain amount of "street cred" in negotiating access to the group. Throughout the nineties, I had participated to varying levels in many different events, enterprises and organisations associated with the environmentalist subculture. This participation had brought me into

contact with most of the core members. Out of the ten core members that I studied, there were two that I had not met before attending my first meeting with the group. At this first meeting I outlined the nature of the study and my research questions and asked their permission to go ahead. This permission was duly granted and I engaged in participant observation from February to October 1999. I attended the monthly “Hub” meetings and participated in various working bees and became a member of the fundraising collective. In all, I participated in 23 meetings, 3 working bees and 2 parties. Toward the end of my participation, I conducted interviews with the ten core members of the group. Two members ceased their involvement during this period and I interviewed them also.

All interviews were taped and fully transcribed. All field notes, interview transcripts, articles and fliers written by group members were analysed using grounded theory analysis techniques, described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The distinguishing features of these techniques are the method of constant comparison, the asking of generative and concept relating questions and systematic coding procedures. I followed grounded theory principles to generate my categories, however in the final analysis Weber’s ideal type of the ascetic was utilised due to its explanatory power. In this paper I have used pseudonyms to identify speakers in quotes from my interviews or observations.

Social Setting

The group was relatively new in Brisbane, an Australian capital city of about 1 million people. In 1996, a number of interested people had a series of meetings about setting up a new group. It was felt that there was a need to fill a gap left by the existing environmental movement organisations in Brisbane, which were reformist and/or focused

on single issues (such as wilderness or wildlife preservation). In 1998 the organisation formed. It rented a small office space in an inner city suburb, and a core group of people began working on organisational development. In 1999, the group moved into bigger premises in the same suburb, and more people became involved. This was the period in which I conducted my fieldwork. In September 1999 it had 16 active members and 34 non-active members (supporters who paid a membership fee but did not participate in any campaign or fundraising work). Although in this paper I focus on ethical norms, it would be mistaken to believe that modelling the good society was the main purpose of the group. It was important, but so were its campaigns. During the period of observation, the group had several campaign collectives, namely: genetix, which looked at concerns associated with genetically modified organisms, anti-sandmining, anti-nuclear, indigenous solidarity and sustainable societies. They also had three administration-related collectives: office, fundraising and training.

I focused on a core group of ten people who regularly attended group meetings. Meetings were usually held in the evenings on weekdays in the group's office. The average age of the core members was 26, with eight females and two males. The class location of the activists as indicated by schooling and parents' occupation (Western 1991:69) was mainly upper middle class (six members). There were two members from lower middle class backgrounds and two from working class backgrounds. All members had high levels of education: of the ten in the group, three had two degrees, two were studying for their second degree, three had one degree (one with Honours), and the other two had partially completed a degree. One member worked full-time, one member was a full-time student and the other eight worked between 15 and 25 hours a week in casual or

part-time jobs. Six of these members worked in the university, government or community sector. The other three worked in unskilled occupations.

Members of the group favoured a 'grunge' look- choosing clothes that were either second-hand, hand made, fair trade goods, or plain clothes associated with blue-collar occupations, such as dark blue denim or flanellette shirts. If an occasion called for 'straight' clothes, these were worn with a studied ineptitude- ill-fitting, ill-matching and never ironed. Shoes were optional, but if worn, a typical choice would be hand-made leather sandals. Hair could be long or short for men and women, and natural hair colours were maintained. Most of them lived in share houses with others who participated in the same lifestyle (but not necessarily activists). Most group members lived in the same inner-city suburb as the group's office, which was one of the older suburbs in Brisbane. In the main, the houses are wooden and date from the early 1900's. The houses I visited were decorated with posters from past campaigns, flyers about artistic events, with colourful scarves and tie dyed fabrics thrown over old second hand furniture. There would usually be at least one musical instrument (often a guitar). The kitchens would be full of jars of pulses, organic vegetables and fruits, soy milk and jars of tahini (sesame seed paste). Televisions were absent or hidden from view. A small stereo system could usually be found, with CDs in the genres of alternative rock, world music, folk music or protest songs.

