



## Discussions and interventions

# Far-right localism as an environmental strategy in France

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the promotion of localism as an environmental strategy by actors on the French far right. Far-right localism constitutes an example of mutating far-right ecological discourses on the denialism-ecofascism spectrum that further promotes far-right ideology under a 'green' banner. In this commentary I use empirical examples from the far right in France to show how this localism, which advocates a nativist rootedness in an exclusionary local, is upheld as a prerequisite for effective environmentalism. Such a strategy mobilises a reactionary conceptualisation of place that defends an exclusionary attachment to the local environment. Far-right localism feeds and revolves around an identitarian, naturalist and organicist conception of ecology typical of far-right ecologies, as well as the wish to supplant the left/right divide with a global/local one. This paper brings into conversation the fields of human geography and the political ecologies of the far right to contribute to a better understanding of constructed meanings of place by far-right actors in the context of climate change and ecological degradation. It furthermore encourages scholars across fields to keep investigating and disentangling complex affinities between ideologies of nature, identity (re-)production, belonging and resistance in conceptualisations and meanings of place.

**Keywords:** *Far-right ecogism, identitarian ecology, rootedness, local, place*

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## Far-right localism: new geographies between climate denialism and ecofascism

The (far) right is often associated with climate denialism (Lockwood 2018) and the defence of fossil capital and fossil fuel interests (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021). Yet, contemporary developments show that, on the one hand, there is an undeniable change in the nature of climate denialism as far-right parties move away from an outright denial of the science to a 'yes but' position (Forchtner & Lubarda 2022), leading scholars to conceptually speak of 'climate obstruction' to better encompass multiple strategies of denial, delay and inaction by a variety of actors beyond the far right (Ekberg et al. 2022). On the other hand, there is a simultaneous rise of the far right promoting their own ecologies (Forchtner 2019; Lubarda 2020), in fact reviving and actualising a long history of (far-)right reactionary environmentalism (Biehl & Staudenmaier 1995; Olsen 1999). Tropes linking the purity of the environment to the purity of the nation – evoking the combination of white supremacy and environmentalism rooted in the Nazi ideology of 'blood and soil' (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995) – have fed both the recent rise of ecofascist movements, propaganda and terrorism (Campion 2021; Moore & Roberts 2022; Macklin 2022) and the greening of (ethno-)nationalist politics (Lubarda 2018; Forchtner 2019b; Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021), resulting in the promotion of immigration control as an environmental policy (Hultgren 2015; Turner & Bailey 2021).

The far right's promotion of localism as an environmental strategy is one example of these mutating far-right ecologies situated in this complex in-between space on the climate denial-ecofascism spectrum. As such this paper contributes to the monitoring of contemporary varied and evolving articulations of nature/the environment by far-right actors through more case studies (Lubarda & Forchtner 2022). It also speaks to the 'new geographies of exclusion' generated by the advance of the far right worldwide (Nagel & Grove 2021), fed by a resurgence of problematic uses of nature in relation to nationalism in far-right discourses on the(ir) environment (Forchtner & Kølvrå 2015; McCarthy 2019; Forchtner 2019a). Indeed, the social (re-)production of nature and landscapes and their role in regional and national identity formation has long been highlighted by geographers and beyond (Sörlin 1999; Paasi 2003). At the same time, place plays an important role in the geographies of hate brought about by far-right political organising (Flint 2004; Miller-Idriss 2020). Looking at the mobilisation of 'the local' by far-right actors to convey their environmental political views – often embedded within the defense of regional and national identities – brings insights on the specific geographies and meanings of place mobilised and produced at the intersection of the rise of the far right *and* climate change that require further investigation (Koch 2023).

After reviewing contested meanings of 'localism', I move on to empirical examples from the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary far right in France. I show how far-right localism revolves around the advocacy of nativist rootedness in an exclusionary local, hence promoting a reactionary conceptualisation of place as a prerequisite for effective environmental preservation. Far-right localism is grounded in an identitarian, naturalist and organicist understanding of the environment typical of far-right ecogism. Attempting to supplant the left/right divide with a global/local one, this strategy also embodies a form of response and resistance to global processes, sometimes leading to critiques of economic growth and neoliberal capitalism. I conclude by emphasising the need for human geographers to further investigate both the discursive and practical manifestations of the multifaceted and multi-scalar exclusionary 'problematic senses of

place' (Massey 1993: 64) in times of climate change and how they are intertwined with ideologies of nature, identity (re-)production and belonging.

