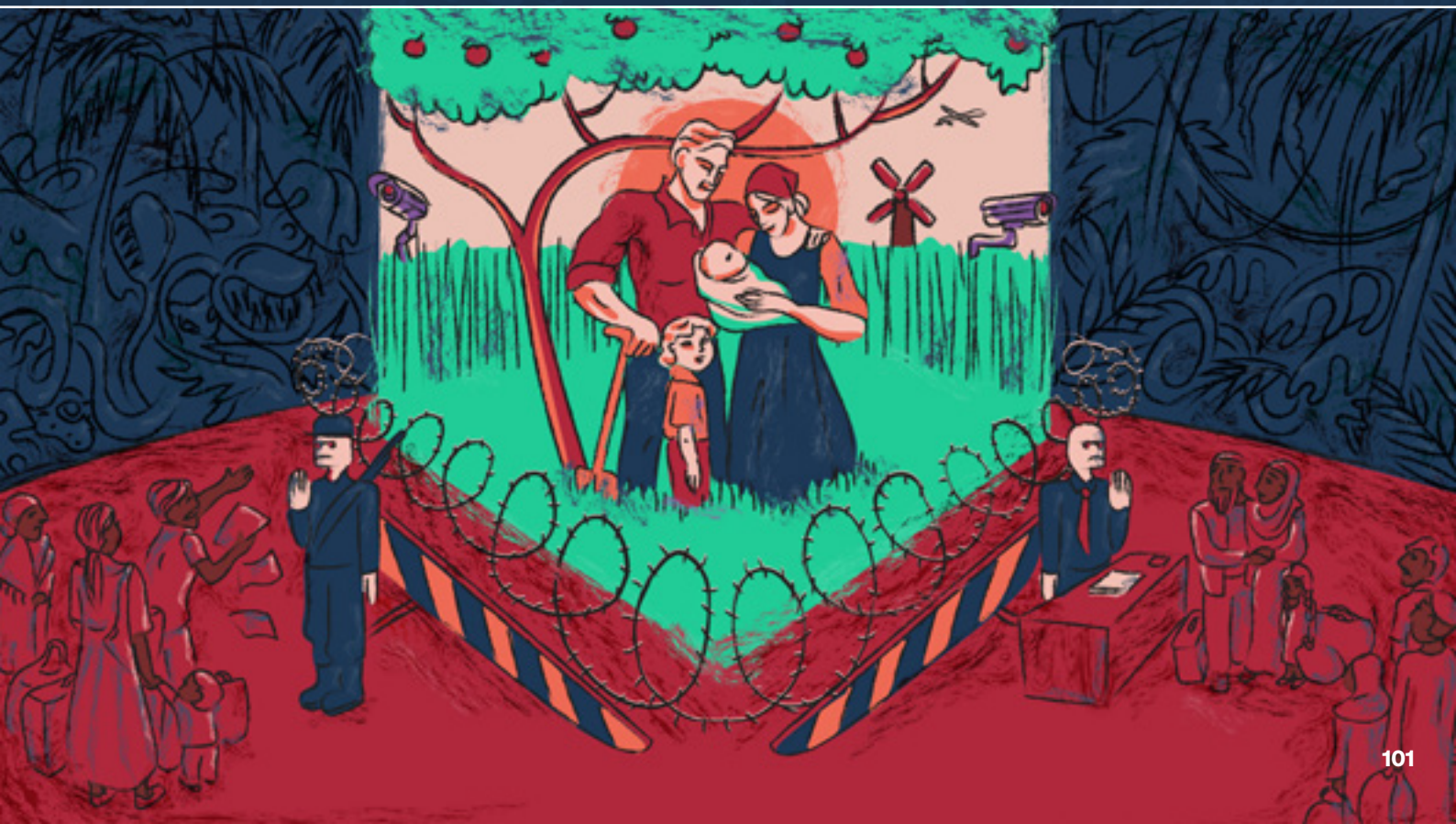


THE NEW BLOOD AND SOIL: Nature, culture, and eco-fascism on the identitarian right

Matt Varco



The far-right may be known today for their climate denialism, but there is an emerging strand of fascist politics that draw on ecological metaphors to justify xenophobic politics. This articulation could become more popular at a time of economic and environmental crises, unless environmental movements protect against these far-right intrusions and articulate a clear anti-fascist politics.