ASCETICS- ATHLETES OF VIRTUE

According to Weber, asceticism is the practice of methodical procedures for achieving religious salvation (1968: 541). The essential features of asceticism are self-denial, self-observation and self-criticism (Weber 1968:541-551; Harpham 1987). In this

paper, I use the term asceticism in a loose sense, as I am not describing a religious group, but a political one. However, there are similarities to a religious group. I found that disciplining the self was undertaken in order to achieve a transformation of the world through a moral re-generation (Weber 1991:324). Religion demands that the faithful commit to a pattern of life integrally and methodically oriented to the values of religion (1968:534). In this group I found that the arena of lifestyle was of central importance to their strategy for social change.

Douglas and Wildavsky (1982:122) also noted the quasi-religious, sectarian nature of environmental groups, though their description is more apt for groups such as the one in this study rather than more reformist environmental organisations. They describe environmentalists as committed to “to human goodness, to equality, to purity of heart and mind” and opposition to worldliness - big organisation, big money and market values. These types of groups prefer small-scale organisations that can avoid the inevitable problems of factions and power plays. They set themselves against the mainstream, acting on “the border”, that is, outside of institutional politics and the market. Acting outside the mainstream ensures that they can maintain their moral purity. This group did not accept government funds, fearing this would compromise their radical agenda. Instead it’s funds came from fundraising activities and membership dues.

Weber (1968:542) states that “subjecting the natural drives to a systematic patterning of life, always leads to a radical ethico-religious critique of the relationship to society”. In this case, a new initiate has usually developed a radical critique of society and is drawn to the group, seeking like minded others and opportunities to work towards their vision of change. Once a member, a more systematic patterning of life therefore

compounds and exaggerates their critique of society on moral grounds. Harpham (1987) argues that asceticism is always about resistance, as it contains a binary form: on the one hand it rejects the world, and on the other it seeks to transform the world's wicked ways. It structures a cultural opposition between what exists and the yearning for what is "pre-cultural". In this group, this was expressed as yearning for a mythologised 'country life', the pre-industrial age or the indigenous, tribal, hunter-gatherer existence. Members of the group felt that their "social conditioning" was problematic. This conditioning led them to accept exploitative social relations and destructive environmental practices. The only way to overcome this was to work on the self. Modelling the "good society", both personally, and collectively with the group, was key to this group's strategy for social change. It was the foundation for the campaign work in which most were involved. The following quote illustrates this point and comes from an interview with Sally, a 23 year old core member who devoted most of her time to the group. She was most passionate about anti-nuclear issues and had been arrested during protests against a uranium mine the previous year.

Sally: ...that's one thing that attracted me about [the group] is the fact that everyone involved has a lot higher level of commitment than in a lot of other groups?

Me: ... what do you mean by commitment? What to?

Sally: umm to their ethics, to themselves, which - which flows into the organisation and the group, umm so I guess when it comes down to it, I guess [the group] is probably to me more of a representation of a group with umm a focus on ethics and individual levels of commitment first, and

recognising that that probably is a starting point and then helping each other, reaching out from there so I guess that's why [the group] is something that, yeah, inspires me.

In Weber's model, the rationally active ascetic seeks to master the world and "to tame what is creaturely and wicked through work in a worldly 'vocation'" (Weber 1991:325). Active "inner-worldly" ascetics also seek to transform their external bearing by "overcoming creaturely wickedness in the actor's own nature", which I have conceptualised in this paper as engaging in "self work". This self work can be seen as an ethical training regimen, the aim of which is to develop an "ethical total personality" (Weber, 1968:540). This religious temper must be maintained in spite of all temptations- rigorous ethical standards are applied to all spheres of life in order to secure salvation. Weber defines salvation as deliverance from suffering (1991:327). Green activists seek salvation in the sense that they seek to "save" the world from the hellfire of environmental disaster. Living frugally, they have to resist the temptations offered by consumer society, the temptation of convenience. In this way they set the model for the rest of humanity.

The risk in using a religious metaphor to understand the group is that people can disregard the goals that the group work towards. This fear was expressed by group members when I reported my findings to them. It is not my intention that readers of this paper take this view. The usefulness of the religious metaphor lies in accounting for an approach to morality, ethics and the proper way to live one's life. The environmentalists I studied can be considered ascetics in three main ways: applying the principles of green ideology to every aspect of daily life (proving faith and virtue through action), working

on the self (self discipline, self observation and self criticism) and commitment to activism as a vocation. I describe these in more detail below.

THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUE: The Green Lifestyle

An ascetic lifestyle is a way of life organised in pursuit of a sacred value; in this case, that sacred value is nature. According to Douglas and Wildavsky (1982:11), “[n]ature in the wild, uncorrupted by social artifice, equivalent to a society without social distinction, is [environmentalists’] preferred emblem of godliness and symbol of unworldliness”.

Members withdraw from the ordinary social world, that is, the world of mass consumption, by living the green lifestyle with likeminded others. At the same time they act upon the world, by taking part in non-violent civil disobedience and other non-institutional forms of political activity.

The establishment of a green identity and the achievement of an ethical lifestyle creates a definition of “the situation” (Mead 1977:43), the state of the contemporary world, as one where social change is possible: if group members can change themselves so can others. The lifestyle allows them to build a coherent and rewarding sense of identity, based on remoralising daily life (Giddens 1991: 75). The members of the group I studied were like Melucci’s (1989) “nomads of the present” who want to live their dream of “ecotopia” in the here and now.

Weber talks about the obligation the ascetic feels to do something about the ethical irrationality of the world (1968: 548). In this case, members felt a high sense of personal responsibility to learn about, and rectify, the impact of their daily lives on the planet. Group members were part of an activist counter-culture in which concerns for the environment and usually, the plight of animals and oppressed peoples around the world

were used to orient behaviour. For example, the aims and objectives of the group I studied list such things as:

Halt the destruction of ecosystems and the corresponding loss of biodiversity and ecological processes;

Halt the abusive exploitation of people around the world;

Halt the systemic abuse of animals and encourage the ecologically sustainable and socially just use of the earth's resources.

The attempt to live this lifestyle is what members of the group refer to as "being ethical" or "having ethics". Simultaneous awareness of their privileged position in relation to the peoples of the world, and the existence of urgent environmental problems, lead to members feeling obliged to do something. Berking (1996) refers to this as a sense of extended solidarity, a result of globalisation processes such as the growth of media and communication technologies. This sense of extended solidarity is illustrated by a quote from Sally again:

... everywhere you look, everywhere surrounding you, especially when you are living in the city, you are surrounded by the products of a society that you think, something is not quite right with this, you know, if I recognise this, then you know, I have an obligation to sort of do something about it.

"Ethical" Consumption

The main component of lifestyle is focused around consumption. When asked about what she does to live out the "ethical" lifestyle, Simone, a 29 year old mother-to-be who worked in the office and fundraising collectives, gave the following response:

... well, umm I make choices about the kinds of foods that I eat, for a start, and the amount of stuff that I consume, and, and where it comes from, the stuff that I consume, and by working with [the group] and riding a bicycle and using public transport ahaha, um yeah. Haha

Simone continued to ride her bike with her big belly! In making consumption choices, members of the group look for goods that are locally produced, fruit and vegetables that have been farmed organically and minimally packaged goods. It is even better to buy your food from a cooperative, rather than a profit-oriented business. In this way, they attempted to minimise the impacts of consumption on the environment and the poor in third world countries.

Ethics are learnt through reading about environmental issues, or just by interacting with people who are practising an ethical lifestyle. The interactional learning of ethics is demonstrated in the following example related by Mick while a small group of us were waiting for dinner (vegetarian of course!) at a weekend retreat devoted to developing strategies for the upcoming year. Mick was one of the founders of the group in Brisbane. He was 29 and had a full-time job in a recycling cooperative he helped to found. He was talking about how people at the cooperative he now worked at didn't share the same view on ethics as members of the group. He told us that one day he was going to run some errands and one of his co-workers (new to eco-work) asked if he would get him a Coke. He replied "I don't mind you drinking Coke, but I'm not going to buy it for you". His co-worker said resignedly "Ok, why don't we drink Coke?". Mick brought some information in the next day on the corrupt nature of the Coca-Cola organisation. Mick told us that this was 'really hard work' and that he never had to

worry about that kind of thing when working in the group. I never observed any interactions like this within the group, perhaps as by the time people came to devote most of their time to a group such as this, they had learned the 'rules'.

