On behalf of the lynx, five buildings and four ski lifts at Vail were reduced to ashes on the night of Sunday, October, 18, 1998. Vail, Inc is already the largest ski operation in North America and now wants to expand even further. The 12 miles of roads and the 885 acres of clearcuts will ruin the last, best lynx habitat in the state. Putting profits before Colorado's wildlife will not be tolerated. This action is just a warning. We will be back if this greedy corporation continues to trespass into wild and unroaded areas. For your safety and convenience, we strongly advise skiers to choose other destinations until Vail cancels its inexcusable plans for expansion.

(anon 2000:47)

We have been forced to take this action ourselves because the biotechnology companies have used their wealth and power to subvert not only the process of scientific innovation but also the democratic process. Genetic manipulation of trees is a major threat to the world's environment. Forests maintain our atmosphere and climate, and sustain thousands of independent species of animals and plants. Those who are manipulating the DNA of trees, using very powerful but new and dimly understood technology, show contempt for our planet and the life it supports, including human life. They respect only profit for themselves and their shareholders.

(Brookes and Brown 1999: 3)
Introduction

It is our contention that ecologically motivated acts of sabotage or ‘Ecotage’ have become the universal dark matter of the title: ecotage may go entirely unreported but has influence. In the early 1990s political entrepreneurs attempted to construct a network that advocated 'ecotage' in the form of the Earth Liberation Front. In the UK this network was inspired by an earlier tradition of covert action from the animal liberation movement and repertoires which were diffused from Earth First! in the US. The ELF network in the UK has since decomposed but our research suggests that covert ecotage has become a widely generalised repertoire which is no longer exclusively tied to a particular ideological orientation but is used by a range of activists with various rationales for taking covert action ranging from pragmatic to ideological.

Defining Dark Matter

In physics dark matter is matter that we believe is present, but whose form cannot be ascertained by our senses. This dark matter has a visible effect on quantifiable matter. This analogy seems appropriate for capturing an important dimension of covert forms of ecotage. We know more about ecotage than we generally know about dark matter in physics, but the scale of ecotage is impossible to measure. It was in measuring the levels of action undertaken by Earth First! groups in the UK that some of the features of dark matter became more apparent. The existence of dark matter is clearly important to any attempt to analyse levels and forms of action in movements such as Earth First!

In this paper dark matter refers to particular forms of ecotage. These are intended to cause material damage to opponents. They are covert, meaning that they are carried out in secret, and activists aim to avoid identification and arrest. But perhaps most interesting is the fact that British activists rarely claim responsibility for ecotage, even anonymously, in contrast for instance to the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), and the results of ecotage are rarely reported in the media. Covert forms of sabotage have long been part of the repertoire of social movements. The Luddites, Captain Swing and other groups used sabotage as a means of defence against the new forms of political economy, and their heritage is celebrated by contemporary eco-activists. The central difference in context is that those movements could not campaign overtly without facing severe repression. Although Earth First! does face forms of repression, it is also able to maintain public activity.

Other, ideologically very different radical groups such as Class War, and Far Right Extremists also combine overt and covert action in ways that are difficult to measure. Unlike these groups, however, the dark matter of groups such as Earth First! is

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For instance, legislation such as the Criminal Justice Act (1994) and the Terrorism Act (2000) were framed by British governments to include the kinds of protest action undertaken by Earth First! Redefining damage to property as terrorism and targeting protesters as intolerable, through the rhetoric of politicians and through the surveillance and policing carried out by state agencies, have heightened the degree of confrontation with the state in the UK.
non-violent. While the meaning of non-violence is much debated and contested, the non-violence of Earth First! is based on a commitment (which can be pragmatic or moral) to avoid physical harm to people or animals, a position which is consistent with the most traditional meaning of violence (Keane 1999).

In the USA the ecotage associated with Earth First! was primarily targeted at developments that threatened to erode wilderness areas. In the UK, initial covert actions taken by the ‘new wave’ of 90's eco-activists seem to have been inspired at least in part by the US model, though with notable differences—Not least in the scope/form(s) of covert action taken. The absence of wilderness meant that targets included a wider range of opponents who caused environmental destruction. In 1992 peat-cutting machinery was wrecked in Yorkshire, UK in an act costing £500,000, which was claimed by Earth First! This was an uncharacteristically large covert action, as our research suggests a typically British pattern of many, smaller, covert acts of sabotage, or 'pixie-ing', taking place on a regular basis across the country. Tending to have road construction sites and quarries as primary targets, covert action typically consists of "trashing" machinery, site workings, and related targets:...

...smash JCB’s, pour sugar into dozers’ petrol tanks, wipe computer hard drives etc: which obviously you shouldn’t do, never ever...

