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Contemporary Climate Movements: Ecological Radicalism, Extremism, or a New Wave of (Eco)Terrorism? A Case Study of Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation Organizations

Współczesne ruchy klimatyczne – ekologiczny radykalizm, ekstremizm czy może nowa fala (eko)terroryzmu? Studium przypadku na przykładzie organizacji Just Stop Oil i Letzte Generation

• Abstract •

In today's world, among other environmental issues, the problems of anthropogenic climate change and the fear of a “climate catastrophe” have been the central focus of contemporary discourse. This has compelled most governments to make efforts to reduce the use of fossil fuels in the energy industry and beyond. Information about the rapid pace of climate warming has simultaneously become a source of social unrest and radicalization. This is evident in popularising movements such as Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate, Climate Strike, Youth Strike for Climate, Extinction Rebellion, etc. One of their key demands is the virtually immediate and drastic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by all countries worldwide. In their efforts to promote their agenda, these organizations are increasingly resorting to methods reminiscent of the history of extreme environmental movements. These methods include blocking transportation and transmission infrastructure or

• Abstrakt •

Współcześnie pośród zagadnień związanych z ochroną środowiska centralną pozycję zajmują problem antropogenicznej zmiany klimatu i obawa przed „katastrofą klimatyczną”, które wymuszają na większości rządów wysiłki na rzecz redukcji wykorzystania paliw kopalnych w energetyce i nie tylko. Informacje o szybkim tempie ocieplania się klimatu stały się jednocześnie źródłem niepokojów społecznych oraz radykalizacji postaw – wyrażają się one m.in. w popularyzacji takich ruchów jak: Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate, Climate Strike, Youth Strike for Climate, Extinction Rebellion etc. Jednym z ich kluczowych postulatów jest praktycznie natychmiastowa i drastyczna redukcja emisji gazów cieplarnianych przez wszystkie kraje świata. Organizacje te, próbując nagłośnić swoją agendę, coraz częściej uciekają się do metod znanych z historii ekstremistycznych ruchów ekologicznych – blokowania infrastruktury transportowej i przesyłowej czy też coraz bardziej

engaging in increasingly bold attempts to destroy property, including unique works of art. In this article, as a case study, we will explore the activities of two organizations, Just Stop Oil (JSO) and Letzte Generation (LG), to determine whether the activities of contemporary pro-environmental movements exhibit signs of radicalism or environmental extremism. Additionally, we will examine whether their actions can be considered analogous to ecoterrorist actions of the past. As part of our research, in addition to the case study, we also utilized the desk research method. We analyzed academic publications on extremism and terrorism and used the content of the JSO and LG websites as well as media reports on their current activities as source material.

Keywords: ecoterrorism; environmental terrorism; global warming; environmental extremism; climate movements; Just Stop Oil; Letzte Generation

śmiałych prób niszczenia mienia (w tym unikatowych dzieł sztuki). Wykorzystując studium przypadku działalności dwóch organizacji: Just Stop Oil (JSO) i Letzte Generation (LG), postaramy się w niniejszym artykule odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy działalność współczesnych ruchów prośrodowiskowych nosi znamiona radykalizmu lub ekstremizmu ekologicznego. Ponadto zbadamy, czy ich aktywność można uznać – *per analogiam* do ekoterrorystycznych akcji z przeszłości – za działania o charakterze terrorystycznym. W artykule analizie poddano publikacje naukowe poświęcone ekstremizmowi i terroryzmowi, a jako materiał źródłowy potraktowano treści zawarte na stronach internetowych JSO i LG, jak również doniesienia medialne na temat bieżącej aktywności tych organizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: ekoterroryzm; terroryzm ekologiczny; ocieplenie klimatu; ekstremizm ekologiczny; ruchy klimatyczne; Just Stop Oil; Letzte Generation

Introduction

The contemplation of nature, humanity's role within it, and the intricate relationship between humans and the environment has been a constant thread throughout the realms of philosophy, science, religion, and political thought since the dawn of the first civilizations. This discourse has taken various forms, from biblical injunctions like "And God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28), which sanctioned the idea of humanity's dominion over the created world, to Enlightenment calls for harmony between humanity and nature ("return to nature"), Romantic glorification of rural life and protests against growing urbanization, over-exploitation of natural resources, and consumerism. In the 19th century, the language of science gave rise to the term 'ecology', credited to German evolutionist Ernst Haeckel. Ecology referred to the study of the structure and functioning of ecosystems, examining the relationship between living organisms and their environment. In contemporary usage, however, the term has become more vague and is often misapplied. It has permeated everyday language, with the prefix "eco" extending to science, products (such as eco-friendly food), lifestyles (the trend of "being eco-conscious"), political ideologies, and belief

systems (like environmentalism). The birth of the modern environmental movement is commonly traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its origins can be found in countercultural movements, such as hippie ideologies, anarchic and pacifist movements, as well as in initiatives taken by the United Nations (UN)¹. These organizations share a common goal to draw global attention to the issue of human-induced environmental degradation. During that period, environmental protection emerged as a prominent topic in public discourse, offering an alternative perspective to the prevailing forces of globalization. Consequently, anti-globalization and alter-globalization movements gained momentum. Simultaneously, a growing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged in Western Europe and North America. These organizations aimed to raise public awareness about environmental issues, combat uncontrolled environmental exploitation, and influence political agendas, the actions of multinational corporations, and the broader political system.