When I asked group members about the way they felt about imposing sometimes difficult lifestyle choices upon themselves, they all said that it was something they chose to do, rather than feeling any particular pressure from others in the group. Besides setting a good example, it was felt it was necessary to avoid hypocrisy in order to give their message more weight. However, people did talk about the difficulties they had with being 'ethical'. The following quote is from Julie, a 28 year old who had been involved in activism since 1995. She was very committed to the group and spent at least 35 hours a week working on the genetix campaign and general group administration.

[Being committed to ethics] actually makes me feel quite trapped, it's like oh ok, I'm committed to this ethic, I don't have to think about what I do anymore...sometimes it is just really simplistic, being ethical...that's why I am saying that sometimes I feel trapped by this concept that I've got to do this because everyone thinks that this is the right thing to do.

[interviewee's emphasis]

Tanya, a 25 year old social worker, was also critical about the demand for complying with ethical norms:

Me: and what about living up to the green ideal lifestyle?

Tanya: it's really bad... like that's one of the worst parts of it...it becomes quite personalised in some ways and its really easy to say "Well you don't eat organic eggs do you!" [or] "You've got too much plastic in your

house"...it gets really full-on, and I think, that's really hard because often...you don't have time to put in this work on making your lifestyle very eco-friendly.

This "ethical rigorism" (Weber, 1968:534) is justified by group members as it was felt that it was important to set an example to inspire 'ordinary people' to change their lifestyle. Stefan, a 30 year old who described himself as a 'roaming activist', describes how he started off very inflexible in the application of ethics, but over time this had mellowed, though he still demonstrates commitment to the idea of being a change agent that demonstrates ways of "stepping lightly on the Earth":

...I don't know, like, years ago, I was, probably started off being a bit of an eco-fascist in that way, like thinking that everyone had to live this really this set lifestyle and minimal impact... I think that after a while I realised that it's, yeah it's not really, you can't really achieve that...there's definitely, you know, ways to lead by example and I don't know, I think it's more about encouraging people to look for change, and to recognise a need to change behaviours and personal habits...

Leading by example takes effort, involving a transformation of identity and creating alternative experiences of the self. I discuss this work on the self below.

WORKING ON THE SELF

As demonstrated by the examples above self work was absolutely central to this group's strategy for achieving change (though it wasn't the ONLY strategy). By self work I mean the effort expended in order to bring personal feelings, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours into line with ideological commitments, or an application of what Foucault (1997) refers to as 'technologies of the self'. This style of individualistic politics has been called

“personalism” by Lichterman (1995), and is individualistic in the sense that each individual member is valued and time is given to airing personal grievance as part of their way of working together. It is felt that membership of the group should be rewarding, inspiring and even fun. During the time of observation, “process” meetings were established as a way to air and resolve issues around power sharing, inclusiveness and gender balance. This was in response to a belief that one of the problems of mainstream society is that people are “disconnected” from how they really feel, or that people’s feelings are not taken into account in the cut and thrust of a market based society. The goal of self work is to achieve a consistent self, that is a self that reflects a commitment to anarcho-environmentalist ideology. The consistent self was a rationaly ethical self, as described by Weber:

The person who lives as a worldly ascetic is a rationalist, not only in the sense that [they] rationally systematizes [their] own conduct, but also in [their] rejection of everything that is ethically irrational, esthetic [sic], or dependant upon [their] emotional reactions to the world and its institutions. The distinctive goal always remains the alert methodical control of one’s own pattern of life and behaviour (1968:544)

Mick demonstrates this rational asceticism in the following quote:

Yeah, I think that [working on your own attitudes] is really important, that’s something I value highly... it gets to the very cause of our social and ecological problems, I think it, I think it does come down to personal processes, that, personal ways of being and ways of relating to people, and ways of relating to the environment, and knowing that if you don’t deal

with that at a personal level then, and challenge ourselves personally, then you know, you're just pissing in the wind really...I feel good when I see that I actually am... moving forward, and I'm becoming a more integrated person...and I am able to - I guess make more conscious choices about how I respond to the world, that are more in line with what my conscious beliefs are, rather than just you know, reacting, and embodying a whole lot of different paradigms that...consciously I think would be a problem.