This writer came of age politically in the ‘merchants of doubt’ era. The far-right I have known is neoliberal, pro-market, and deregulationist. As such, I have become accustomed to an image of those on the right of the political spectrum as the great enemies of the environment. They are fossil capitalists, even fossil fascists; they want to ‘Drill, Baby, Drill’, tearing up the earth to sate the petro-capitalist death drive. But my studies of the far-right in Germany (and beyond) have led me to realise that, historically, this stance towards ecological questions represents only one among several possible options for the right. As the 2020s usher in a new age of nativism, and the high-tide of globalisation starts to recede, the far-right is rediscovering other ways of articulating its authoritarian worldviews with ideas of nature and the environment. This essay warns of how the right is tapping philosophical sources within its own intellectual tradition and using these to develop ecological positions beyond established climate denialism. I begin with a case study from Germany, a hotbed of these kinds of ideas since the Industrial Revolution, and then broaden the scope to consider the resonance of these eco-nationalist and eco-fascist ideas in other geographical contexts.

Understanding ecology from the right

Many regard right-wing ideologies (nationalism, conservatism, fascism) as being fundamentally incompatible with environmentalism. The former think in terms of borders, hierarchies, and the nation, whereas the latter requires, by definition, an internationalist, planetary horizon of politics. Although the last 50 years have seen anti-environmentalism become the default position of nationalist and right-wing populist parties across the world, driven by billionaire philanthropists and fossil fuel interests,³²¹ this connection masks a much longer history of ecological thinking within different currents of right-wing political thought and practice. Historically, critics have shown how appeals to ‘nature’ help shore up political constructs that serve the powerful, from the idea of borders³²² as ‘natural’, timeless separations between different human groups, to the idea of class hierarchy as an organic feature of human society.³²³ Ecological metaphors can also be transferred uncritically into reactionary claims about human societies – witness the discourses around invasion biology,³²⁴ for example, which Banu Subramaniam argues provides cover for xenophobic distinctions between ‘domestic’ and ‘alien’ species based on arbitrary criteria of ‘nativeness’, or the use of concepts like ‘carrying capacity’ from ecological economics to justify tight restrictions on immigration³²⁵ by nativist environmentalist think tanks in the United States (US).

To understand these contemporary affinities, it is useful to look back to the twin birth of romanticism and nationalism in the nineteenth century, particularly in Germany, where the two movements were particularly pronounced. As societies grappled with the unfolding effects of modernity, urbanisation and the industrial revolution, many artists and writers tried to push back against a scientific worldview that reduced the natural world to inert raw material to be exploited to human ends. This drive against the rationalising and fragmenting thrust of modernity led to a search for roots, wholeness, and authenticity, which for many Romantics could be found in the study of nations and their customs. The German folklorist Wilhelm Riehl often celebrated the vitality of the peasantry and countryside, as a

counterweight to the uprootedness of city life. His 1854 book *Land und Leute* claimed there were deep historical links between geography and ethnicity, and posited three 'zones' within German-speaking Europe, populated by distinct climatically defined cultures. This use of the natural environment as a primary explanation for human differences appealed to Romantics elsewhere who were looking for more organic explanations of human history. For example the English writer George Eliot (the pen name of Mary Ann Evans) reviewed *Land und Leute* favourably, praising Riehl's sensitivity to the environmental influences on national culture. A critic of industrialisation herself, Eliot lamented that the German depth of feeling towards the past, valorised by Riehl, had been made impossible in England by the rise of 'Protestantism and commerce'. This vein of 'agrarian romanticism', as Riehl described his politics, was quite earnest about nature as a source of cultural vitality, but also set up a rigid and essentialising view of how human society is determined by its environment.

