

Nature Through the Lenses of a Fossil-Soaked Far Right

Article by Krisztian Simon

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Far-right parties are increasingly inclined to take a stance on climate change. Some choose outright denialism, others acknowledge a human-driven climate catastrophe but opt for inaction. Krisztian Simon looks back on a conference in Sweden that attempted to better understand the political ecology of the far right.

Many EU countries now have far-right parties as part of their governments and their impact on European politics cannot be neglected. In light of this, Lund University, Sweden, saw a three-day conference in November 2019 aimed at undertaking the “first systematic inquiry into the political ecology of the far right in the 21st century.” The past year has shown that the subject of the conference is only becoming more relevant. At a time when right-wing forces and industries that benefit from the status quo use the pandemic as a pretense to quash progressive proposals – such as the Green New Deal – and the far right blames immigrants for bringing the virus to Europe, it is crucial to be awake to their narratives and strategies.

The landmark event, “Political Ecologies of the Far Right”, attracted leading scholars and activists from around the world to share experiences and explore the diverse range of problems and opportunities that arise from studying this question. Discussions included how Europe’s populists communicate about climate change; how Brazilian President Bolsonaro threatens both indigenous rights and ecological balance; how Pakistan’s neoliberal farm management policies have forced surplus labour into the Taliban; and how South American feminist movements have renewed their messages in alliance with environmental struggles.

Living in fossil-fuelled times

Lund, a small sleepy Swedish town less than an hour train ride away from Copenhagen, is home to some of the best researchers working at the intersection of environmental and social sciences. In 2018, local academics founded the Zetkin Collective which brings together students and scholars to study the connections between “rapidly rising temperatures and rapid advances of the far right.” One of its leading figures is Andreas Malm: a scholar renowned for his investigations into what he calls “fossil capitalism”. Malm and his colleagues combine scholarly work with activism, engaging in struggles and demonstrations and producing academic work that aims not only to describe the world around us, but also to make it a better place.

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In today’s fossil-soaked times, our lifestyles – as Cara Daggett argues – are entirely dependent on dirty energy. Those who want to bring about progressive change therefore need to simultaneously challenge the whole of the political status quo, the dominance of vested interests, and the wave of destructive tendencies. This predicate would

come up in the conference again and again: the far right and capitalism work together to counter progressive tendencies, as coal, oil, and gas have received a cultural meaning for the privileged classes, which benefit from a racially unequal society. As such, the far right's efforts to secure white dominance go hand in hand with the protection of polluting industries.

According to sociologist Leon Sealey-Huggins, whose investigations deal with climate breakdown in the Caribbean, our current economic order, with all its injustices and pollutions, was built on racial grounds that are still being felt all over the world. He argues that "Industrialisation was kickstarted by building on the work of colonised people and racial minorities." The root of the problem is too deep to be addressed by the managerial approach of the World Bank and the Green Climate Fund's "win-win" narratives, in which both rich and poor could benefit. Sealey-Huggins warned that current proposals, such as the Green New Deal or Europe's Green Deal, could leave the West's climate debt and fossil-fuelled colonial past unattended and thereby risk creating a kind of eco-utopia at home whilst leaving the world in misery or even exacerbating global inequality.

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A historical moment

The recent electoral successes of both Green and far-right parties point towards new political divisions along these lines, due to the prominence of both climate change and exclusionary discourses on national sovereignty. As Greens combine ecologism with the demand for an open, welcoming society that respects human rights, the far right compliments its xenophobic, rights-denying narrative with a limited response to growing public concern about climate chaos. This response often includes denialism, scepticism, and pseudo-solutions, turning far-right parties into an increasingly powerful vehicle to spread the message of fossil-fuelled lifestyles and a fossil economy.

The climate communications of two dozen European right-wing populist parties have been studied by Stella Schaller and colleagues at the German think tank Adelphi. Complexity, as she argues, lies at the heart of the problem: climate science is an elitist science, requiring preventive measures, long-term solutions, and government interventions. What is more, it requires deep ecological transformation. These are all premises that the far right does not accept. Although the debate in Europe is not as polarised or ideological as in the United States – and the European far right less stridently denialist than its American peers – the situation in Europe is alarming. In a continent with the second largest emissions in the world, there are parties that do not shy away from building their climate communications on fake news. Former leader of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) Heinz-Christian Strache, for example, claimed in an interview that "Greenland used to be a green country with vineyards" and that global warming would allow us to cultivate new land. Meanwhile, Alternative for Germany (AfD) has claimed that Antarctica is actually getting cooler, so alarm about climate change is unnecessary.

According to Swedish researcher Joakim Kulin, there is an additional, important reason why the far right has a hard time dealing with climate change constructively. For far-right parties, he argues, global climate treaties threaten national sovereignty and accepting that there is such a thing as climate-induced mass migration would undermine their national culture. Many conservatives, as Herbert de Vriese from the University of Antwerpen points out, decry the so-called "oikophobia" of the Greens and the Left – by which they mean a "pathological aversion to one's home." Yet self-proclaimed conservative environmentalists rarely manage to provide adequate responses to the problems facing our local environment i.e. our home. The late British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton for example proposed that conservatives should aim for a "reasonable" but "less ambitious" solution to "seek local

control and a reassertion of local sovereignty over known and managed environments.”

Loving nature while ignoring climate change

It is almost a cliché among far-right supporters to point out that the German Nazis were among the first who passed a law on environmental protection, the *Reichnatschutzgesetz*, in 1935. Whilst this is true, argues Hikmet Kuran, in practice the Nazis were anthropocentric, emphasising the higher value of the German race and supporting destructive activities such as the building of highways and military expansions, to secure their “developmentalist” goals. Green forests were treated as nothing more than a military, national, and political symbol which stood for national unity. In theory, the environment had to be saved so that “Germany remains German,” at least at home and when it was convenient; what happened to nature abroad was disregarded.