A change in a sense of self is a goal for those who wish to achieve wider social change. Members of this group interacted with themselves (Mead 1977), in order to bring their attitudes into line with environmentalist dictums such as "reduce, re-use, recycle", as well as embodying political modesty and a rejection of sexism and racism. As indicated above in relation to consumption, this is a difficult thing to do and when questioned, people use words like "struggle", "deal with", "confront", "avoid", "address" or "work on". This perfecting of the self is an ongoing project, as demonstrated in the following quote from Sally:

Me: ...how much obligation do you feel to actually work on yourself, to be better...?

Sally: Well it gives you confidence in yourself, it gives you credibility when you try to talk to people about it, I know I need to recognise that there are still issues that I need to work on, but I know the more I feel happy about those things, the better my attitude...[my emphasis]

During my period of observation and in interviews, the desire for consistency was often articulated. The importance of this concept was demonstrated time and time again in the

period of observation, as people recounted the conflicts they experienced with other members of the group or, more commonly, with other groups who shared a concern with issues, but operated under a different political ideology, such as Marxist groups. These conflicts were framed around a lack of consistency between ideals and practical action. Recounting these conflict stories to each other helped to reinforce the norms of proper ethical conduct that was expected to maintain group membership. Those who did not display their commitment to the cause in this way were interpreted as not “really” caring about the environment. At one meeting about organising a food stall, there was a heated discussion about whether to sell bottled drinks or have drinks in cups that would be washed up later. After the meeting, when most people had left, Skye, a 21 year old who was very conscientious in the application of her ethical position, said:

Sorry, I’m feeling a bit stressed. Emma and I seem to be having these arguments all the time and it really bothers me. You don’t expect to have these arguments here, you expect that there is a general agreement about things like minimising waste.

By chance I saw Emma again the same day. Emma was 22 and took a less hard line approach to ethics. Unprompted, she said she felt a bit stressed about the discussion:

Emma: I think we’re both getting a bit stressed.

Me: About the food stall or just in general?

Emma: In general. I just don’t think you need to do it every time.

Me: Do what?

Emma: You know, we’re doing everything else.

Me: You mean, you don’t have to be perfect all the time?

Emma: yeah.

Later that week, Emma, Tanya, Sally and I got together to cook for the food stall, and the arguments between Emma and Skye were raised again. Tanya and Sally said they really admired Skye for having high standards. Tanya said that it was difficult to maintain your principles in this world, and that it was good that Skye argued for her principles, even if it meant inconvenience or made life a little bit more difficult.

Underlying these conflicts and didactic interactions lies the hopeful vision held by group members (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Conflict threatened peoples' belief that it was possible to create a better world. More fundamentally, like all voluntary groups, conflict posed a serious threat to its survival (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982:122). If people stopped enjoying their participation, the group could dissolve. Hence throughout my time of observation, people spoke of the need to be able to work well together. Self work was seen as a strategy for being able to work well as a group, and working on yourself was necessary for group involvement. In an interview Stefan described this:

Me: Do you feel like there's an expectation that you should be...working to make yourself better?

Stefan: Ummm [pause], [softly] yeah, I mean it's never sort of, overt or anything, it's not something I get reminded of everyday, but I think that just by being part of this group, you're sort of in a way, acknowledging that that's how we op—yeah the optimal way to work together, it's something we should be trying to strive for.

Group membership was very important to all the members- it helped them achieve their goal of working for social change and provided a support network of like-minded others.

All the core members enjoyed being part of the group, and as well as working together, members socialised together. Cassie describes the way she feels about the group:

...working in a group, it's-you don't feel so isolated, you get lots of support, lots of encouragement...it's like being in a family really, it's a feeling of belonging, we're all friends, and there's a nurturing that goes on amongst us, we do have our differences and conflict does arise, eventually, but people are trying to work out how to deal with those better.

