



SAM MOORE & ALEX ROBERTS

# THE RISE OF ECOFASCISM

CLIMATE CHANGE AND  
THE FAR RIGHT



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*Climate Change and  
the Far Right*

Sam Moore  
Alex Roberts

polity

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# Introduction

On 13 January 2020, we first put pen to paper for this book. Our argument felt clear and horrifying: as climate systems broke down, the centre of political normalcy would collapse, and people would find themselves looking for more drastic solutions. The escalating climate crisis would provide opportunities to all parts of the far right. Seductive neo-Malthusian arguments about overpopulation would bolster hardline security policies and borders, and give seemingly compelling justification for the radical deepening of racist politics in the Global North. The cultural tropes of uncleanness, pollution and pestilence, which for centuries dictated the hierarchy of different people's places within, and access to, nature, would become more potent as people once again encountered the natural world as their antagonist. The interests of capital would swing behind authoritarian governments as a means to protect profits and growth. While we disagreed with some who had said that 'ecofascism' would be a direct and unavoidable consequence of climate breakdown, we thought such a project couldn't entirely be ruled out.

On the day we began to write, 41 people were in a serious condition in a hospital in Wuhan, China, their lungs

filled with a strange form of pneumonia, caused by a virus which did not yet have a name. In a matter of months, what came to be known as COVID-19 spread across the world, and some of the social stressors we had envisaged occurring with the onset of serious catastrophic climate breakdown arrived a decade or three early.

Much of the response to the pandemic avoided talk of the climate crisis directly. This is perhaps because the diverse ecological problems facing us have sometimes been simplified into the correlation of two measures: the parts per million of atmospheric carbon dioxide and the rise in global average temperatures. Such a simplification cannot account for the increasing risk of pandemics, among a host of other events. COVID-19 wasn't caused by a rise in CO<sub>2</sub> levels, but it was arguably a product of the transformative effects modern capitalist societies have had on the environment.<sup>1</sup> It was perhaps the moment at which we should have collectively and decisively moved in our understanding – and not just in our terminology – from 'global warming' to 'climate systems breakdown'.

The pandemic provided a glimpse into possible *political* responses to future climate breakdown. Past responses to climate crises such as extreme weather events had been shot through with environmental racism and state violence, but the scale of total social transformation implied by the word 'fascism' would have been hyperbole. Long imagined in disaster-movie style as a series of blazing hot summers and polar bears adrift, all punctuated by the occasional cataclysmic wave, it suddenly seemed to us that climate systems breakdown might actually look much more like the pandemic did: mass death events, sudden stresses on global supply chains, abrupt and previously unthinkable changes to everyday life, massive discrepancies in vulnerability across class and racial groups, a generally increased anxiety, racially displaced blame, the tightening of surveillance regimes, a sudden return to governments acting exclusively and aggressively in their national and class interest, the mainstreaming of conspiracy culture,

talk of the end of globalization, a retreat to protectionism, unprecedented measures that suddenly seem entirely necessary, the sudden collapse of livelihoods for billions of the world's poor, and a deep economic shock worldwide.

This book is not about the coronavirus pandemic, and we should not expect the politics that emerges in response to major climate events in the future to resemble it exactly. Climate change contains other kinds of crises: extreme weather events, migration crises, chronic and acute food and water shortages, climate-related conflicts and the like. Each crisis will be encountered differently, each response will be, as the governance of crisis always is, complex and multifaceted, and often suddenly amplificatory of dormant social forms. It is in these unpredictable consequences of complex crises that the threat of the far right lies.

Mass far-right environmentalism will not be born from a vacuum. It would draw on the history of reactionary nature politics, which we call 'far-right ecologism'. In the first part of this book, we trace the history of these ideas and practices, from colonial nature management to the rise of scientific racism and eugenics to the 'green' aspects of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany through to the postwar overpopulation discourse, currents of environmentalist misanthropy, and lastly the securitization of the environment itself. It is tempting to lump all historical manifestations of far-right environmentalism together. But this would be wrong. Although Umberto Eco noted that fascists are prone to understanding their own politics as a 'singular truth, endlessly reinterpreted',<sup>2</sup> we should resist this tendency. The history we cover is episodic and disparate, although consistent patterns do emerge. Time and again we see 'far-right ecologism' as animated by the profound tension between capitalism's expansionist dynamic, which often entails the destruction of parts of nature, and its continual production of social transformation. It is a history, therefore, not just of far-right ecologism's ideas but also of capitalism's nature-culture interface and its attendant crises.

And what this history shows is that far-right ecologism has been, by and large, intellectually parochial, concerned with nature in a curtailed and limited form. Its sense of nature has been flattened by fixation on particular species or a single place. If they have, like the environmentalist maxim, often ‘acted local’, they have rarely ‘thought global’. Nevertheless, such intellectual parochialism should not be underestimated: it has been capable, at times, of genocide.