It is our contention that such acts form part of an established and accepted repertoire of activist tactics, and as such are - and have been- commonplace in activist milieu. Acts of arson and systematic criminal damage transpired during the campaign to prevent the building of the M3 across Twyford Down, also in the UK-.

I became aware... that pixie-ing [covert action] was rife...although it was very seldom spoken of...

At Pressmennen Woods in southern Scotland, trees were spiked with ceramic nails to reduce the value of timber in 1997. Reclaim the Streets actions from 1997 onwards were accompanied by often vast damage to property. In the late 90's and up to the present day, covert action against genetic engineering farm scale test sites- has been more explicitly championed by direct activists:

I think with GE the profile of criminal damage has escalated exponentially because it's the only way people see of getting rid of the test sites...

Other forms of covert ecotage occur within overt actions. For instance, during the 1996 Reclaim the Streets Party on the M41 in West London, the skirts of giant pantomime

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2 though the authors are also wary of attributing too much instrumentality- covert direct action was reported at Greenham, for example- and it is central to our argument that it was an established (though much less widespread) action repertoire before UK EF! was set up. Also see later for legacy/influence of the ALF.

3 A significant amount of covert action or "dark matter" takes place on the construction sites adjacent to protest camps; Twyford Down, Newbury, Solsbury Hill, the M11, Manchester Airport...

4 From Earth First! Action Update no.17 June 95. The humorous tone is a common feature of UK activist references to ‘dark matter’.

5 anonymous in interview 2001

6 anonymous in interview 1999
dames on stilts were used as cover for activists using pneumatic drills to break up the road. Also, during office occupations activists often refile or remove paperwork, damage hard disk drives and borrow material. Since there is a high risk of arrest on office occupations advice in the Earth First! Action update suggested that anyone taking documents should carry a piece of paper promising to return them, so that if caught they would stand a better chance of avoiding conviction for theft (Action Update no.57, April 1999).

Computer hacking or hacktivism has become more widespread, and can also be used for covert ecotage. Computer mediated communication (CMC) is of essential importance to environmental radicals, particularly in reducing the costs of spreading information (Doherty 1999). Hacktivism has been used by radical environmental activists, but cyberactivism has been mainly used for reasons other than sabotage. For instance, online protests bombarding targets with spam mail or denial of service attacks have been used on occasion, for instance by supporters of the Zapatistas in a global action targeted at Mexican financial institutions. Environmental activists interviewed by Pickerill (2000) in her study of CMC use were ambivalent about using online methods to attack opponents believing that this might lead to further restrictions being placed upon the internet.

Not all sabotage carried out by Earth First! or similar groups is based upon ecological motivations. Companies and public institutions have been targeted for their role in arms production, exploitation of the Third World or racism. For instance in 2000 electricity supplies to Campsfield detention centre for asylum seekers had to be cut after persons unknown attempted to cut the supply cables (Action Update No.68, May 2000).

The study of ecotage may be seen as an area of fringe concern, a product not of popular movements but the often fictitious construction of marginal entrepreneurs of violence. There is some evidence that opponents of radical environmentalism even promote such acts as a means of alienating the public or as employment promotion for the security services (O’Hara 1994). The category of eco-terrorism used by anti-environmentalists in the USA and the UK is often based on a combination of rhetoric and misinformation. The authors of this paper believe that the study of ecotage is centrally relevant to social movement research for a number of reasons.

First, covert repertoires of contention pose a methodological challenge to social movement theory because without awareness of the existence of covert action, an inaccurate picture of protest activity is the inevitable outcome for the researcher. Our research and indeed our experience as green activists suggest not only that ecotage occurs but also that it is often, at least in the UK, unreported. Activists fear that communicating covert ecotage will lead to arrest and the institutions targeted may be reluctant to admit that they have been subjected to such hostile attention. Further, ethical considerations

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7 More playful forms of disruption have been used such as the creation of sites with similar names to those of major businesses such as Shell and BP or of official sites with information on GM crops, that carry critiques of these targets. These sites, however, are both overt and legal.
limit researchers from giving fuller accounts where such evidence is available. It is safer for everybody simply not to know.\(^8\)

Second, covert ecotage poses a challenge to the legitimacy of liberal democratic systems, without being based on anti-democratic sentiment. Since property damage has been used as a basis for justifying new repressive legislation, designed to repress whole movements, rather than just their threat to property, establishing the motivation and rationale for covert ecotage is politically important. At present the understandable silence of its practitioners leaves the field open to their opponents.

Third, covert ecotage is a form of protest and political participation. As well as considering its effect on our understanding of the specific character of radical environmentalism, we also need to recognise it as further evidence to support Tarrow’s (1998) claim that as contention becomes a normal part of citizenship, we are moving towards a social movement society. There is no justification for viewing even acts such as covert property damage as ‘unconventional’ or ‘extremist’, as if they were exceptional and or only to be analysed from within a framework which takes for granted that they pose a threat to democracy. We argue instead, that ecotage, along with other forms of illegal protest, are acts of citizenship compatible with the expansion of democracy.