## Contested local(ism)s

Localism is a contested concept. Indeed, neither its meaning nor what it entails are unique or clearly defined. Localism has different implications depending on whether it is considered in economic, political, social, spatial or environmental terms, as well as whether it is claimed top-down or bottom-up (Davoudi & Madanipour 2015). Re-localisation projects can consequently be motivated by a variety of concerns and mobilised by a variety of actors, but are nonetheless understood as reactions and responses to contemporary multifaceted crises (Herbert & Powells 2023). Hogan and Lockie (2013) however rightly point out that the philosophy of localism benefits from overwhelmingly positive connotations that appeal to common sense: why would anyone be against re-localising production and consumption, while rethinking governance to give more power to local communities? Yet, Massey (2018[2000]: 191) reminds us that 'local may be good or bad, depending on your politics'. As slogans of localism are heard across the political spectrum – from grassroots environmental activism, centre-left and neoliberal environmentalisms to far-right ecogism (Herbert & Powells 2023) – it is crucial to scrutinise and clarify their different motivations and implications.

Davoudi and Madanipour (2015: 12) draw an important distinction between 'the local' and 'localism': while the former offers 'a descriptive relationship between a phenomenon and a place', the latter refers to 'an attitude', 'an emotional attachment, a normative link between phenomena and places, and in doing so it becomes an ingredient in the development of an ideology'. This reflects Agnew's (1987) distinction between location (a geographical point) and sense of place (the subjective attachment people form with place). However, as Davoudi and Madanipour (2015: 18) crucially ask: 'what makes up a locality? [...] How are the identities [of the local agents] shaped, for what purposes and by whom?'. Therefore, appeals to the local through slogans of localism are always ideologically-loaded, and such questions echo critical geographers' emphases on the social processes and power relations that construct the meanings of places (Massey 2018[2000]). Meanings of place and place-identities have always been contested sites of the (re-)production of narratives of who/what belongs and who/what does not (Creswell 1996). Consequently, critical geographers have long warned of the local's ability to bring about both progressive and reactionary politics, accordingly criticising essentialist and romanticised attachment to local places (Massey 1993; Harvey 1993; Paasi 2003; Amin 2004).

Both Herbert and Powells (2023) and Bernier (2021), with a respective focus on the United Kingdom and France, have attempted to classify different manifestations of localism or 'localisations' into neoliberal, progressive green-left and (far-)right. First, neoliberal localism refers to the appropriation of the term by centre-right political actors as a trojan horse to decentralise competences to regions and municipalities, but without adequate budgets or legal leverage. This results in the acceleration of the privatisation of public services and the impossibility of achieving significant socio-ecological transformations (see also, Nadai *et al.*, 2015), leading Bernier (2021) to denounce neoliberal localism in this institutional top-down form to be a sustainability

diversion. Second, 'progressive localism' is, according to Bernier (2021), originally grounded in a call for the decentralisation of power influenced by the parallel emergence of political ecology in the early 1970s. In France, this form was to regain visibility in the 2010s primarily in environmental movements before being adopted at the electoral level, especially municipally, by a more social-liberal left ecology in the 2020s. Herbert and Powells (2023) more directly connect this 'green left' localism to radical critiques of economic growth and socio-ecological transformations exemplified notably in the degrowth scholarship. Lastly, (far-)right manifestations of localism are, to Herbert and Powells (2023), fuelled by right-wing populist and reactionary critiques of globalisation that result in nativist and racialised conceptualisations of place. Bernier (2021) emphasises the identitarian aspect of this localism, whereby the preservation and promotion of an exclusive identity rooted in the local is mobilised for environmental purposes. It is to this category that the following empirical section speaks to.

## Localism: a (new) keyword for the French far right

In March 2021, Hervé Juvin and Andréa Kotarac, two executives of 'Rassemblement National' (National Rally, NR) the main far-right party in France, announced the creation of the new ecologist organisation 'Les Localistes', (The Localists). The associated Localist Manifesto stated: 'the primary security is to be at home, insured of having access to the resources of one's territory, of the solidarity with one's people, of one's identity and of the ability to pass on what one is to one's people'<sup>1</sup> (Les Localistes 2021: 21). The manifesto revolves around the opposition of a rooted local to an uprooted global characterised by 'openness, mobility and nomadism' (Les Localistes 2021: 7). The same week, party leader Marine Le Pen announced the party's ecological counter-project, presented as *really* green in opposition to the policies of the Greens, the Left and Macron's government. Along the same lines, she defended a localist and 'rooted ecology' linking ecology with identity preservation and heritage transmission (Le Pen 2021).