In the early twentieth century, the *Heimatschutz* movement, a grouping of early middle-class conservationist societies, inherited these strands of Romantic thought and channelled them towards the wholesale protection of landscapes. *Heimatschutz* drew on the ambiguous meanings of *Heimat*, signifying both 'natural habitat' and 'national homeland', to advance an agenda on environmental protection with a strong emotional charge. Some historians praised *Heimatschutz* for its ability to channel people's emotions into environmentalist action,³²⁶ but Thomas Lekan also reveals the strong nationalist currents within the movement, particularly in wartime, when it drifted into a more exclusive understanding of who belonged to, and in, the German *Heimat*. In Lekan's phrase, this was a conservationist movement that provided ways of 'imagining the nation in nature'.

In a more scientific vein, the modern paradigm of 'ecology' can also be traced back to Germany, to the zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term to refer to the study of interconnections between living beings. He was also the co-founder of the German Monist League in 1906, which advocated for monism, a philosophical alternative to dualism (man vs nature, subject vs object, etc.), but which took on a strong nationalist orientation and attracted many members from eugenics associations.³²⁷ The League became a vehicle for the political application of Haeckel's ecological ideas, which drew on the idea of national communities as living, growing entities engaged in a struggle over scarce resources. This highly social Darwinist philosophy has been widely credited with inspiring the ideas of *Lebensraum* and *Geopolitik* which influenced the National Socialists some decades later.³²⁸

To this day, parts of the German right still reach back to this tacit sense of the German people as uniquely and innately 'in touch' with the natural world, even as it remains hostile to other parts of an environmentalist agenda. Much of the radical right in Germany remains outspokenly opposed to *Klimapolitik* on populist grounds (again often funded by the lobbying arm of US fossil capital³²⁹), depicting climate legislation as being inflicted on ordinary people by an out-of-touch, cosmopolitan Green elite obsessed with abstract questions of climate and ignorant of local concerns. Despite the vocabulary of a 'culture war' regarding green legislation, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) still depicts itself as the defender of a natural German homeland threatened by the uprooting effects of immigration and globalisation.³³⁰ In 2023, Germany's longstanding neofascist National Democratic Party (NPD) changed its name to *Die Heimat*, tapping the emotional and political undercurrents of this loaded term for the natural environment. Even supposedly apolitical calls to participate in sustainability initiatives often appeal to a tacit version of a similar impulse, positioning Germany's leadership on questions of environment and energy as a source of positive national pride³³¹ (in high demand in a national context wracked by anxiety about legitimate and illegitimate forms of nationalism).

Die Kehre and identitarian ecology in Germany

Attempting to channel these diverse natural–national associations into a more concrete ideology and policy programme, a group of nationalist activists around the former AfD staffer Jonas Schick, founded *Die Kehre* magazine in 2020. Schick’s political roots lie in the identitarian scene – a young, educated, technologically savvy and culturally energised strand of right-wing nationalism newly popular in Europe.³³² Linked with many of the major right-wing populist parties through think tanks, party youth chapters, and personal connections, these identitarian activists aim to keep a stream of radical ideas flowing into the European political mainstream, pressuring parties like the AfD to maintain their radicalism and resist co-option into the political establishment. *Die Kehre* is a particularly vivid illustration of this strategy at work. It is pitched as a sophisticated, respectable magazine of conservative ecological ideas, with the tagline, ‘Journal for Nature Protection’. The phrase ‘die Kehre’ translates as ‘the turn’, a reference to the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger’s 1962 essay ‘Technology and the Turn’, which critiqued the ‘technologisation’ of western societies and the increasing abstraction of modern life.³³³