These arguments are elaborated further below. Many of the points made apply more generally than to the UK. For reasons of space and limited expertise, we have concentrated our discussion on the UK. However, in order to understand the UK case, it is necessary to explain the history of Earth First! and Earth Liberation Front in both the US and the UK, because despite the differences between them, each has influenced the other.

**The History of the Earth Liberation Front.**

Earth First! was launched in the US in 1980 on the back of Edward Abbey’s novel ‘The Monkey Wrench Gang’ which he based on accounts of ecotage that stretched back to the early 1970s (Abbey 1991). Ecodefense, an ‘ecotage’ manual, produced by EF!(US) co-founder Dave Foreman was widely distributed with hints on attacking the corporate offices of polluting companies, felling and burning advertising hoardings and dismantling animal traps. Most controversial were tactics of treespiking, which involved hammering nails, preferably ceramic to avoid discovery by metal detectors, deep into trees to destroy sawmill blades and wreck chainsaws. Continental European countries have also seen their share of ‘ecotage’. Most dramatically half of the Icelandic whaling fleet were sunk in Reykjavik harbour in 1986 by Sea Shepherd, a Canadian conservation group.

Militants in Earth First! (UK) sought to construct an Earth Liberation Front which would promote a radical political agenda and repertoires of sabotage. Shortly before their first national gathering in April 1992 a communiqué sent to the media claimed EF! (UK) responsibility for sabotaging a Fisons peat digging operation in South Yorkshire. Some EF! activists, at the time, believed that it would be legally difficult for them if the network publicly endorsed such ‘ecotage’. It was agreed at a seminal Earth First! Gathering to divide the network in two with the Earth Liberation Front indulging in secretive criminal damage and EF! using public non-violent direct action (Wall 1998).

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\(^8\) The Terrorism Act (law as of 19th Feb 2001) now defines criminal damage taken for ideological and/ or political reasons as a terrorist act. Failure to pass on such information to the relevant authorities is also a prosecutable offence.
After much debate,

it was agreed at the Gathering, Earth First! would be split into two. On the one
hand there would be an underground group the Earth Liberation Front which
would do ecotage and all the embarrassing naughtiness stuff and, on the other
hand, all the open civil disobedience kind of thing that would retain the name
Earth First! [...] people were insisting there if there was going to be a split it
shouldn't be a case of competition between units. They should be supportive so
there should be toleration by groups.9

From ELF the noun elf and the verb elving, sometimes mutating into pixie-ing
evolved. Elves aim to do rather more than manipulate symbols; rather than seeking to
embarrass or win over authority, they believe in directly and physically dealing with the
ills around them. Anonymity is vital, so that activists can avoid arrest and maximise their
ability to destroy more perceived sources of ecological ills. The acronym ELF was
playfully taken from the ALF initials of the Animal Liberation Front. Repertoires of
covert sabotage practised by the ALF were an obvious source of inspiration for such
activists, who used animal liberation networks to recruit others sympathetic to their
approach into EF! (UK). One early EF! (UK) supporter formerly active in the animal
liberation movement noted,

*a good way in was to approach the hunt saboteurs because they are already
into [a] sort of direct action and it is quite easy to show them the links [...] if you
are going to save the fox from the hunt why let it be killed by a contractor [...] from
that Plymouth EF! was set up [...] the thing that really appealed to me
initially was the deep ecology that I saw as an extension of the animal liberation
idea.*10

Within sections of the animal liberation movement there is a tradition of using covert
and disruptive direct action (Lee 1983, Roberts 1986, Ryder 1989). One link between an
ALF approach and the ELF has been via several tiny green anarchist networks. Green
Anarchist (GA), a newspaper produced by radical greens, has long championed the ALF
and sought to diffuse EF! to UK. Chris Laughton who wrote for GA, attempted to use it
to launch EF in the UK in 1987 but failed. The growth of the EF! (UK) in the early
1990s was also aided by GA. Another joint EF/GA activist noted,

'a key model throughout the 80s was the Animal Liberation Front of course in terms of
they were directly resolving things in a clandestine manner'.11

A second network- Greenpeace London- also had early networks links with EF! and was
sympathetic to the ALF. ELF tactics were also influenced by the ‘ecotage’ of EF! (US)
and then re-exported from the UK back to North America. Chris Laughton, a physics
graduate who had come into contact with EF! (US), attempted to establish an EF! (US)

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9 Anonymous in interview 1996
10 Anonymous in interview 1996
11 Anonymous in interview 1996
by importing copies of 'Ecodefense' and promoting ecotage during the late 1980s. He was disillusioned by the emergence of EF! (UK) which in his opinion did little to promote sabotage.