In contemporary environmental discourse, the predominant issue at the forefront is anthropogenic climate change and the looming specter of a “climate catastrophe”. This concern has prompted governments worldwide to embark on an effort, often entailing significant social, political, and economic costs, aimed at curtailing the use of fossil fuels not only within the energy sector but also across various industries. The awareness of the alarming pace of climate warming, often observable without the need for specialized instruments, has simultaneously become a catalyst for social unrest and radicalization, with young people often at the forefront of this movement. This expression of concern has given rise to popular movements such as Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate, Climate Strike, Youth Strike for Climate, and Extinction Rebellion, among others. One of their central demands is the immediate and substantial reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by all nations across the globe. These organizations, in their endeavor to promote their agenda, have increasingly resorted to tactics reminiscent of past extremist environmental movements. These methods include obstructing transportation and energy infrastructure and engaging in more audacious actions such as the destruction of property, including invaluable works of art. In this article, we aim to address the question of whether the activities of contemporary

¹ On December 3, 1968, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution 2398 (XXIII) taking up the issues related to the environment of man. At the same time, principles stated in May of the following year by Secretary-General U Thant in his report “The Problems of Human Environment”, came to be regarded as most rudimentary with regard to protecting the environment. In 1972, in the immediate aftermath of these ideas, United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was assembled (Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 157–158; Prandecki & Sadowski, 2010, p. 106).

pro-environmental movements exhibit characteristics of radicalism or environmental extremism. Further, we will determine if these actions ought to be considered a contemporary manifestation of ecoterrorism and, in a similar vein, if any parallels are to be found with terrorist activity on the part of environmental organizations of the past. It is noteworthy that, while several valuable monographs (Nagtzaam, 2017; Pośluszna, 2012; Liddick, 2006) and articles (Izak, 2022; Mukherjee, 2022; Spadaro, 2020) have delved into the subjects of ecoterrorism, radicalism, and ecological extremism within the realms of Polish and global science discourse, our analysis of the activities of contemporary climate movements represents a notable and innovative contribution. In conducting our research, we utilized the case study method, focusing on two organizations that have been extensively covered in the media in recent months: Just Stop Oil (JSO) and Letzte Generation (LG). Our case study includes a description of the demands of both organizations and the characteristics of their ongoing activities over recent years – including the most visible actions against street and airport infrastructure and famous works of art housed in leading European galleries. This article consists of an introduction and conclusion, supplemented by three subsections. The first subsection explores the relationship between the concepts of extremism and radicalism. In the subsequent subsection (the second), we shed light on the prevailing definitions of environmental extremism, ecoterrorism, and environmental terrorism within the discourse. We also attempt to provide an overview of the historical context surrounding these phenomena. Finally, in the third subsection, we delve into the case study of the aforementioned climate organizations.

Extremism and political radicalism: conceptualization of terms

As Patryk Tomaszewski aptly observes, political extremism is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and determining what constitutes extremism versus what does not requires a contextual reference point. Extremism, by its nature, implies a departure from the norm, and thus, political extremism is defined by Tomaszewski as “a complex set of views, ideas, and demands with varying levels of internal consistency, coupled with behaviors characterized by extremeness, as perceived within the existing political power balance” (2012, pp. 47–48). Roman Tokarczyk, on the other hand, intriguingly notes that extremism encompasses a range of extreme ideologies and methods of action, but it may not always be directed toward extreme objectives (2003/2004, p. 256). However, much like Tomaszewski, Tokarczyk emphasizes that a degree of

