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Sabotage

A blast furnace operator at a steel mill purposely makes a slight slip-up, causing a cold shut-down. An ex-employee cuts telephone cables serving half a million people. A plumber puts small nails in the pipes of a new building. A computer programmer deletes all copies of data on a computer system. An anti-tobacco activist creatively disfigures and rewrites a billboard advertising cigarettes. A member of Ploughshares uses a hammer to dent the nosecone of a nuclear missile.¹ A forest activist surreptitiously pulls up survey stakes put in by a logging company. An environmental activist pours sand into the fuel tank of a bulldozer. An animal liberationist torches a laboratory used for animal experiments.

These are all examples of sabotage, which can be thought of as purposeful action to damage, destroy or displace physical objects in order to achieve a social objective.² There is a long history of sabotage by workers, for example to obtain a break by forcing a halt to a relentless assembly line. Nonworkers can “disrupt production”—in other words interrupt business as usual—in a wider sense by a range of actions against physical objects.

In the workplace, sabotage as a strategy is commonly portrayed as resisting progress. In the late 1700s and early 1800s in Britain, in the dawn of the industrial revolution, the livelihoods of cottage workers using handlooms were threatened by mechanised looms in factories. Some of them responded by smashing the factory machinery. Inspired by the example of leader Ned Ludd, these workers were called Luddites. Since then, “Luddite” has been turned into a term of derision, treated as synonymous with opposing progress.

However, this is a rewriting of history by the victors: the capitalists. The Luddites were not just machine-smashers; they were campaigning for a system that provided satisfying work and income, a system which had come under attack by the capitalist factory

system, which in the early years obtained higher output only through severe exploitation of employees.

Sabotage has only occasionally been an organised workers' strategy. There are a few who argue for this approach, notably David F. Noble in his book *Progress Without People: In Defense of Luddism*. He sees capitalism as a struggle between capital and workers in which capital has all the weapons and workers are not even in the fight. In his own words: "There is a war on, but only one side is armed: this is the essence of the technology question today. On the one side is private capital, scientized and subsidized, mobile and global, and now heavily armed with military spawned command, control, and communication technologies."³ On the other side, workers are in disarray. Noble argues that the way workplace technologies are constructed reflects the capitalist system of power and, once constructed, these technologies help perpetuate capitalism.⁴ For example, the assembly line subordinates workers to the pace and tasks set by the line, reducing their opportunities to exercise autonomous judgment and to design and run the production process themselves. This is compatible with Gandhi's analysis of mechanised textile production, which subordinates workers, compared to the hand-spun cloth khadi, whose production meshes with community self-reliance.

It can be said, in short, that certain technologies embody capitalist social relations. Capitalists choose or design machinery to serve their purposes, and in practice the machinery gives owners and managers power over workers.

Analysis of the role of technology in capitalism is one thing. How to challenge this is another. Noble observes that smashing the machines is one response by workers.⁵ But is it effective?

From a nonviolence point of view, sabotage falls into a borderline category. Nonviolent action always means no physical violence against humans. Sabotage can be interpreted as physical violence against physical objects. The type of sabotage of interest here involves no direct harm to humans.⁶

We can only be concerned with direct harm, since indirect harm is possible with any sort of nonviolent action. A boycott can lead to a business going bankrupt, a far more serious harm than a few broken windows.

Among nonviolent activists, there are different attitudes to sabotage. Some, taking a strong line against any form of physical

violence, would rule out sabotage altogether. Others think it is fully legitimate, while an intermediate position is that it depends on the circumstances.

It is worth keeping in mind that people do not always mean the same thing by the word “violence.” In the early 1970s, a group of researchers investigated attitudes to violence by surveying over 1000 US men. Among their revealing findings were that more than half the men thought that burning draft cards was violence and more than half thought that police shooting looters was *not* violence. The researchers concluded that “American men tend to define acts of dissent as ‘violence’ when they perceived the dissenters as undesirable people.”⁷ In other words, many of the US men used the label “violent” when they thought something was bad and “nonviolent” when they thought it was good. In contrast, from a nonviolence viewpoint burning draft cards is a form of sabotage—destroying physical objects—and of course shooting someone is definitely a form of violence.