Laughton's libertarian right wing sympathies were rejected the ELF who believed that direct action should explicitly link environmental and social issues. The ELF was strongly promoted by a minority amongst a minority of direct action radicals using the Animal Liberation Front as a template. A number of ELF publications including the Terrarist aimed to propagate covert repertoires of contention and a discourse of anti-capitalist. Others in EF! (UK) were hostile to the ELF, viewing it as a product of masculine posturing. Polemics were swapped and a number of ELF actions were claimed by supporters. During this same EF! national gathering discussing covert action a newspaper report was published containing an unattributed statement from an EF! (UK) activist that argued that radical greens might carry out bomb attacks (Cohen 1992). This polarised positions even further.

“[Someone]...had been conned by some reporter into going on about how bombings would soon be seen in the cause of environmentalism [...] so he was all terribly embarrassed by this. That was used as a stick to beat the militants with.”

Ultimately, no ELF network developed as a consequence of this gathering. Almost no actions have ever been claimed in the name of the ELF in Britain. And yet, instead, over the 90’s covert ecotage became a standard part of many activists’ repertoire. Thus the ELF as a separate covert action network if not still born soon decomposed, biodegrading into uncoordinated, widespread and crucially mostly unclaimed ‘pixie-ing’. Importantly, its use is not restricted to the critics of non-violence, but is generalised across such divides. Typically, this activist interviewed in 1999 noted,

"I don't count violence to property as violence, I don't count the destruction of property...the destruction of machinery I think is perfectly valid, something that I enjoy immensely [laughs] and is something that is important to do..."

Criminal damage according to another interviewee is

"a very important part of what we do, and it's a part that for a long time people were very woolly about it, and said, 'oh well, EF! neither condemns nor condones [it]'... and I

12 Anonymous in interview 1996
13 See also ‘Methodological Considerations’ section later in this paper
14 Anonymous in interview 1999
think we needed to move away from that, into saying, 'well, there's a lot of very angry people out there and they are going to take criminal damage...’

Activists, even where hostile to covert ecotage, noted how such ecotage was widely accepted. Such causal acceptance in the 90’s thus contrasts clearly with more articulated resistance to forms of property damage in 80’s peace movements. Three Earth First! activists interviewed in 1995 all make this point.

*I mean there’d been whole big meetings at Greenham about whether or not we should cut a fence you know I remember that as being a big, big thing that happened.*

Yet it is essential to highlight that property was damaged in covert direct actions at Greenham and other peace camps. Sabotage had also been part of the repertoire of opponents of nuclear energy in the late 1970s. Continuity in the use of covert action within this British direct action milieu is evident in the following quote:

*‘The whole hang-up about damage to property, I think, was pretty much dispelled from an early age, because we had bits of the Greenham fence decorating our Christmas tree’*

Generally, though, it seems that the 80’s peace/nuclear movement was slower to adopt covert action as a strategy. This does probably have a lot to do with discourses on a specific type of non-violence as earlier interviews suggest; the relative scarcity of dark matter reflecting the collective identity of the peace movement at the time. Other reasons why its scale was less widespread in the peace movement than in the 90’s environmental movement are probably pragmatic. Covert damage to military bases will not reduce the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used. Other tactics, such as following Cruise missiles to their ‘secret’ dispersal sites and therefore undermining their strategic effectiveness were possibly more effective. In contrast, 90’s eco-activists feel that economic sabotage can significantly escalate the costs of construction to specific companies.

It seems, given later interviews which explicitly define damage to machinery as non-violent (see above), that somewhere along the line the resistance to ecotage shifted, with covert action eventually becoming a more generally accepted movement position. And, as discussed above, crucially at the same time in the 80’s the ALF were doing a lot of claimed covert action (‘trashing’ research laboratories etc). Thus it’s more persuasive that it’s the ALF, rather than the peace movement, who were the tactical innovators, the explicitly “early risers” (Tarrow 98) on the dark matter front- a repertoire that is well established in all networks by the 90’s. As earlier interview quotes highlight, in terms of covert action ALF appear to have had more direct influence on the nascent EF! UK movement in the early 90’s. Thus while covert property damage is therefore not wholly a

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15 Anonymous in interview 1999
16 anonymous in interview 1995
17 Anon in interview 2000
development of the 1990s and since in Britain, it is probably now more common. Its character and the rationale for its use depend upon the principal targets of direct action.

**Activist rationales for undertaking dark matter actions**

Activist discourse in certain settings (such as round a protest camp fire, or discussed abstractly during an interview) can highlight motivations for undertaking covert and unacknowledged direct action. Such campfire talk generally avoids specifics but its common occurrence during participant observation we have undertaken highlights the fact that dark matter is an integral part of activist environments. Whilst the veracity of these dark matter claims cannot be checked in most cases, and exaggeration must be allowed for\(^ {18}\), such discourse often provides an insight into activist motivations for undertaking dark matter action. Our research has found that emotional, strategic, ideological and pragmatic rationales for mobilising covertly are all flagged as important by activists.