relativity is inherent in extremism as a political phenomenon (2003/2004, p. 257)². Indeed, the relativity of extremism is a widely recognized concept among political scientists. German political scientists Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse as well as prominent figures in Polish political science such as Andrzej Antoszewski and Ryszard Herbut have all explored this aspect of extremism. They emphasize the importance of establishing a reference point, either in the form of generally accepted norms or the prevailing center in politics (Janicka, 2016, p. 146; Antoszewski & Herbut, 2004, p. 87). This reference point helps in distinguishing extremism from what is considered mainstream or acceptable within a given political context. Furthermore, it is worth noting that political extremism is not a static phenomenon but is rather highly susceptible to change over time. What may be deemed extremist today could evolve into a viewpoint that is entirely acceptable within society tomorrow (Pośuszna, 2012, p. 35)³. This fluidity underscores the dynamic nature of political ideologies and the shifting boundaries of what is considered extreme in different social and political contexts. The aforementioned Roman Tokarczyk also draws attention to the erroneous perception of the concepts of extremism and radicalism as synonymous words. While both phenomena are inherently linked to a worldview that is extreme relative to the mainstream, there exists a small but nonetheless crucial distinction between them. As a rule, political extremism is associated with practical action aimed at realizing one's anti-systemic demands. In contrast, radicalism is more of a worldview or position with a clear theoretical underpinning. Consequently, radicals can typically function legally within a democratic political system, whereas extremists, due to their anti-systemic actions, no longer necessarily enjoy this privilege (Machniak, 2018, p. 260; Hołub, 2016, pp. 24–25, 28; Malendowicz, 2015, p. 153; Pośuszna, 2012, p. 36; Tokarczyk, 2003/2004, p. 257). Radicalism itself can be seen, according to the Latin etymology of the word, as “a return to the roots”, implying a revisiting of the origins of concepts used in the language of politics. This may involve concepts that have been distorted, are interpreted as distorted, or are not interpreted literally (Malendowicz, 2019, p. 73). According to Marek

² In doing so, he uses an accurate *bon mot*: “what to someone is extraordinary extremism, to someone else may be ordinary moderation” (Tokarczyk, 2003/2004, p. 257).

³ History is replete with examples where ideas and demands that were once considered extreme have eventually become widely accepted as part of societal progress. The abolition of slavery in the United States and the fight for women's suffrage in Switzerland are indeed excellent illustrations of this phenomenon. Both were fiercely contested issues in their respective times and regarded as extreme or radical demands by many. However, as societies evolved, moral values changed, and a broader understanding of equality and justice emerged, these demands gradually gained acceptance. Today, these achievements are celebrated as fundamental pillars of human rights and social justice, and it is difficult to imagine them being viewed as political extremes.

Górka, radicalism can also be understood, in the context of a political program, as a direction aimed at bringing about fundamental change that extends beyond the mainstream consensus (2019, p. 87). At the same time, Górka makes an interesting observation that “radicalism changes depending on time, place, and political events” and “the reception of statements also depends on the person who publicly articulates them” (2019, p. 88). Thus, it is evident that relativism and contextualization, in addition to extremism, are at the core of both political radicalism and extremism. The fundamental difference, however, lies in the inclination, inherent to extremism, to engage in usually illegal actions aimed at changing the undesirable status quo⁴.

Environmental extremism and ecoterrorism and environmental terrorism

As Elżbieta Pośluszna points out, science lacks a single definition of environmental extremism – the author proposes that it should be considered as such “the adherence, promotion and implementation of extreme views of a pro-environmental and pro-animal nature” (2012, p. 11)⁵. Both strands of environmental extremism admittedly have much in common (e.g., organizational similarity), there are, nevertheless, quite significant ideological differences between them and they differ at the level of their actions as well. As a matter of principle, environmental extremists believe that the death of animals is a natural part of the life cycle and, as such, cannot be completely prevented. Even humans have a right to kill animals as long as this serves their basic needs and is not practiced, for example, for the sake of entertainment, nor is it driven by vanity. For obvious reasons, pro-animal extremists view every animal as a kind of “sacredness” and its right to life must be protected

⁴ Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning at this point that, as indicated by Patryk Tomaszewski, in the case of extremism, we can distinguish between its passive and active varieties. The former involves theoretical reflection on the desired world order and gaining supporters through the attractiveness of the arguments presented. On the other hand, active extremism, according to Tomaszewski, encompasses both legal and illegal actions aimed at destabilizing the state and, consequently, creating conditions conducive to the realization of the proclaimed demands (2012, pp. 48–49).

⁵ With reference to the relationship between extremism and radicalism that we analyzed earlier, a remark should be made that “environmentalism” can be considered the so-called radical equivalent of ecological thought. Environmentalism is understood as “social theories, philosophical orientations, ideologies and worldviews, while underlining the significance of environmental threats resulting from civilizational development as well as harmful effects of ecological damage on the wellbeing of both individuals and societies, place human beings and their relationship with the environment as the focal point of their interest” (Dziubka, Szlachta, & Nijakowski, 2008, p. 56).