Another way of defining sabotage is as violence against property. This definition highlights ownership rights under capitalism, since nearly every physical object is owned by someone or something, whether individual, corporation or government. Many people see violence against property as more despicable than violence against humans.

There may be significant cultural as well as individual variations in the way people respond to sabotage, as indeed in the way that they respond to nonviolent actions such as strikes and fasts. Responses will also vary greatly depending on what the sabotage involves. A giant explosion wiping out a shipping terminal is quite a different thing from deletion of a computer file, which affects only a few atoms. Yet if the computer file is of crucial importance—for example, a list of labour activists targeted for impending arrest—its destruction may have a greater impact than the destruction of the terminal.

Sabotage is a method and so cannot be assessed in total independence from the goal of an action or campaign. If the goal is improved wages and conditions, with little fundamental challenge to capitalism, then use of sabotage is unlikely to make the challenge any greater. What is possible, though, is to look at how a nonviolent campaign is altered by use of sabotage.

1. Does the campaign help to

- undermine the violent underpinnings of capitalism, or
- undermine the legitimacy of capitalism, or
- build a nonviolent alternative to capitalism?

In principle, sabotage can contribute to any of these. Whether sabotage adds to or subtracts from the campaign depends greatly on the circumstances, including cultural attitudes to the particular action taken. In some countries, property is seen as so sacred that any form of obstruction or damage is vehemently condemned. Owners of a shopping mall might be just as outraged by protesters handing out leaflets in the mall as by graffiti on shop windows. A key element here is the attitude of third parties: those observing the action, whether directly or through reports, including the media. Damage to property can evoke incredibly hostile attitudes. But again, does this mean the campaign is less effective, for example in undermining capitalism's legitimacy? That depends. No hard and fast conclusions can be drawn on this point.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

Many types of sabotage, because they are dangerous and because they would be blocked if opponents knew about them in advance, must be planned in secret. If environmentalists announced they were going to put sand in fuel tanks or spikes in trees, they would be intercepted and probably arrested before succeeding. Many types of sabotage are kept secret from beginning to end, with no admissions afterwards. Participation in these sorts of actions is very limited, typically with no more than a few people involved.

Ploughshares actions are direct disarmament, such as damage to weapons systems, principally as a form of symbolic protest, though sometimes the financial and logistical costs to the military are substantial. In these actions, planning is in secret but once the action is taken, the activists acknowledge their responsibility and surrender to police. In these cases, participation in the detailed planning is limited but wider involvement in support for ploughshares actions is possible, especially in court struggles.

Widespread participation is not necessarily possible for any form of nonviolent action. In repressive regimes, even meetings of a few dissidents can be illegal and lead to surveillance and arrests. However, in anticapitalist struggles this level of repression is unusual, so that a

high level of participation is often possible. When use of sabotage leads to a drastic reduction in participation, that is a definite negative.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

It is hard to imagine a nonviolent society in which sabotage is routine. If workers control the production process, then there should be no incentive to damage equipment. That means that sabotage as a method is unlikely to ever reflect the goals of a campaign. Another way to express this is to say that sabotage will seldom be a part of "living the alternative."

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

At a commercial level, it is hard to imagine cooption of sabotage. Will there be firms advertising "Sabotage Services at Your Disposal" seeking to employ members of the radical environmental group Earth First!? In this direct sense, use of sabotage in a campaign is resistant to cooption. But there are other roads to cooption, notably via organised violence of the state.