> 'I think you need to use what resources you’ve got to the best of your ability...doing things in the dark which cost me nothing...'

\(^ {19}\)

This highlights a certain activist pragmatism—when resources are low, then covert action is viewed as the most effective way of getting results. Living in an area where there are few other activists and the costs of triggering overt mobilisation are too high, having a criminal record and wishing to carry on "being effective" but without being photographed or arrested on overt actions, having a number of ongoing campaigns which stretch ones' resources, having limited resources for other forms of mobilisation (money, activist networks, friends in NGOs, IT facilities), are all flagged in interviews/P.O. as rationales for dark matter.

*that’s what it takes, small groups of people who you trust implicitly…*

\(^ {20}\)

Seemingly, affective ties—strong social bonds—are as relevant to covert cells as they are to more 'overt' activist networks; more so, possibly, given the risks involved (though covert action is also undertaken by individuals). Echoing Granovetter (1973), activists themselves occasionally have strategic worries about such 'strong ties'- if covert cells are the only action repertoire, then activists could drop out of sight:

> it's something you could do whilst having a job...You just go out at night, and you'll do something, and then you go home and live your life in a very ordinary way.... Yeah, it's a very tempting way to go [but] I think what it does, is it stops as being a mass movement...If you're 18 and you've left school, and thought 'I really want to do this stuff', how do you get involved with it? ... so I think whilst we see that path of covert cells to go down, I think that we also need

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\(^ {18}\) Methodological problems such as these are of course common to all ethnographic data collection.

\(^ {19}\) Anonymous in interview 2001.

to keep our feet on the ground and be involved in things that are bringing about change in communities...”.  

Covert action is an effective strategic option for activists who do not want to be publicly identified with protest action. For instance, when one group of activists initiated a project which required working with several funding agencies and the local council, it was impossible for them to maintain the pattern of public confrontational actions that they had previously been involved in, and they therefore combined their new less confrontational public campaigning, with covert action.

Activists often give the specific strategic rationale of economic sabotage as highlighted below:

*economic sabotage is far more effective [a tool] against corporate enterprises to cost them money, and the most effective way to do that is to physically damage their property...yeah. It's the only thing that they recognise and take notice of... That’s my strategy*.

High levels of machine ‘trashing’ at Twyford Down in 1993, combined with the tactic of mass mobilisations-stopping of work on site through “digger-diving”- ensured that Tarmac, the main contractors, finished the road months behind budget, meaning they incurred very severe financial penalties. Insurance costs and the costs of increased security were also significant economic factors. Dark matter has very tangible results.

As with other direct action repertoires, emotional responses are interwoven into activist rationales;

*well, put yourself in their position...they're angry...something very easy they can do which doesn't harm anyone else, is to go and destroy that machine, and I also know people who see taking acts of criminal damage as being an act of love, you know [laughs]*.

Anger, frustration, grief, love - such passionate emotions fuel the fire of dark matter. In some activist circles, covert action does come with an element of macho posturing, a certain ‘swagger’. (This is perhaps most true of a type of “late at night round the fire” discourse on protest camps-though also see earlier activist comments on the ELF). It is quite possible that a significant proportion of dark matter happens partly through a desire to ‘show off’ to friends. However it would be misleading to suggest that such behaviour typifies covert action, or that it is a predominantly male activity.

**Methodological Considerations: Recording Dark Matter.**

While we know some covert action is occurring, critics are bound to ask, how is it possible to analyse its consequences when it is impossible to be sure about how much of

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21 anonymous in interview 1999
22 anonymous in interview 2001
23 anonymous in interview 1999.
it there is. Firstly, ecotage, while covert, may be reported. It is a feature of both the ALF and the ELF, in the USA, that actions are acknowledged via communiqués to the mainstream or activist media. While it is difficult for obvious reasons for academic researchers to identify and interview practitioners of covert repertoires, such actions can at least be recorded when this data is available to us. Thus protest event data sequences can be constructed that include covert ecotage as well as more conventional forms of unconventional political participation such as site occupations. Thus, for example, the (UK) Earth First! Action Update between 1993 and 1996 advertises 'Earth Nights', supposedly a national night of covert action:

From EF! AU no. 16 May 1995- ‘Diary dates’

[May] 15 ‘Earth Night- Pixies and Elves are coming out to play’

Given that actions are very rarely claimed as occurring after 'earth nights', it is impossible to map levels of activity with any confidence. It is possible that their primary purpose is to make the state/pariah companies paranoid. Yet at the very least the simple idea of 'earth nights' highlights that such discourse forms an integral part of activist identity. Similarly, a hint of dark matter levels surfaces when activist publications report the sentencing of activists for covert activity. ‘Earth Liberation Prisoners’ (ELP) - a UK support network- consistently reports such cases. Such examples can at least give an indication as to the presence of dark matter.