This strong rhetorical connection between the land and the people is more than just an episode in history; it is still present in far-right thought. In Poland, explained Central European University doctoral student Baša Lubarda, parties and movements see strong parallels between their nostalgic desire for order and stability and the balance of natural ecosystems. The Polish far right, with its longing for self-sustainability, is far from the only one. The French far-right philosopher Alain de Benoist recommends that people look at the environment “as a partner and not as an adversary or object”, while Austria’s FPÖ contends in its manifesto that protecting the natural environment is “a basis for our existence in our homeland of Austria.” But for the University of Leicester’s Bernhard Forchtner, their ideologies are not coherent: while some far-right parties indeed manage to come up with proper proposals regarding the protection of the environment, the majority quickly sacrifices nature when it comes to furthering other goals – whether that’s gaining power or pleasing certain interest groups.

This is illustrated by Spanish far-right party Vox in their discourses on national self-sufficiency, as Santiago Gorostiza from the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* explains. Party leader Santiago Abascal is a proud horse-keeper, hiker, and self-proclaimed enthusiast of Spanish nature. The party presents itself as a defender of the rural world and its traditions, and self-righteously tries to discredit environmentalists by claiming that scientists build on emotions instead of scientific data, alarmist people pollute more than the rest, and “climate change gurus” (such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Al Gore) are the biggest polluters in the world. Behind the Vox slogans, however, the party frames the cruel practice of bullfighting as a cultural heritage and advocates for lower taxes on gas, fertilisers, herbicides, and plastic.

The search for a scapegoat

The ideological roots of Finnish far-right party Finns Party in Romanticism, German nationalism, and Malthusianism is outlined by Sonja Pietiläinen of the Zetkin Collective. The past few years have been a marked shift in the party’s standpoint on climate change: previously denialist with no commitment to climate policies or mitigation, its position has become more pragmatic. With growing evidence harder to refute, the party now admits belief in human-driven climate change but looks for other arguments to justify inaction. Members today argue that for a small nation such as Finland, there is no point carrying the burden of tackling climate change – especially since its main causes are to be found outside of the West, especially in “the mother of all economic problems”: population growth. Their solution is thus to call for controlled population reduction in most parts of the world – but not the West.

The power of pragmatism was also highlighted by Andreas Malm in his dissection of the Sweden Democrats. Leaked emails, he explained, have shown that the party leadership was afraid that outright climate denialism would deter female voters, leading them to opt instead for little communication on the issue. There was nevertheless ample opportunity to understand the stance of the party. The most obvious case was seen in August 2018: whilst Sweden suffered unusual droughts and fires, party leader Jimmie Åkesson disregarded the problem and praised the

weather. He was glad that Swedes could now enjoy such weather at home rather than travelling abroad. And the fires? According to Åkesson, climate activists, antifa, or Islamists could have been the ones responsible.

Spearheading the resistance

“It doesn’t make sense that the AfD has no answer to the biggest crisis of our time, and still people vote for it” – starts a workshop by Ilana Krause and Florian Teller on how to foster closer cooperation between the antifascist and climate movements. Indeed, despite growing public concern and ever more obvious signs of the climate crisis, populists seem to be able to get away with their evasiveness, in part because they know how to mislead people and are ready to pick up on issues that others are not willing to touch. The Swedish journalist Mathias Wåg provides an example: it is the populists who are spearheading the local resistance against windmills – the massive steel colossuses that produce renewable energy but also seem to ruin the view from the window. In contesting the windmills, they can present themselves as the ones who listen to the concerns of the people, while Greens are presented as the ones who impose unnecessary hassle on the population.

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The not-in-my-backyard mentality helps the far right connect with people. And that leads to the next big problem Wåg identifies, which is the normalisation of the far right. In their respective countries, many of these parties are now seen as just another political grouping, and as they build networks that reach into the centre right, they get closer to exercising power. Germany and the AfD have already shown this year how easily these parties can influence mainstream politics: in the East German state of Thuringia, Liberals and Christian Democrats elected a prime minister with the help of the far right. Although the newly elected leader of the state had to resign due to the nationwide outrage at this violation of the cordon sanitaire (a policy of no cooperation with far-right parties), journalistic investigation revealed meetings and contact between far-right and mainstream parties in many parts of the country. A coalition government involving the AfD remains for now highly unlikely, but a growing number of Christian Democrats believe that the only way to contain the far right is a visible rightward shift in the mainstream discourse. This is a disturbing sign for Germany’s post-Merkel era, which may have an impact on the whole of Europe.

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Of course, a growing number of thriving movements try to push back against the far right, xenophobia, and the degradation of the climate. Two newly established movements, Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, are close to becoming household names across Europe. The image of young climate leader Greta Thunberg has become omnipresent; she looks out from covers of mainstream magazines, her statements can be read in reports about major international conventions, and her face features in fast-spreading far-right memes. These movement’s messages and demands are well known and followers numbering in the hundreds of thousands engage in school strikes, protests, and civil disobedience. Their success spurred on the Green surge of 2019, but their actions have

yet to trigger the corresponding policy responses. It is against this backdrop that one of the participants asked: Do we run the risk that the climate movement turns into something like a religion? What if protection of the climate turns into a holy commandment and recycling into no more than a ritual? Will it still have a chance to play a role in democratic politics? These questions are legitimate, at a time when the crisis is acute and the backlash strong. It is far from enough to know the solution and preach the message – we also need to learn how to make our ideas a political reality.



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