Now, the overarching form of environmental crisis is anthropogenic climate systems breakdown. Chapters 2–4 turn to the various far-right responses to this crisis. Climate systems breakdown is no local problem, nor can it be resolved by force. The consequences of failure cannot easily be made to affect a particular othered group. It will not be solved by anything the far right has historically proposed. But nor is it irrelevant to far-right politics. Far-right politics has, since its inception, been intimately involved in the defence of capitalism, and the most important cause of climate systems breakdown – the continued extraction and use of fossil fuels – is, in the words of Andreas Malm, ‘not a sideshow to bourgeois democracy . . . it is the material form of contemporary capitalism’.<sup>3</sup> Climate systems breakdown puts the structure of capitalism at risk and thus also the social order that the far right is committed to defend.

Faced with a crisis of such magnitude, the far right has diversified its nature politics once again, splintering into parts more or less accepting of the problem, more or less mystified, more or less ambivalent about the possible end of industrial modernity. There is no single far-right nature politics at the moment. Just as they have been throughout history, different actors are divided up by different ways of looking at the problem, various conceptions of what is and is not included in ‘nature’, profound disagreements about what the problem *actually is*, massive discrepancies in tactics, and conflict about long-term solutions to climate breakdown.

We have grouped them here according to their present political form: first, far-right parties and other parts of an emerging ‘environmental authoritarianism’; secondly, the younger far-right and fascist movements whose comparative agility, lack of interest in immediate electoral success and lack of connections to institutional power make them arguably more dangerous in the long term than the current electoral far right; and thirdly, the ‘ecofascist’ terrorists, the best known of whom carried out the Christchurch mosque attack, killing 51 Muslims. Each of these groupings has distinct aims, distinct political methods, their own internal tensions and, often, pronounced antagonisms with other parts of the far right. Just as in our previous book, *Post-Internet Far Right*, the far right is treated not as an aberrant force external to and preying on wider society, but as the most extreme part of a distribution, involved in a complicated dance with the rest of society.<sup>4</sup>

The effects of climate systems breakdown are already widespread. But like any exponential process without end, it is almost all in the future. It is to this future that the final chapter of the book turns. Here, we address what we call the ‘ecofascist hypothesis’: the widespread anxiety that our political future might be ‘ecofascism’. How are we to make sense of such a prediction?

We start with the future emergence of reactionary movements. In particular, we argue, the long history of climate change denialism on the right is likely to have unexpected, complicated effects on their future nature politics. Large numbers of people committed to mainstream right politics, most substantially in the US, have been lied to by those who denied climate change. When they confront this – and perhaps more importantly discover that in many cases this suppression of the truth imperils everything that their politics works to hold together – they are likely to radicalize, although, like all radicalization, it will be unpredictable. It is unlikely, we think, to generate a flood of new converts to the left. Two reactions here combine to make a particularly potent mix: a revolt against those who have got us

into this mess *and simultaneously* an attempt to hold on to what some people already have, either as individuals or, more worryingly, as racial groups.

If it scales up beyond this movement stage to become a form of government, this future ‘ecofascism’ will have to address the more pronounced tension that has animated all forms of far-right ecologism to date: the tension between capitalism’s endless economic expansion and the affirmation and protection of the ‘natural order’. We outline two possible futures. In each, the far right serves as the (perhaps unruly) tool of a large fraction of capital. First, fossil capital, which allows the far right to continue its current broad commitments to climate change denial (we call it ‘Fossilized Reaction’). Secondly, it adheres to the interests of the security state and authoritarian capitalist interests more generally (we call this possible future ‘Batteries, Bombs and Borders’), which are involved in the geopolitically fraught process of securing the resources for a green energy transition and securing hegemony in a renewed era of superpower competition. Complicating both of these is the possible arrival of far-right groups of ‘climate collapse cults’.

Let us be clear about our target. The vast majority of current environmental movements and organizations are not on the far right. Nor are the concerns of environmental movements in some way ‘fascist’ concerns. It is not fascist to care about nature. Our conclusion turns to the responses we can make to such far-right movements, and about how we can act in ways impervious to far-right co-optation. Environmental movements must be politicized around issues of climate justice. Many, of course, already are. Yet, as environmental movements grow in importance, and the climate crisis becomes ever urgent, such movements will accumulate and jettison models of the world with increasing rapidity. And therein lies the risk. The political valence of environmentalism has changed before in the past. In the past, it was just as much an interest of the far right as of the left. It has the potential to



flip again. Whatever the future, declarations that climate disruption will ‘push all utopian visions and ideological disputes into the background’<sup>5</sup> or that people will likely retreat into a form of disengaged hedonism are clearly wrong. Climate systems breakdown will only get *more* intensely politicized from here.