The more 'overt' nature of GE crop 'trashing' gives a better indication of levels of UK covert activity of a specific kind. The website for 'Primal Seeds' has a regularly updated list of GE crop trials that have been destroyed or damaged; http://www.primalseeds.org/testsite.htm. Action Update carried the following report in August 1999:

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24 The tone of the ‘diary date’ is worth focussing on. It’s consciously light-hearted, portraying covert action as a bit of a giggle. UK activist references to covert action are often of this quirky nature, contrasting with the far more militant tone of the US ELF. Possibly this is primarily to ‘normalise’ it for the readership so they are more likely to do it themselves- ie to make it seem less “hardcore”? The association of EF! ers as ‘pixies and elves’- as ‘agents of mother earth' - implicitly gives activists the moral high ground. Paganism, explicit in the movement at the time, is also an influence on this type of movement discourse.

25 Urgent ELP! Bulletin (24th March 2001):Dear friends, ELP has just learnt that Lee Himlin has been on remand for six weeks for criminal damage to quarrying equipment at the Nine Ladies quarry. Spirit of Freedom (Earth Liberation Prisoners) c/o Cornerstone Resource Centre, Leeds, LS7 3HB, England E-Mail < earthlibprisoner@mail.com > < www.spiritoffreedom.org.uk >

26 “Primal Seeds exists as a network to actively engage in protecting biodiversity and creating local food security. It is a response to industrial biopiracy, control of the global seed supply and of our food. This evolving tool is designed to empower individuals to participate in the creation of tomorrow” http://www.primalseeds.org/

27 A significant proportion of GE test sites in the UK in 98/99/2000 are reported as damaged or completely destroyed. Even with such knowledge, it is impossible to extrapolate too much - it is impossible to tell, for example, whether the high proportion of crops destroyed in the East Anglia region is due to a high presence of activists prepared to take covert action in the area, or simply the result of the disproportionally high
Harvest season is in full swing for genetic test sites – As far as we know there have been around 46 test sites fully or partly destroyed so far this season, at least a third of the total number planted. ’

Perhaps the most known- about ‘overt' criminal damage is that taken by Ploughshares activists targeting weapons, for whom "getting caught" and the subsequent court process is an integral part of the action. This strategy is identical to that taken by Cymdeithas y Iaith, the Welsh language Society.

Despite these more 'overt' forms of taking criminal damage, it is our contention that ecotage in the UK is increasingly unlikely to be acknowledged by either practitioners or targeted institutions. Activists may fear that with increasingly sophisticated techniques such as DNA testing acknowledgement of an act of ecotage may create a trail the leads to arrest. Equally those institutions targeted may rather ignore attacks than tell the media or even the police because such action would signal their relevance to other hostile activists as well as conventional NGOs and the public. These contentions are illustrated in an interview with an anonymous activist who practiced 'ecotage', who was ‘pleased’ that the sabotage of a railway line had been covered by the media but noted that covert action normally went unacknowledged. The publicity about sabotage had led to increased local concern thus flagging up the quarry as a source of grievance. This activist claimed never to have communicated with the press.

In the USA the ELF, which was inspired by the UK network, now has a press officer and a web site. Numerous spectacular actions often involving arson and other forms of large scale property damage are reported in the media after ELF communiqués. In contrast with the US ELF and the UK ALF, in the UK there is no web site, newsletter or press representative for the ELF, or indeed for any covert activists, apart from the exceptions already discussed. This is likely to be in part the result of police action against the ALF in the 80’s, where ALF press officers such as the northern press officer Roger Yates were tried and convicted for conspiracy. In these conditions, staying underground makes good sense. A close study of direct action movement newsletters such as the Earth First! Action Update, Schnews, Do or Die! and the ultra militant Green Anarchist show that virtually no actions have been claimed by the UK ELF since 1996. Typically the years 1997/1998 showed only one ELF action.

While numerous genetic sites have been sabotaged, often such sabotage is publicly unacknowledged by the saboteurs (though, importantly, it is reported on activist websites as highlighted above, in contrast to other covert targets. It is quite likely that

amount of GE crops grown in this area, with activists coming from outside the locality to take covert action. All these factors may be relevant.

28 EF! AU no. 61 1999.

29 "Trident Ploughshares is a campaign to disarm the UK Trident nuclear weapons system in a non-violent, open, peaceful and fully accountable manner..." http://www.gn.apc.org/tp2000/

30 “the principle thing with Cymdeithas is that if you cause damage then you’ve got to take responsibility for it…” -anonymous in interview 2000.