The magazine’s leaders have clearly made an effort regarding *Kehre*’s presentation and optics. Its staff writers have master’s degrees or even PhDs; the contributors page spotlights reams of relevant expertise in fields of energy, agriculture, and urbanism. Since its founding in 2020, *Kehre* has already secured some high-profile guest interviews with figures in the world of science and ecology – the British nature writer Dave Goulson, the US anarchist Derrick Jensen – major victories for a young magazine with a circulation probably in the low thousands. In contrast to its precursor magazine *Umwelt&Aktiv*,³³⁴ an NPD-affiliated, eco-nationalist tabloid-style publication, whose subscriptions and niche in the far-right publishing market it inherited, *Kehre* pursues an intentionally high-brow strategy. Its articles on ecology, society and history are peppered with references to literature and history, and heavily footnoted with articles from *Nature* and *Science*, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), as well as works of social theory. A representative article on ‘Growth and Consumer Society’ refers to Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society*, Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*, and Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, using these to call for a return to ‘German ways of life’ as an antidote to turbulent and uncertain social conditions. The magazine also enjoys plenty of access to the upper ranks of the AfD, and the European right-wing intellectual elite. *Kehre*’s early issues ran intimate interviews with new-right intellectual Götz Kubitschek and the head of AfD’s Thüringen branch, Björn Höcke, widely seen as one of the party’s most radical figures. Kubitschek writes of his love of the slow rhythms of life on the land in his small village, while a six-page feature shows Höcke relaxing in an orchard with Schick, the latter dressed in the academic smart casual attire often favoured by identitarian activists.

The Berlin-based antifascist library Apabiz calls *Die Kehre* a ‘high-gloss magazine’, positioning it as a mainstreaming vehicle for ethno-nationalist ideas.³³⁵ Behind its intellectualised justifications, much of *Kehre*’s content follows a predictable slate of far-right demands, inveighing against immigration, multiculturalism, feminism, and Islam. But what sets *Kehre* apart from other European far-right journals is how it filters these talking points through a rooted, place-centred, ecological idiom. A recurring keyword across *Kehre*’s editorials and articles is the idea of *Oikos*, the Greek word for ‘home’ or ‘hearth’, and the root of the modern word ‘ecology’. Schick’s editorial for the magazine’s inaugural issue pivots around this concept, which for him symbolises why a true ecological programme can only be realised from the right. In contrast to the liberals who dominate the Green Party, Schick writes, *Kehre* approaches ecology ‘from a holistic perspective’. Its goal is to:

...put a stop to the present narrowing of ecology to 'climate protection', and broaden our perspective on where its original meaning lies: that it is the study of the whole environment, cultural landscapes, rites and customs, which includes the home and the farm ('Oikos') as its namesake suggests.

This helps clarify the apparent contradiction of a philosophy simultaneously opposed to legislation on climate change but supportive of 'conservation' in a wider (national and racial) sense. Schick critiques mainstream environmentalism for being beholden to an Enlightenment worldview of human agency and therefore fixated on technological solutions to ecological problems, which leads to an exclusive focus on global climate metrics over the more tangible ways people engage with nature (namely, *Heimat*).³³⁶ After this re-scaling of 'ecology', *Kehre's* pages propose right-wing articulations of numerous other ecological concepts: 'sustainability' means not just consuming resources in a way that allows them to be replenished naturally, but ensuring that a whole society can reproduce itself demographically without relying on immigration. De-growth, to which a whole issue is devoted, does not entail a critique of capitalist production, but becomes a jumping-off point for imagining a new social order based around ethnic solidarity in small, kin-based communities. Indeed, one of the overarching fantasies of the *Kehre* project is that of an ethnically homogenous society directed around the principles of rootedness, natural order, and identity. To this end, *Kehre* draws on the idea of 'bioregionalism',³³⁷ a concept originating in anarchist and social ecology movements to imagine forms of social organisation more adapted to ecological processes, but refashioned here as the conceptual backbone of an ethno-nationalist vision for Europe. One article, titled 'Against the Sellout of the Heimat: Bioregional Identity Against the Disappearance of Place', explains the relevance of the bioregion to a nationalist project:

What is a bioregion? Firstly, it is no mere biotope, but rather a natural-spatial unit shaped over long periods of time by an indigenous people through local centres into a relatively homogenous cultural landscape which differs from its bordering regions. The idea of bioregionalism therefore also captures the defining character, the 'soul' of a landscape, which leaves an unmistakeable stamp on the inhabitants of an ecosystem and their culture.