at all costs. Paradoxically, it is the pro-animal extremists who are, in theory, more likely to resort to direct violence against another human being, especially one who restricts the animals inalienable right to life (Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 12–13, 2020, p. 9)⁶. Robert Borkowski, on the other hand, goes so far as to say that “at the root of environmental extremism lies the conviction that the development of technology must be stopped and civilization must be changed (or destroyed)” (Borkowski, 2006, p. 243). It remains an open question whether the political violence carried out by these extremists can be classified as terrorist activity, and if so, what kind of terrorism we are dealing with. In order to answer these questions, in the first place it is worth making a distinction between ecoterrorism and environmental terrorism, which – despite appearances – should not be seen as identical. Ecoterrorism (or millenarian (proper) ecoterrorism) is, in principle, an action using sabotage methods to protect the natural environment from excessive human influence (Mukherjee, 2022, p. 105; Spadaro, 2020, p. 59; B. Walewska, 2008, p. 90; Borkowski, 2006, p. 249). On the other hand, environmental terrorism (instrumental ecoterrorism or ecological blackmail) is an action aimed at the destruction of the environment – carried out often on a massive scale, we should add – i.e., the direct introduction of hazardous substances into the water, air or land, and indirectly, also, as a result of attacks on nuclear reactors or radioactive waste storage sites or damage to transmission infrastructure (pipelines) and means of transport (e.g., tankers) (Izak, 2022, p. 147; Spadaro, 2020, p. 59; Chlebowicz, 2011, pp. 51–52; Borkowski, 2006, p. 249; Alexander, 2000). Given that such projects often require the involvement of vast resources – which are customarily at the disposal of state organisms rather than a single person or even a group of people – it would be reasonable, in our view, to refer to it as environmental terror⁷.

⁶ Due to the chosen object of research in the form of climate movements, we will focus in the following pages of this thesis exclusively on (pro)environmental movements, of which climate movements are a part.

⁷ At this point it is also worth raising the problem of the distinction between terrorism and terror – again, as in the case of extremism and radicalism, these are by no means synonymous. Although, to be fair, there is still no scientific consensus on this issue among researchers (Bolechów, 2002, p. 26), in our opinion, the perception of terror as violence of the stronger against the weaker (Pietkun, 2021, p. 354; Białek, 2005, p. 19) – usually the institution of the state against its own citizens or the population of occupied territories – seems correct. It is worth noting that although terror means, as a rule, massive violations of human rights and is therefore rejected by civilized states, it can be considered a legal action from the point of view of the legal order of totalitarian states. However, even in totalitarian states there may be situations where terror is carried out in violation of its own laws (Bolechów, 2002, pp. 27–28). Terrorism, on the other hand, as violence from below and customarily directed against the institutions of the state and its citizens (violence of the weaker against the stronger) is always an illegal activity (Pietkun, 2021, p. 354; Białek, 2005, p. 19; Bolechów, 2002, p. 28).

The term ‘ecoterrorism’ was likely coined by the well-known author and activist Ron Arnold (Izak, 2022, p. 148; Kharlamova, 2011, p. 32). Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines ecoterrorist activity as “the use or threatened use of violence of a criminal nature against innocent victims or property by an environmentally-oriented, subnational group for environmental-political reasons or aimed at an audience beyond the target, often of a symbolic nature” (Mukherjee, 2022, p. 106; Izak, 2022, p. 147; Kharlamova, 2011, p. 33; Buell, 2009, pp. 157–158; Jarboe, 2002). In the acknowledged *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* by Harvey W. Kushner, ecoterrorism is defined broadly as “various forms of violence and sabotage committed in the name of the environment” (2002, p. 116). It is worth noting that in Polish scientific literature, a more substantive definition of ecoterrorism has been created, wherein it was defined as “illegal, radical methods of exerting pressure by nature defenders (environmentalists) on governments and industrialists to achieve specific political goals” (Ciszek, 2010, p. 108). Ecoterrorism is often seen as a form of “single-issue terrorism” where the political demands of ecological extremists resorting to terrorist actions typically revolve around the issue of protecting the environment as a whole (environmentalists) or its specific elements (pro-animal extremists, often referred to as animalists) (Izak, 2022, p. 151; Zębek & Szejnowska, 2016, p. 461; Ciołek, 2016, p. 283; Pomarański, 2016, pp. 263–264; Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 18, 20; Chlebowicz, 2011, p. 52; Ciszek, 2010, pp. 108–109). Both of these strands are also encompassed within the broader framework of “deep ecology”⁸, which gives primacy to the natural environment and in no way exalts humans above nature, thus constituting the antithesis of a “shallow ecology” that views environmental problems through the prism of their usefulness to humans (Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 137–138; Ciszek, 2010, p. 110). Considering the above theoretical reflection, we have opted to formulate our own definition of ecoterrorism. According to this definition, ecoterrorism is fundamentally associated with the actions of groups or individuals who, through the use of violence or the threat of violence – directed at both individuals, institutions, and their property – seek to promote radical political demands aimed at safeguarding the natural environment as a whole or specific components thereof. It is crucial to emphasize that extremist activists within environmental movements vehemently oppose the characterization of their activities as ecoterrorism (Pośluszna, 2012, p. 13) and, to this purpose, they have even coined a euphemism for their actions in the form of “ecotage” – i.e., sabotage in the name of ecology (see more: Sumner & Weidman, 2013) – or

⁸ The term was introduced into public debate by Norwegian scholar Arne Næss in 1972 (Pośluszna, 2012, p. 137; Borkowski, 2006, p. 245).