Although, occasionally Cymdeithas y Iaith's covert activity wasn’t claimed. Cymdeithas y Iaith's mostly accountable action/ criminal damage should be differentiated from the more "violent"/ "extreme" criminal damage (the firebombing of English- owned properties, for example) taken covertly by other Welsh nationalists. Ongoing project work by the co-authors discusses Cymdeithas y Iaith as an activist network in more detail.
activists publicising information about crop damage are relying on high levels of public concern over the spread of GE material into the environment). The communiqué at the start of this paper is very rare and no communiqués from the ELF or any other covert practitioners taking responsibility for covert crop–trashing have been identified during our research. Clearly, while some forms of ecotage are claimed by other networks such as Genetix Snowballs or occur as with the June 1999 (J18) anti-capitalist street party on such a large scale that they cannot be ignored, much ecotage simply takes the form of dark matter.

During interviews and participant observation throughout the 90’s the authors of this paper have been surprised to find out how common the practice of unreported ecotage is in the UK. Academic accounts which aim to explain how and why mobilisations happen, why people take action and under what circumstances, are compromised by the existence of ‘dark matter’, which they rarely take into account. For example, researchers and theorists could make assumptions about a range of factors consistently found to lead to / be conducive to mobilisation: a ‘strong’ issue to mobilise around that has the potential to attract a range of allies; a well-networked, highly motivated, socially connected group of activists or opening political opportunities [Tarrow 1998]. In a specific case study, all the factors may be there for overt mobilisation, and yet it’s not happening. Basically, the activists may well have made a tactical decision to mobilise covertly as their only action repertoire.

Such covert and unacknowledged action is thus difficult to map. Research into ‘dark matter’ is fraught with ethical and practical difficulties. As researchers who strive to provide saturated accounts of our field we cannot provide conclusions which are ‘closed’ but by presenting provisional possibilities we aim to open an area of critically important debate. Research by the co-authors using interviews, participant observation and historical documentation shows that covert ecologically motivated damage to property is becoming/ has become more widespread throughout the 90’s but its nature has changed in ways that make it even more difficult to map in any meaningful way. These problems can at least be acknowledged.

Dark Matter as a Challenge to the Legitimacy of the State

If dark matter is present, to what extent is it a threat to democracy? The answer to this does not depend upon the extent of covert ecotage, because it is a question of principle rather than scale. While activists’ rationales for taking covert action differ, their justifications for doing so do not stem from anti-democratic sentiment. Those involved in Earth First! and other similar groups are committed democrats, but they regard current democratic institutions as inadequate. There is a contrast between current discourse on democracy in the UK and US radical environmental movement and some of the earlier practitioners and advocates of ecotage in the US such as the Unabomber and Dave Foreman, who did not see the achievement of a participatory democracy as one of their goals. Discussions on the precise form of alternative institutions are rare, and when they

31 Perhaps they feel too stretched to take on the setting up of a camp, have other issues to mobilise over, or just feel that ‘pixie-ing’ is more efficient, for example.
take place familiar issues such as how one might deal with self-governing communities that supported racist measures (a theme debated at a recent activists’ discussion group).

Yet, perhaps the more fundamental question is what gives activists’ the right to damage the property of others. First and most obviously, activists challenge the principles of property law upon which such an argument rests. This does not have to lead to a complete rejection of private property as the only alternative. When Shell are targeted for the profits made in Nigeria that depend upon working with and benefitting from state oppression of the Ogoni people, it is the injustice of Shell’s wealth that is at stake. Most action concentrates upon the most obvious instances of such injustice and is intended to both redress the balance and to expose and reveal power.

Covert ecotage only works as an effective challenge to illegitimate forms of power when it is used in combination with overt and public action. If there was only dark matter and no other kind of action occurring, there would be some retribution for the injustices carried out by the powerful, but, little or no political effect. The economic damage caused by covert action is tiny. But its effect is greater when combined with public campaigns which explain the reason for the action and provide a basis for mobilising a wider opposition. For activists dark matter can be argued to be justified as resistance to oppression. Psychologically it helps to bridge the gap between the sense that the change required is vast and the need to feel that actions are having a direct effect. Thus, whether covert property damage is ethically correct depends on a moral judgement about the role of the targets in a wider social system.

Whatever the practical effects of dark mater, it is clear that practitioners of property damage are challenging the legitimacy of the existing political system. This is true both of those who carry out covert actions and overt actions, such as those of the Ploughshares activists. The latter are not carrying out traditional civil disobedience in the liberal sense. They believe that it is morally correct to physically damage weapons and do not justify their action as an appeal to the state to act. Moreover, courting arrest does not mean that they accept the right of the state to punish them. They use the legal system pragmatically and increasingly successfully to defend themselves using international law. Juries have been increasingly reluctant to convict defendants such as Ploughshares activists or (with more liberal motivations) the Greenpeace campaigners who were acquitted of charges of criminal damage after trashing a GM crop in Norfolk.