This definition also cites the concept of 'cultural landscape', which encompasses the natural environment but also the spiritual essence of its inhabitants. Like Riehl's agrarian romanticism, this worldview understands cultures and environments as part of an organic unity. This is not inherently problematic and is shared by many other environmental philosophies. But this connection between human beings and nature is then recontextualised as the basis for an exclusive claim on the land by its supposedly native inhabitants. On this view, environmental destruction is bad not just on its own terms, but because it deprives peoples of those natural features from which their national energy and character are derived.

At the same time, the arrival of 'non-natives' risks diluting or even destroying the long-standing bonds that arise from continuous dwelling in place. Indeed, the suspicion that this philosophical venture into bioregionalism is a pathway to a nativist citizenship policy and closed borders is confirmed in the author's discussion of how the boundaries of *Heimat*, place, and community are to be defined. Though the idea of bioregionalism as a long-term, place-based identity leaves the door open, in principle, for naturalised citizens to display this kind of ecologically rooted citizenship, for this author, 'merely' being born somewhere does not mean having 'roots' in that place. They write: 'A sense of a region as one's *Heimat* is only acquired after a longer stay, and even then not always'. This phrasing reveals an ideology of racially defined citizenship; a national identity based on blood and descent, not on values or attachments. That this intergenerational definition of 'nativeness' based on

uninterrupted residence is completely incompatible with the countless upheavals, displacements, and border revisions throughout Germany's history, and would be utterly impossible to implement in that country of all places, is not remarked upon. This racialised reading of bioregionalism ends up representing the same dream of wholeness embedded in that older Nazi slogan of blood and soil, the dream of a natural, purified, closed social order.

Kehre's ecological politics is surprisingly internally coherent, with numerous national-conservative positions related back to a core set of principles (roots, place, and organic society), but its worldview ultimately relies on a series of sleight-of-hand manoeuvres. First a move from a universal to a local understanding of the environment; and second, a very specific and nativist interpretation of what comprises 'the local', defining community and belonging in a way that excludes the movement's others and enemies. What makes this ideology particularly worrying, however, is that in many contexts these are thoroughly plausible manoeuvres. The logical steps involved do not depart in a major way from culturally dominant ways of talking about the environment: the natural metaphors we use to talk about people, and the social metaphors we use to talk about nature, the treatment of native species with care and non-native species with suspicion, the use of roots as a common shorthand for legitimate cultural belonging, the association of landscapes with patriotic values and so on. The danger of *Kehre's* nativist take on ecology, and with eco-fascist arguments more generally, is arguably in how intuitive and 'truthy' their style of argumentation feels; that for many people, this is not seen as an extreme, or even particularly 'ideological' way of talking about the world. Ultimately, its obscure origins and minority position in most far-right movements offers no reassurance that these ideas will remain niche – they are able to be absorbed into the mainstream precisely because they work with the grain of dominant ways of talking and thinking about nature and society (an important part of the New Right's 'metapolitical' strategy³³⁸ of normalising ethno-nationalist ideas within the domain of culture and common sense).

Eco-fascism in a global context

This new 'blood and soil' politics is far from an exclusively German phenomenon, and plenty of evidence suggests it has a growing transnational appeal. The ideological networks around *Die Kehre* alone reveal a tangled web of sources and influences, as ideas are translated (literally and figuratively) between different national contexts. *Kehre's* primary philosophical influence, for example, is the late English philosopher Roger Scruton. One of Scruton's later books, *Green Philosophy* (2011), draws on Edmund Burke's idea of 'trusteeship' and intergenerational responsibility to propose the idea of 'oikophilia'.³³⁹ This 'love of home' is positioned as the foundational motive driving any kind of environmentalist action, and one which situates the latter as an inherently conservative endeavour (one which quite literally wishes to *conserve*). This, in contrast to a 'radical environmentalist movement', which Scruton critiques for 'defining itself through global agendas, internationalist campaigns and world-wide mobilization', a dangerous project which 'uproots what it claims to serve, the search for roots'. Scruton's proposals often sound sensible – looking after the place where you live, caring for your surroundings – but as we have seen, these appeals to home, roots, and land clearly lay a foundation for nativist, exclusionary interpretations of the same philosophical raw material.