“monkeywrenching” (from the name of the universal spanner used to dismantle machinery and equipment used, in their view, to destroy the environment). The etymology of these terms will be discussed later.

Continuing with this reflection, when considering terrorism as a tool or method of political struggle in the hands of extremists, it is important to acknowledge the historical connection between ecoterrorism and environmental extremism. The origins of organized environmental action and responsible natural resource management can be traced back to the 19th century. During this time, grassroots associations dedicated to preserving scenic natural sites began to emerge in Anglo-Saxon countries. Notably, the Sierra Club, an environmental organization that still operates in the USA today, played a prominent role in this movement. In the subsequent decades in the USA, there was a growing and contentious relationship between non-governmental organizations and environmentalists on one side and the federal government on the other. The latter showed particular concern for the protection of America’s wilderness from overexploitation⁹. In contrast, in Britain, the primary focus was on preserving the “English way of life” and safeguarding the British countryside from the adverse impacts of industrialization and urbanization. The outbreak of the First and Second World Wars temporarily halted the development of environmental ideas and movements. The urgency to expand wartime industries and subsequently rebuild the devastated world took precedence during these times (Ciołek, 2016, p. 287; Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 153–156). It was not until the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s – such as the exuberance of the counterculture we mentioned above (Machniak, 2018, p. 262) and the sensitization of world public opinion to the problem of environmental protection – that the environmental movements and their demands secured a prominent place in public debate. During that time, more environmentalist organizations, such as Greenpeace, began to emerge *en masse*. They directed their attention to protecting the environment *per se* rather than focusing it on specific species or naturally attractive areas. At the same time, the new environmentalist organizations introduced inventive methods of struggle in the name of environmental protection. Above all, in contrast to the conservationist organizations, they rejected, as a matter of principle, cooperation with the state and

⁹ It was back then that the foundations were laid for the two different approaches to environmental protection that persist to this day: the conservative one known as “conservation” (nature should be protected in such a way as to ensure that humans can make full use of its gifts in the form of, for example, natural resources) and the radical one collectively known as “preservation” (which assumed that human interference with nature should be kept to a minimum or even eliminated) (Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 153–154).

its institutions, opting instead for a bottom-up strategy of exerting pressure on rulers and corporations (Połusznna, 2012, pp. 160–163)¹⁰.

The birth of a new wave of environmental movements in the mid-1970s also marked a period of increasing radicalization and a growing tendency to employ violence in the name of nature preservation, commonly referred to as ecoterrorism. The terms ‘ecotage’ and ‘monkeywrenching’ emerged, initially as titles of books dedicated to radical environmental actions, during this era. The first of these, titled *Ecotage!*, was compiled in 1972 by members of the extremist organization Environmental Action (see: Love & Obst, 1972). It served as both a manifesto and a toolbox for other extremists. Three years later, Edward Abbey’s novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* was published. In the novel, a group of conservationists traveled through the western states of the USA, where they engaged in acts of sabotage against machinery and equipment to combat environmental degradation (see: Abbey, 2014). These terms, ‘monkeywrenching’ and ‘ecotage’, soon became the preferred tactics of environmental extremists in the United States. Dismantling bridges, burning billboards, destroying construction machinery, or blockading factories and offices became commonplace. Many of these actions exhibited the characteristics of ecoterrorism. One of the most renowned organizations employing monkeywrenching actions, Earth First! (EF!), was founded in the wake of the popularity of ecotage in 1980 (Izak, 2022, pp. 162–163; Mukherjee, 2022, p. 106; Ciołek, 2016, pp. 287–289; Hirsch-Hoefler & Mudde, 2014, p. 591; Połusznna, 2012, p. 173 and beyond; Ciszek, 2010, pp. 112–113; Buell, 2009, p. 154; Kushner, 2002, pp. 111–112). Although Earth First! led the way among ecoterrorist organizations for many years, internal conflicts eventually contributed to its disintegration. As early as 1992, radical extremists from EF! established a new organization in the UK called Earth Liberation Front (ELF). ELF quickly gained notoriety for numerous arson attacks on buildings, most notably at the Vail ski resort in 1998 (causing an estimated \$12 million in damages) and in San Diego in 2003 (causing damages as high as \$50 million), as well as SUV’s vehicles and other facilities believed to be associated with environmental destruction. *Ergo*, ELF at the turn of the century became – alongside its sister Animal Liberation Front (ALF) (see more: Machniak, 2018, p. 262) – the most active terrorist group in the US (Izak, 2022, pp. 163–166; Mukherjee, 2022, p. 106; Ciołek, 2016, pp. 289–292; Hirsch-Hoefler & Mudde,

¹⁰ Nevertheless, these old and distinguished conservationist organizations, such as the aforementioned Sierra Club, have benefited from the increased public interest in environmental issues, which resulted in professionalization of their activities and at the same time greatly helped expand their ranks (Połusznna, 2012, pp. 161–162).