To work at goodness you need to learn what behaviour to avoid. To do this, it helps to associate with people who have the right "headspace", that is, those who are living an "ethical" lifestyle, who are actively "working for social change". In Weber's terms, they are people who demonstrate the "ethical total personality" (1958: 533). They can provide role models and provide constructive criticism to the neophyte activist. Once wrong behaviour is identified, an attempt should be made to change, by "confronting it" or "dealing with it". The consequences of successful self work is to minimise conflicts with others, to increase the ability to work more co-operatively, to gain an improved sense of self-worth, approval from others and to feel a sense of credibility when representing your views to others.

ACTIVISM AS A VOCATION

The activists in the group treated activism as a "vocation"; that is, an occupation that is distinguished by extraordinary commitment (Weber 1968:543). When asking how people would describe their occupation, most of the core members said "activist", and those that had paid work would name the paid occupation second. All of the activists saw their work as a life long commitment. This comes from a belief that social change is

a gradual process that requires consistent effort. It also comes from recognition that the group is in a position of little power in the scheme of things. Mick demonstrates this life commitment:

...I don't know what else you'd do with your life apart from working for social change...I guess I do have a real positive sense, I guess a real hope, that it is possible to create a better future...it feels really good to be part of that, to be working towards that, and building something positive, yeah.

Working well together, mentioned above, was seen as key to sustaining people interest and enthusiasm for working for social change. "Burn out", when activists can no longer sustain their enthusiasm for working for change, is a problem widely acknowledged in the environment movement and is evident in this quote from Sally:

...I feel now, that I want to be an activist of some kind for the rest of my life and how to do that and how to make that sustainable for the individual is a good question...I hope the enthusiasm's there.

People often used the terms "working for change", or "working well together". As described earlier, I have used the concept of "self work" to reflect the kinds of words people used, such as "struggling with", "dealing with", or "working on". Mick demonstrates the importance of the concept of work in the following exchange where I was corrected:

Me: And what about the idea of fighting for environmental and social justice? Does that make you enthusiastic?

Mick: Fighting?

Me: Well being part of well, maybe fighting is the wrong word, but like...

Mick: Yeah I wouldn't use the word fighting, I would use the word working.

Activism is these people's vocation, and they are anxious for it to be seen in a legitimate light. People outside of the movement tend not to value activism. Tanya describes this in the following quote:

...friends or family, people that I know that aren't involved, often don't give any amount of validity or approve of it...I have a friend who always asks, "When are you going to get a real job?"...yeah there is just always this concern that this is a really immature and naive thing to be doing.

The desire to be seen as "working" may also be due to a reaction against the common stereotype of "dole bludging hippy"² and the ubiquitous comment made by passers-by at rallies: "get a job".

CONTEMPORARY SECULAR ASCETICISM

A more familiar form of asceticism is Weber's Spirit of Capitalism (1958: 181). The Protestant ethic requires that one prove one's state of grace through success in a worldly vocation. However, Weber argues that over time, the ideological and theological structure in which the spirit of capitalism emerged has fallen away. The famous iron cage quote from Weber says:

...care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of a saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage...No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous

development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals. (1958: 181-2)

Almost one hundred years after Weber was writing, we can consider who does live in this iron cage. Resistance groups can be observed that challenge the materialism and consumerism of mainstream society, and this challenge is based around morality and values. Pakulski (1991) argues that contemporary movements such as the environment movement are radical because they exaggerate existing elements of the society they challenge. It is never possible to meet their demands for moral purity, as translating a principle into government policy always involves compromise. This symbolic challenge exaggerates extant ascetic elements of western culture and can be seen to be part of a longer-term cycle of collective action (Traugott 1995).

Weber's disenchantment thesis held that society was on a one way street towards increasing technological rationalisation (Gerth and Mills 1991:51). The activists described in this paper were disenchanted with contemporary life, but had a more hopeful vision of the future than Weber.