Indeed, the potential for the boundaries of 'home' to be cast in an exclusionary way while retaining a positive, innocent façade makes 'oikophilia' an attractive concept for many on the ecologically conscious right; the translation, distribution and discussion of *Green Philosophy* among reactionary think tanks speaks to the demand for this kind of rooted, organic language of national identity. *Die Kehre's* publishing house (aptly named *Oikos Press*) credits Scruton as a 'Key Thinker', and

the magazine ran a favourable review of Scruton's *Green Philosophy* in its sixth issue, praising his reclamation of environmentalism (the 'crown jewels' of the right) from the liberal left. The reviewer concludes: 'it is conservatism's local character which makes it predestined to solve environmental problems'. Meanwhile the Spanish translation of the book, *Filosofía Verde*, is printed by the right-wing Catholic publisher Homo Legens and carries a combative prologue by Santiago Abascal, president of the far-right Vox party, who writes of his relief at having found a vision of environmentalism compatible with patriotism, tradition, and closed borders. The book was also well reviewed in the Orbánist think tank *Hungarian Conservative*:

Albeit wrongly associated with the political left most of the time, green philosophy is integral to conservatism too. The late, great Roger Scruton believes that environmental protection should be based on one's love for their local territory and community, and not be dictated top-down through a globalist agenda.

These are clear signs, then, that these reactionary articulations of ecology are filtering into the wider intellectual networks of the global radical right, much of which is directly plugged in to nationalist governments and parties. These networks play a key role in communicating these eco-nationalist manoeuvres – 'fear of the other' recast as 'love of home', ethno-nationalism recast as bio-regionalism – to wider right-wing circles and placing them in proximity to power. And though these nativist ideologies of nation and nature are prevalent in Europe, they are also increasingly visible in a wider global context. Studies of Hindutva,³⁴⁰ for example, the ideology of Hindu nationalism behind Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, have shown its frequent use of ecological metaphors in its exclusionary nation-building discourses. The environmental scholar Mukul Sharma shows how Hindu nationalist narratives cast ethno-religious differences between Hindu and Muslim groups through a lens of purity versus pollution, and how Modi himself mobilises visions of India as an ancient ecological nation, making a nationalist case for green energy and staging PR stunts like 'holy dips' in symbolically charged natural settings.³⁴¹ And as certain (upper-caste, Hindu) groups and their cultural landscapes are regarded as being central to the essence of the nation, the construction of India's non-Hindi majority regions as racialised, unproductive frontiers provides the justification for a range of exploitative projects in the name of national security.³⁴²

Settler-colonial societies also feature racialised visions of the environment throughout their history. Alexandra McFadden's writings on the Australian far-right³⁴³ show how claims of racial superiority are closely tied to the ability of white settlers to steward, tame, and 'civilise' the natural landscape. This vision of white civilisational superiority has supported the (ongoing) dispossession of Indigenous lands, as well as an overtly racialised 'White Australia' immigration policy, which existed well into the 1970s. Indeed, histories of conservation often highlight the origins of many conservation areas in the colonial era, where landscapes were protected for their aesthetic and recreational benefits for colonisers, and environmental stewardship was explicitly linked with ideas of racial superiority.³⁴⁴ Similarly, in the Canadian context, Andrew Baldwin and colleagues deconstruct how the cultural imaginary of the 'Great White North' serves to romanticise a pristine Canadian wilderness and erase the long-standing claims of First Nations peoples to this land, establishing whiteness as a 'natural' part of Canadian national identity.³⁴⁵ And in the US, preserving the nation's environments and its racial stock were often seen as one and the same necessity. This fusion was embodied in the person of Madison Grant, an Ivy League-educated lawyer who was a tireless advocate of national parks and the co-founder of the American Eugenics Society. In Grant's eyes, the blond man was just another 'pure and perfect specimen' to be preserved alongside the American bison and the bald eagle. Much of the myth of the American frontier rests on a similar belief in US superiority forged in a spiritual battle with the wilderness.³⁴⁶