2014, pp. 586, 591 and beyond; Chalk, 2013, pp. 203–204, 741; Pośluszna, 2012, p. 180 and beyond; Ciszek, 2010, pp. 114–115; Kushner, 2002, pp. 112–113).

It is important to note that according to FBI statistics, environmental organizations, including animal rights groups, were responsible for more than half of the acts of domestic terrorism that occurred on American soil between 1986 and 2005. The financial losses caused by ecoterrorism up to 2008 amounted to a staggering USD 110 million. However, it is worth mentioning that only 17% of these attacks by environmental extremists can strictly be classified as terrorism. Within this category, 10% involved arson attacks, while 7% used explosives. The remaining attacks by environmental extremists were categorized as acts of vandalism (45%), theft (23%), and harassment (15%) (Izak, 2022, pp. 173–175; Mukherjee, 2022, p. 106; Ciolek, 2016, p. 287; Chalk, 2013, pp. 203–204; Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 268–269). This distinction, however, does not diminish the significance of these acts as instances of ecoterrorism. While arson or bombings are undoubtedly the most spectacular and potentially severe in their consequences, any form of political violence remains political violence, regardless of the scale of the action or whether it affects victims directly (such as posing a threat to their life or health) or indirectly (such as the destruction or theft of their property) (Chalk, 2013, p. 203; Pośluszna, 2012, p. 16). What is crucial in this context is the political motivation of the attackers and their propensity to use violence. Nonetheless, acts of pro-environmental ecoterrorism have a unique characteristic not often seen in other types of terrorism, mainly, a longstanding conviction among environmentalists to avoid human casualties at all costs (Spadaro, 2020, p. 65; Pośluszna, 2012, pp. 176, 270–271). As a result, some scholars question the legitimacy of using the term ‘ecoterrorism’ (Sumner & Weidman, 2013), while others point out an interesting asymmetry between ecotage actions (typically limited in scope and not causing human casualties) and environmental terrorism committed by large corporations or governments, which can have devastating effects on a massive scale (Buell, 2009, p. 156 and beyond). In our view, the line between ecoterrorism and civil disobedience is often deliberately blurred for the ideological purpose of favoring pro-environmental movements on the one hand, and as a result of public relations exercise, seeking to counteract any potential after-effects of being labelled as ecoterrorist, on the other. However, by referring to the definition of ecoterrorism outlined earlier, it becomes easier to identify examples of this type of action. Blocking streets, writing pro-environmental slogans on walls, or even destroying signposts at future construction sites may be considered a nuisance, but their social harm is minor, and the damage is easily reversible and non-intimidating. In contrast, attacks on private or public property involving pyrotechnics or arson

are fundamentally different, as these actions result in significant and irreversible losses, carry a high risk of human casualties, and are designed to instill fear among the population and indirectly influence decision-makers.

The activity of contemporary climate movements: a case study of Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation organizations

This chapter delves into the activities of two climate organizations: Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation. These groups consist of individuals who are deeply convinced of the urgent need for radical action to combat anthropogenic global warming, often referred to by climate activists as the “climate catastrophe”. While both organizations primarily operate in their respective countries of origin, Just Stop Oil in the UK and Letzte Generation in Germany, they collaborate with each other and similar groups within the A22 Network (n.d.). They receive funding both directly from individual donations and indirectly through the Climate Emergency Fund (n.d.). While JSO and LG share the overarching goal of opposing the continued use of fossil fuels beyond 2030 (Just Stop Oil, 2023a; Letzte Generation, 2023a), their short-term postulates differ. Just Stop Oil, for instance, demands the British government immediately and completely suspend issuance of new permits and licenses for oil exploration, extraction, and processing (Just Stop Oil, 2023b). In contrast, Letzte Generation has a broader set of demands, including the imposition of a speed limit of 100 km/h on German motorways (currently there is no limit on certain stretches), the introduction of a universal public transport season ticket priced at just €9, and furthermore, the implementation of restrictions and subsidies for commercial flights by the German government. Additionally, LG calls for the establishment of a Citizens’ Assembly to facilitate a nationwide debate on socially responsible ways to achieve complete independence from hydrocarbons by the end of the current decade (Letzte Generation, 2023a; Reuters, 2022). Both organizations emphasize their commitment to the “non-violent” principle and, in theory, focus their activities on protests and educational initiatives (Just Stop Oil, 2023b; Letzte Generation, 2023b). However, they have gained international recognition through actions that may raise legitimate concerns and suspicions of a progressive radicalization, particularly evident, if we take into consideration the assumptions and conduct underlying these actions.