Dark matter can also be viewed in part as a response to an increase in repressive legislation and other action by the State. As an action strategy, it neatly fits the POS framework, in that ecotage is a product of culture frustrated by conventional forms of political activity; in a system seen as closed, disruption may have a powerful logic. Current research by the co-authors highlights a significant amount of police violence during protest events reported in activist publications. These claims of State-sanctioned

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32 “By the concept of Political Opportunities, I mean consistent - but not necessarily formal or permanent - dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people’s expectations for success or failure...”(Tarrow 98:pp76)

33 the co-authors themselves have direct experience of the use of what police call “reasonable force”.
force have been repeated during life history interviews and participant observation. Certainly activists themselves construct the State as often sanctioning unjustifiable levels of force and repressive policing. The increasing tendency to construct primarily non-violent eco-activists as “eco-terrorists”\(^\text{35}\), the criminalisation of protest under the 95 Criminal Justice Act\(^\text{36}\) and the introduction of the 2001 Terrorism Act, are very likely to have played a part in triggering covert action and providing a political/strategic rationale. As democratic doors close in protestors’ faces, it is hardly surprising that they pick the locks on others.

**Conclusion**

In writing this paper the authors have struggled with the basic problem of whether to use sources available to us or not. As (to a greater or lesser extent) having through our own involvement in direct action networks\(^\text{37}\) perhaps a greater degree of access to them, we are also in a position to abuse this trust and access\(^\text{38}\). There are ethical-not to say legal-considerations here. For this reason this has been a difficult paper to write. Despite the small snapshots of activist experience outlined in this paper, covert action (in the UK at least) is still dark matter as far as academia is concerned, and is likely to remain so. Yet covert and unacknowledged direct action is important. When it comes to the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of political action (Melucci 1996), dark matter as an activist repertoire can be woven into the standard social movement ‘theoretical toolkit’. For example, it is quite possible that when movements or networks (local or national) appear to be moving through more ‘dormant’ phases-latent networks (Melucci 1996) rather than highly visible mobilisations- there may be more ‘dark matter’ occurring. Yet the unacknowledged nature of much covert direct action may mean that it is missed when researchers using such techniques as protest event sequences examine mobilisation waves. Whilst levels or significance of such action cannot be quantified, acknowledging its existence and its potential can be factored into academic accounts of social movement activity.

It is the contention of the authors that covert action is not ‘extremist’ but rather (as discussed at the start of this paper) is a normal, everyday form of protest and political participation taken by actors in a social movement society. It is only when viewed through the lens of the dominant paradigm that ‘pixie-ing’ becomes the actions of violent extremists. Now legally defined as terrorists, UK practitioners of covert action have consistently given rationales which explicitly state that their actions are consciously targeted to ensure no harm to life. As highlighted in the paper, activists who explicitly define themselves as non-violent have no problem with ecotage. In interviews and in

\(^{34}\) North Wales activists are currently pursuing a legal claim over levels of force used at the Brewery Fields evictions in 1998. Such action is not uncommon.

\(^{35}\) This term was in currency from the early 90’s(certainly not an activist construction but rather a media one). The Terrorism Act made a cultural definition a legal one.

\(^{36}\) To give just one specifically-targeted clause as an example, trespass became a criminal, not a civil, offence.

\(^{37}\) Plows, A., (1998) "In with the in crowd": Examining the methodological implications of practising partisan, reflexive,"insider" research. (unpublished MA dissertation, University of Wales, Bangor)

\(^{38}\) See Roseneil (1993) p204 for her feelings on “using” her subjects.
other arenas, activists consistently define the State and the system of neoliberalist economics as the violent extremists, citing examples such as the British sale of arms, torture equipment and other weapons of war to dictatorships. Covert action must be seen against the background of the discourses of the powerful.

39 From Schnews http://www.schnews.org.uk Issue 217, Friday 25th June 1999 : editorial on “J18” anti-capitalist action in London. “The actions of a few hundred troublemakers clearly intent on causing mayhem and violence marred what was otherwise a great day out. This small, highly organised group, some of them wearing suits and sporting mobile phones, managed to get into buildings housing major financial institutions. One man who didn't want to be named told SchNEWS: "They had little or no connection with the thousands of ordinary protesters out on the streets and were clearly intent on causing serious violence. They used computer and comms equipment and were quite aware of what they were doing. We did all we could to stop them but by the end of the day they had killed 11,000 kids. That may sound shocking, but these people are responsible for that, through easily preventable poverty-related diseases, every day. They give protests like the one today a very bad name, because they own the newspapers that print complete crap about what's really going on. It is very important that the public supports our efforts to bring these people to justice".
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