These cases help us recognise that reactionary ideas about the environment aren't simply invented by philosophers and then circulated to powerful actors via clandestine channels. Many of these claims work entirely with the grain of dominant ways of talking about nature and national identity. Indeed, what makes these diverse strands of nativist nature-thinking relevant across cultural contexts is that they provide intuitive answers for a broad experience of ecological and political crisis. Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor take the temperature of this moment well with their discussion of 'end-times fascism',³⁴⁷ describing a zeitgeist saturated with dreams of fortresses, lifeboats, and an 'exit' from obligations to others. These fantasies are shared by tech billionaires, neo-fascist intellectuals, and xenophobic politicians alike. But what projects like *Die Kehre* are engaged in is channelling these diverse cultural currents into policy positions, using a deep bench of philosophical sources, and nudging these inchoate emotions of insecurity and fear towards an organised, cross-border nativist project. In contrast to Klein and Taylor's sketch of an end-times fascism with no 'horizon', no sense of something following the end times, this identitarian project is equally invested in an 'end of the world' fantasy, but also in visions of what comes *after* the apocalypse. As I have written elsewhere,³⁴⁸ its approach to the future is prefigurative, in actively trying to bring about a society that is securitised, racialised, and purified, through movement-building efforts in economically depressed rural areas. Imminent social and ecological collapse, on this view, are taken as given; and these right-wing ecological projects are invested in preparing for the new possibilities this post-collapse world will bring for downscaled ethnically organised forms of society. Clearly, the dream of a homogenous society, and a life in harmony with nature, is a powerful tonic in crisis-saturated times.

Beyond eco-fascism

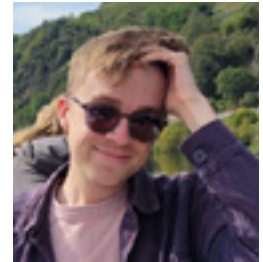
A string of white nationalist terror attacks through the late 2010s committed by self-identified 'eco-fascists' catalysed a wave of public concern about the threats of this dangerous new composite ideology.³⁴⁹ But a focus on these most visible and shocking acts of violence perhaps obscures the wider ideologies that sustain those hierarchical and murderous worldviews. The current danger is less that a militant eco-fascist movement will slowly gain followers and become strong enough to depose governments (though in the right-accelerationist scene, this is always a dream³⁵⁰), but that amidst the unfolding conditions of crisis and collapse, dehumanising scripts of where people 'naturally' belong are normalised, and the militarised systems supporting these separations are consolidated and extended. In *The Rise of Eco-Fascism*,³⁵¹ Moore and Roberts call for 'clear-eyed opposition to the forms of racialized power that are wielded over and through the environment, be they "fascist" or not'. This necessity is made clear in a recent speech by the European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who traded freely in images of Europe as 'a garden', surrounded by a 'jungle' which wants to invade it. Though the 'gardeners' should take care of the garden, taming the 'high growth potential' of the encroaching jungle requires active management, not just 'high garden walls'. The social Darwinist metaphor is no coincidence; it quite aptly describes the calculative, punitive function of border agencies like Frontex, as a militarised system of surveillance and detention designed to filter out undesirable organisms and secure the garden's natural beauty.

Clearly then, dehumanising and racialising human beings from the Global South and Europe's former colonies via an ecological language of biohazards and invasive growth is not the exclusive purview of the extreme-right but works its way into the very institutional logics of the state (and supra-state) system. Rooting out these 'everyday ecofascisms',³⁵² in Menrisky's phrase, is undoubtedly a harder task than opposing individual fascist groups. But it clarifies the stakes of the social and political dimension of environmental politics. There is no predetermined path from ecological engagement to a progressive political worldview. Terms like 'sustainability', 'degrowth', or 'green transition' need

to be articulated within a politics with an inclusive and universal horizon: not just 'our native nature', but '*all of our planetary home*'. Civil society groups are already taking up this fight; groups like FARN³⁵³ and the Heinrich Böll Foundation³⁵⁴ provide detailed advice for local green initiatives to identify the signs and fight back against far-right incursions into their movements. And for millions of environmental justice activists opposed to the violent, colonial logics of capital, the fight to protect the environment, the fight against fascism, and the fight for a new world are one and the same.³⁵⁵ Ecology must be anti-fascist, or it will be nothing at all.

BIO

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