Few books on the environment model transformations in politics as drastic as those outlined here. There are exceptions, notably *Climate Leviathan*. In it, Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright outline four hypothetical transformations of politics.<sup>6</sup> Most similar to our outline of future ‘ecofascism’ is their ‘Climate Behemoth’, in which reactionary political actors oppose the globalization of politics but keep capitalism. Many parts of our accounts are similar, although we split it into two distinct parts. The second of these parts even has some similarities with their ‘Climate Leviathan’, which seeks planetary capitalist government. In our speculations on the future, however, we emphasize the brutal and decidedly national character of the securitization of adaptation to climate systems breakdown, and the fraught aspects of a renewable energy transition. This is perhaps simply a matter of emphasis. We are also less optimistic than they are about the long-term prospects of what they call ‘Climate Behemoth’. They believe that its contradictions will make it fall apart. We believe that it is possible, although not certain, that the far right can gain by its contradictions, and not simply disintegrate because of them.

Another book comparable to ours is the recent *White Skin, Black Fuel* by Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective.<sup>7</sup> It details the imbrication of its two titular parts: the white skins of fossil fuels’ most important historical advocates and developers, and the black fuel itself. It is mostly, although not exclusively, focused on climate denialists, and the racial politics that informs it. It differs from our project in several respects. Firstly, we deal with a rather broader set of far-right actors, and therefore in less detail. Secondly, Malm and the Zetkin Collective focus

on climate change and the responses to it. Of course, the emphasis is warranted: global temperature rise exacerbates all the other ecological problems. And, more than that, it poses existential risks to humanity as a whole. But this focus makes it more difficult to see what is specific about nature politics on the far right: its concern with particular places, with particular natural features, with food culture, with gender politics, with overpopulation, with energy security, with ideas of racial and ethnic identity and much more. Although a focus on each of these aspects might be read as a way of avoiding what is *really* essential in the politics of climate change, we think understanding these more diverse figurations of nature is essential to grasping contemporary far-right ecologism and predicting its future movements. The complex effects of future climate systems breakdown will mean that political actors will be able to contest what the *really significant* parts of it are. It is in this contestation that the far right's more diverse nature politics will become relevant.

Others have argued that it is essential to maintain a conception of climate systems breakdown beyond the radiative forcing effect of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.<sup>8</sup> We agree. It is important for engaging the interrelated collection of problems that exist. But it is also politically essential: full decarbonization of the economy, absent adequate responses to the panoply of other ecological challenges, would not defuse the far right's ability to use their ideas of a 'crisis in nature' for political gain or entirely rule out the threat of what has been called 'ecofascism'.

But should we call it that?

## On 'ecofascism'

'Ecofascism', as a term, has a rather complex history. Bernhard Forchtner, editor of *The Far Right and the Environment*, notes that 'ecofascism' is a much-contested term, not widely used in the academic literature. He

characterizes it as a 'fringe phenomenon' that has little impact on the existing political landscape.<sup>9</sup> We largely agree. Why, then, is our book titled as it is? There are two reasons. First, we are writing in anticipation of politics to come as much as reflecting on the politics of today. Second, we accept the anxiety about the future that presently goes under the name of 'ecofascism' as valid, even if it is not the most precise or useful term.

Let us look at some of the uses to which the term has been put. First, 'ecofascism' has been used as a smear by right-wing opponents of environmentalism. Perhaps most illustrative is James Delingpole's *The Little Green Book of Eco-Fascism*, whose subtitle, 'The Left's Plan to Frighten Your Kids, Drive Up Energy Costs and Hike Your Taxes!' says enough about its politics. 'Fascism' here is the generic bogeyman of government action.<sup>10</sup> It goes without saying that we are not claiming any similarity between left-environmentalism and fascism. Similarly, in line with the overwhelming critical consensus, we identify 'fascism' as an ideology of the far right, not of the left. To borrow a line from Frank Uekötter, author of *The Green and the Brown: A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany*, 'If you came upon this book hoping to be told that today's environmentalists are actually Nazis in disguise, then I hope you paid for it before reaching this sentence.'<sup>11</sup>

A second use of 'ecofascism' has also been to criticize the Deep Ecology movement by proponents of 'social ecology', most significantly Murray Bookchin.<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s, Bookchin used the term to describe increasingly misanthropic tendencies within Deep Ecology, a strain of environmentalism that 'ascribed an equivalent value to human beings and nonhuman nature, and rejected the premise that people should occupy a privileged place in any moral reckoning'.<sup>13</sup> Bookchin was responding to Earth First! co-founder David Foreman's suggestion that US aid to Ethiopia during the famine was merely delaying the inevitable. Much better, he said, would be to 'let nature seek its own balance'.<sup>14</sup> Bookchin was also responding