Road-blocking actions in both countries, favored by activists, were typically carried out on pavements and aimed to disrupt the daily lives of citizens without causing lasting harm, intimidation, or damage to property. Both Just Stop Oil

and Letzte Generation have repeatedly attempted to bring traffic in London and Berlin to a standstill in the hope of pressuring the UK and German governments to take action in line with their demands. JSO activists made a few attempts to block the M-25 motorway bypass surrounding London, with the most recent attempt occurring in November 2022. However, these actions were often carried out by relatively small groups of protesters, and as a result, the motorway was usually cleared within minutes of starting the protest (Kirk, 2022; Powell, 2022). In contrast, Letzte Generation activists have been more successful in mobilizing larger groups, involving several hundred activists from across Germany for a major blockade of Berlin in April 2023. During this event, nearly 40 streets in the German capital were simultaneously blocked, with the duration of each blockade typically ranging from 15 minutes to an hour. It is important to reiterate the principle of non-violent protest, which pro-environmental organizations have repeatedly declared as a core value, thereby signifying a commitment to avoid harm to the health of activists or others. However, the protests in Germany revealed that gluing oneself to the road surface is not necessarily harmless. To impede the efforts of law enforcement units and security forces, the activists started using a mixture of cement and epoxy resin instead of harmless glue. This tactic can lead to the need for amputation if an individual becomes stuck in this manner (Kumar, 2023; Mukul, 2023). Furthermore, these blockades are likely to obstruct critical emergency services. According to a statement from the Berlin Fire Brigade, the April action immobilized 13 of their vehicles, significantly impeding their operations and leaving over only seven of those vehicles en route to action (Connolly, 2023; The Local, 2023). Additionally, local police investigated two activists in connection with an incident where an emergency vehicle they had blocked was unable to reach an injured cyclist in time that resulted in victim's death (Zeit ONLINE, 2022). It is evident that despite their declarative commitment to the principle of "non-violence", climate organizations may inadvertently fail to uphold this principle in practice, often due to insufficient consideration of the potential consequences of their actions.

Another instance highlighting the short-sightedness of environmental activists was the two-hour blockade of Berlin Brandenburg Airport organized by Letzte Generation activists in November 2022. A group of individuals cut through the airport's perimeter fence at two points and then entered the airport grounds on bicycles; some of them even attached themselves to the airport apron. While the immediate consequences of LG's actions were relatively minor, as the airport was closed for only two hours, the potential repercussions of such actions cannot be overlooked. Firstly, it is evident that the diversion of several planes to other airports, which was

necessary during this incident, could have led to various problems and disruptions¹¹. It is also not insignificant that the activists succeeded in exposing the powerlessness of German airport security against people of sufficient determination¹². The action of the Letzte Generation environmental activists may therefore serve as an inspiration for a possible course of action to terrorists or “soldiers without distinction” (within the framework of so-called hybrid warfare) in the future, which by no means will necessarily be limited to German soil¹³ (Manu, 2023, p. 25; Reuters, 2022; Zeit ONLINE, 2022; D. Walewska, 2022; Lemańczyk, 2022). Incidentally, LG effectuated similar actions in July 2023 at Hamburg and Düsseldorf airports. This time, the blockades lasted significantly longer, causing lengthy delays that affected nearly a hundred thousand passengers. Some flights had to be canceled, while others were diverted to airports in different German cities. Notably, the activists employed the same modus operandi as they did in November of the previous year: after breaking through the airport’s perimeter fence, they reached the runways on bicycles, and blocked access by gluing themselves to the paved surface (Deutsche Welle, 2023b; Tagesschau, 2023).

A final category of controversial actions on the part of climate movements involves attacks on well-known and priceless works of art. The Just Stop Oil movement has notoriously used this strategy, as a result of which, as of June 2022, works such as *Peach Trees in Blossom* and *Sunflowers* by Vincent van Gogh, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer, and perhaps the most famous painting, *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci have been successfully targeted by JSO activists (Alao, 2022; William, 2022). On the other hand, members of Letzte Generation decided to pour mashed potatoes over Claude Monet’s painting *Les Meules* (English: *Haystacks*) (TVN24, 2022a). The modus operandi in these actions involved pouring liquid foodstuffs (canned soups, purees) over the paintings and then gluing themselves to the artworks and walls in art galleries. After each terrorist operation, the attackers issue a short statement, often in the form of a catchy slogan, which is also subsequently circulated on the social medial platforms belonging to the affiliated organization. The interpretations of these actions often display elements

¹¹ It is common knowledge that, for cost-saving reasons, airlines choose to fly with a minimum reserve of fuel for a given flight.