The data presented in this paper demonstrates the way that appropriate practical application of ethics were negotiated in a group of anarcho-environmentalists. That this was the main area of disagreement I observed during my time of observation illustrates the importance ethics had for the group members. Theorists of contemporary social movements had not adequately accounted for the strong commitment to personally embodying ideals and treating activism as a vocation that I observed. Some people find it hard to believe that these activists could live up to their ideals in everyday consumption behaviour. In my observations they succeeded in this by pursuing downward mobility-

their need for material possessions was low, they did not need a high income to support their lifestyle. Except for Mick, who worked in a recycling co-operative, and Emma who was a full-time student, they all chose part-time work to enable them to pursue this lifestyle and their campaigning work. However, paid work did pose 'ethical dilemmas' for the group members, for example if they had to handle meat in a hospitality job, or use strong chemicals for cleaning. Many members expressed the desire to 'support themselves' by starting up their own business (selling an environmentally friendly product or service) in order to overcome this dilemma. Perhaps this desire to be a member of the bourgeoisie in spite of their efforts at downward mobility can be explained by the class background of the majority being middle, or upper middle class.

The data presented here may have given the impression that the activists took themselves very seriously. While they took their ethics seriously, they also joked about them. Spending time with them was fun and there was lots of laughter. Perhaps as a result of their self work, members of the group were friendly and welcoming, and people showed each other concern and consideration. This view was shared by all the core members. However one 'ex-member' I interviewed did not feel welcomed nor included in the group. He was a man in his forties who was viewed as a bit odd and irritating by the group members, as he didn't pick up on the group rules, such as appropriate meeting etiquette. The other person who became an ex-member in the time of observation came to disagree with the main strategies for social change employed by the group, and decided it was more effective to work 'within the system'. She also didn't fit into group rules about consumption practices, for example her home was full of shiny new consumer goods, and she died her hair with chemical dyes.

A benefit of group membership was the achievement of a coherent lifestyle that eased the ontological insecurity that is characteristic of our times (Giddens 1991). The group was affiliated with a global environmental organisation, giving people a sense that they were part of a worldwide movement for social change. Pursuing an ascetic strategy is also a powerful antidote to despair. Transforming your habits and being with others who do so, means that people who have an acute concern about the future of the planet, can maintain their hope that it is possible to transform the world. This psychic benefit was often mentioned by group members.

It would be interesting to carry out a similar ethnographic study of other social change groups to see whether and to what extent they utilise the 'ascetic' strategy for bringing about social transformation. It seems likely that this political orientation would be most likely found in groups that reject the state and large organisational forms, leaving individual orientation the only resource left to transform. I suspect that other groups within the environment movement that utilise boycott type campaign strategies would adopt asceticism to some degree, as well as people who are concerned about environmental issues but are not part of any group. But as the quote from Sally showed in the beginning of the paper, people were attracted to the group because members were more committed to living up to their ideals than those they had encountered in other environmental groups.

Giddens' (1991) concept of "life politics" which demands a return of morality to everyday life accurately described the form of politics favoured by this group. His suggestion that in late modernity, globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self is borne out by the data reported in this paper. However his assertion

that the condition of late modernity requires a uniquely reflexive self does not hold up when we consider Weber's work on the ascetic, Foucault's work on technologies of the self employed in pre-Christian times, nor when we consider the historical record regarding social movements in other times and places (Calhoun 1995). It seems that Harpham (1987) may be right, in that asceticism is sub-ideological, and is expressed differently in different historical epochs and cultural settings. In what Giddens' calls "late modernity", anarcho-environmentalists embrace a secular asceticism in order to challenge the technological rationality of the system. In a sense, the asceticism from which the spirit of capitalism was borne is revived as a challenge to the excesses of consumerism and its impact on the natural world.

NOTES

1. Anarcho-environmentalist groups are at the radical end of the spectrum of those involved in the environment movement. They dislike hierarchical organisational forms believing them to be inherently exploitative. They do not like central governments but favour local grass roots decision-making. They abhor the pursuit of profit and the destruction of the environment. Their preferred mode of action is to participate in non-violent direct action in the quest to bring down capitalism and the government. For those in North America, anarcho-environmentalism is what Brulle (2000) terms an 'alternative voice' that emerged in response to the statism of reform environmentalism. This group has most in common with Brulle's 'Environmental Justice' groups, though it does not fit easily into any of his categories. See Bookchin (1980) for an example of this political ideology or Eckersley (1992:259) for an overview.
2. A dole bludger is someone who is dependant on welfare and makes no effort to find paid work.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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