Sabotage is a standard military method. Bridges are blown up and power lines severed. Today, in the "information age," militaries are deploying "information warfare," for example by spreading computer viruses in opponents' military information systems. In the sphere of ideas, spreading of disinformation—carefully designed false or misleading information—has long been a standard tactic. This incorporates propaganda but also includes techniques such as running clandestine radio stations that are not what they seem to be. All these techniques can be and are used against activists, who can be subject to intensive surveillance and "dirty tricks."⁸

Cooption can occur when activists start "playing the game" of deception, disinformation and dirty tricks, engaging in a sort of competition in which the object is to outwit and disrupt the opponent. One of the objects in this game is to discredit the opponent and one way to do this is to make the opponent appear, correctly or falsely, to be engaged in some unsavoury activity. Police do this when they use agents to foment violence during a protest in order to discredit the organisers in the eyes of the public. One of the risks of sabotage is that nonviolent activists may start to engage in underhanded tactics.

At a more serious level, sabotage can be a stepping stone to violence against humans. If destroying an unoccupied boat is acceptable, what about a building that *probably* is unoccupied? The line between violence and nonviolence can become blurred more easily.

One way to assess the risks of sabotage is to ask, would it be acceptable for the other side to use the same techniques? One of the great advantages of nonviolence is that if it is used against the “wrong people” the consequences are not so disastrous as violence: the harm from occupation of a building is far less than blowing it up and killing all the people in it.

Consider the tactic of damaging weapons, such as by Ploughshares activists. Most peace activists would be most happy for anyone else to damage or destroy weapons. So destroying weapons is a technique that is not harmful if used by the other side. However, spreading a computer virus is a different story. Having computer files destroyed by a virus is never welcome and can be catastrophic for nonviolent activists as well as police and corporations. So this form of sabotage is probably less suitable as a form of nonviolent action.

In principle sabotage can be considered just another method of nonviolent action but in practice it often has many disadvantages. It is much less likely to be participatory and it never incorporates goals into methods. It is open to cooption through engaging in games of deception and damage. Finally, it has an ambiguous relation to nonviolence.

However, there is a risk in becoming fixated with the problems of sabotage simply because it is perceived to be a form of violence, namely “violence against property.” This alone should not be the criterion for rejecting sabotage. Every method of nonviolent action needs to be assessed for its openness to participation, ends-means compatibility and susceptibility to cooption. The circumstances have a strong effect on how methods measure up according to these criteria. The key point is that assessment of all methods should be undertaken, without automatic acceptance or rejection in advance. Finally, to be compatible with nonviolence principles, this assessment needs to be a participatory one.

Notes

1 “Ploughshares” is a term generically applied to principled peace activists who, after taking direct action to damage or destroy components of the military system, then surrender themselves to police. See for example Liane Ellison Norman, *Hammer of Justice: Molly Rush and the Plowshares Eight* (Pittsburgh: PPI Books, 1989).

2 Pierre Dubois, *Sabotage in Industry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). For numerous examples see Martin Sprouse with Lydia Ely (eds.), *Sabotage in the American Workplace: Anecdotes of Dissatisfaction, Mischief and Revenge* (San Francisco: Pressure Drop Press, 1992). See also *The Black Cat Sabotage Handbook* (Eugene, OR: Graybill, n.d.) and the magazine *Processed World*.

3 David F. Noble, *Progress Without People: In Defense of Luddism* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1993), p. 1.

4 David F. Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). See also David Dickson, *Alternative Technology and the Politics of Technical Change* (London: Fontana, 1974).

5 Noble thinks it would be presumptuous to provide a programme of action for the labour movement. He does recommend intellectual work: “In essence, if workers have begun to smash the physical machinery of domination, so responsible intellectuals must begin deliberately to smash the mental machinery of domination.” (*Progress Without People*, p. 51).

6 Avoidance of harm to humans is emphasised in manuals for environmental saboteurs: Dave Foreman and Bill Haywood (eds.), *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* (Tucson, AZ: Ned Ludd Books, 1988, second edition); *Earth First! Direct Action Manual* (Eugene, OR: DAM Collective, 1997).

7 Monica D. Blumenthal, Robert L. Kahn, Frank M. Andrews and Kendra B. Head, *Justifying Violence: Attitudes of American Men* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972), p. 86.

8 For excellent advice on how activists can respond to surveillance and harassment, see Brian Glick, *War at Home: Covert Action Against U.S. Activists and What We Can Do About It* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).