¹² An area under close surveillance that, interestingly enough, meets all security standards set out by the European Union legislation (applicable, needless to say, to all airport facilities across the EU territories) (D. Walewska, 2022).

¹³ One could easily imagine how this rather peculiar inaction on the part of the airport security is used by terrorist groups to carry out an attack that could result in heavy death toll or, likewise, could be used, as a part of a military operation, to take control over the airport in an upcoming conflict.

of infantilism and an attempt to create a false dichotomy between respect for works of art of immense cultural significance and efforts to combat climate change and its consequences (Alao, 2022; TVN24, 2022b; Just Stop Oil, 2022). It is important to note that, so far, no works of art have been permanently damaged by the actions of climate activists. Valuable collections are typically protected from damage or destruction and placed behind armored glass. The extent to which the participants in these actions were aware of these safeguards and the potential consequences of their activities remains an open question. JSO representatives claim that they deliberately select secured works of art and would not undertake these actions if they were not absolutely sure they would not cause harm (Just Stop Oil, 2022). From our perspective, this wave of attacks on artworks highlights a concerning trend of radicalization within prominent pro-environmental organizations. While current actions by climate organization affiliates are carried out with some consideration for the protection of the targeted works of art, there is the risk of potential imitators who may not be as cautious. It is also possible that some current activists may become radicalized over time, as has happened in the history of pro-environmental movements, and might decide that a loud act of vandalism against cultural property is necessary to draw attention to their cause, especially if they perceive public opinion as unresponsive (as seen in the histories of EF! and ELF).

Summary

Based on the theoretical and empirical considerations presented above, it can be concluded that contemporary pro-environmental organizations such as Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation meet the criteria to be classified in the category of ecological extremist movements. From a public perspective, the political demands put forth by their members are considered extreme. While few question the need to prioritize environmental well-being, the radical nature of the solutions proposed by these organizations generally faces opposition from the public. Although even nearly two-thirds of Poles would like to buy an electric car in the future as more environmentally friendly (Forsal.pl, 2021), as a rule, they do not agree with banning the registration of passenger combustion engine cars within the European Union as early as 2035 (Żółciak & Osiecki, 2023). Interestingly, among Germans the percentage opposing EU regulations in this respect is even higher than in Poland (Deutsche Welle, 2023a). It seems reasonable to assume that in other European countries this percentage will be similar. The extremism of the JSO and LG is, in our view, far more apparent in the progressive radicalization of their actions than in the

content of the demands themselves (which, as we pointed out above, are not rejected *per se*). Indeed, the blockades of Germany's largest cities are becoming more and more of a nuisance for their inhabitants and, as a result, approximately 90 per cent of Germans are opposed to Letzte Generation's pro-environmental acts (Connolly, 2023). The public is equally critical of attacks targeting the aforementioned works of art: a study published by the University of Pennsylvania showed that up to 46% of the respondents indicated that such actions would make them less supportive of the demands of the climate movement, with only 13% responding to the contrary (Patterson Jr. & Mann, 2022; Mann, 2022). It is clear that the activities undertaken by climate movements to date, intended to draw international attention to the issue of escalating global warming, are seen as extreme and likely counterproductive.

However, do the activities of JSO, LG, and similar organizations described earlier bear the hallmarks of terrorist acts? In our opinion, no, as the fundamental criterion for terrorism involves the willingness of potential terrorists to use political violence or threaten to make use of such violence. Actions such as roadblocks or events in art galleries do not typically cause significant damage to public or private property, nor do they result in harm to individuals or loss of life. Furthermore, there is no direct threat of violence in the traditional sense, as pro-environmental activists consistently emphasize their commitment to the "non-violent" principle. While these climate organizations use fear as a tool of influence, it generally pertains to the specter of an apocalyptic vision of a "climate catastrophe". In this regard, climate extremists share similarities with various religious extremists who also present visions of the end of the world as a result of human misconduct. Nonetheless, some activities within the climate movement may go out of control, and the threat of ecoterrorism could become a reality in the future. As radicalization intensifies, some activists may find it morally justifiable to cross new boundaries and resort to violence, much like the ecoterrorists in Anglo-Saxon countries at the turn of the century who started using weapons or explosives to sow fear among their fellow citizens. Finally, the question remains open as to when the first activists may become accidental victims of their own actions, which originally were not intended to involve violence. In conclusion, climate extremist movements should be closely monitored by authorities responsible for national security, and measures should be taken to minimize the threat they pose. Their actions should not be uncritically viewed as innocent activism at the hands of young people who will eventually outgrow their youthful radicalism. The history of Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front serves as a prime example of how environmental extremists, disillusioned by their perceived ineffectiveness, can turn to terrorism as a means to fight for what they believe is a just cause.

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