Such an emphasis on localism and rootedness is the result of a slow 'environmental turn' within NR over the past decade (with a brief exception in the 1990's, see François 2016). Taking over the party leadership from her father in 2011, infamous for his climate-denialist positions, Marine Le Pen engaged in a de-extremization strategy within which the adoption of more pro-environmental stances played a significant role (Bivar 2022). This discourse of so-called patriotic ecology considers biodiversity as 'national wealth' (Collectif Nouvelle Écologie 2016: 4), promotes 'green' economic patriotism and the protection of the environment around the culture-heritage-identity trinity (Boukala & Tountasaki 2019). The 2019 EU elections sealed the adoption of localism by the party. The political manifesto tailored by Hervé Juvin asserted the 'ideological battle' between nationalists and localists on the one hand, and globalists on the other, 'between supporters of rootedness and supporters of nomadic ideology' (Rassemblement National 2019: 7). The Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the vulnerability of global supply chains, further gave a positive platform to this discourse of re-localisation (Berteloot 2020; de Nadal 2022). Unsurprisingly, calls for 'rooted ecology in the local' were central to far-right ecological agendas during the 2022 presidential elections.

Adjacently, the extra-parliamentary far right has also strongly promoted localism as an environmental strategy. In fact, it is precisely there that such an ecological project

based on the defence of local identities and particularisms was initially formulated (see, Francois 2016; Carle 2017; Dubiau 2022). The ‘Nouvelle Droite’ (New Right, ND), a counter-cultural intellectual movement, and the Identitarian thought that came out of it, initially popularised the concepts of localism and (bio-)regionalism as a response to the destructive and, above all, homogenising globalisation driven by industrial modernity. In a 2001 publication of *Éléments*, the magazine of the ND edited by ND’s leading intellectual Alain de Benoist, localism is praised as the ‘affirmation of the value of places and memory against the uprooting, cosmopolitan and multi-racial globalisation’ (Bonesio 2001: 17). The connection between the landscape, identity and nature is clearly put forward, as the ‘landscape configurations of a region’ are thought of as ‘an identitarian heritage, that is, culture and memory, which are necessary to enable the feeling of belonging and the realisation of projects within a community setting’ (Bonesio 2001: 18). The landscape is therefore imagined as a ‘cultural locality’, where its dwellers have left an imprint on a ‘geographical-environmental entity’ (Bonesio 2001: 19). In a later article on localism and bioregionalism, it is explained that such a ‘rebirth of places [...] requires an identification from the established community to its own territory, whose history, ecological equilibriums and cultural, economic and aesthetic values need to be acknowledged’ (Zarelli 2001: 29). Bioregionalism is also advanced as such in an interview by Alain de Benoist of Peter Berg, founder of the bioregionalist movement in the USA, in which the latter advocates the necessary ‘re-inhabitation’ of bioregional ecosystems within the wider ‘sacred biosphere’ (Berg 2001: 30, 32).

In 2013, ‘Les Identitaires’ (The Identitarians), an organisation derived from the ND, published a collection of texts in the book *Anti-global, pro-local*. Chapter after chapter, the trinity of globalisation – free-trade, the free circulation of capital and human migrations/multiculturalism – is denounced. Localism is offered as the solution for an effective and sustainable re-localisation of both the economy *and* people (Cattin *et al.* 2013: 15). Here, localism is indissociable from degrowth, food sovereignty and regional and national identity preservation (Cattin *et al.* 2013: 10, 11, 53) so as to restore ‘harmony within a given space’ (Cattin *et al.* 2013: 10). In this sense, localism is bound to re-rootedness, equilibrium and authenticity (Cattin *et al.* 2013: 16, 19), promoted as the only way to give back meaning to the ‘sacred connection between humans and their territories’ and ‘respect [...] ecosystems’ (Cattin *et al.* 2013: 20).

More recently, in the wake of the dissolution of the national youth organisation ‘Génération Identitaire’ (Generation Identity, initially the youth section of the Identitarian movement), activist groups have flourished locally under a variety of names. Many took on the localist motto which – unsurprisingly – fits perfectly with their ambition to defend local/regional identities and mobilise around the protection of local environments. For example, Lyon-based ‘Lyon Populaire’ recently published a Localist handbook, opening with the statement: ‘Isn’t every one of us coming from a particular land? Are we not meant to prioritise a land, [...] and isn’t this priority supposed to manifest itself by preferring what comes from our territory: people, decisions, productions, culture?’ (Cercle François Duprat 2023: 1). Echoing similar themes listed above, ‘the globalist system’ deemed ‘destructive’ of ‘ecosystems, cultures, societies and peoples’ is denounced (Cercle François Duprat 2023: 4). The ‘localist doctrine’ is therefore presented as the only solution for the creation of more ‘resilient’ societies that would jointly preserve the natural environment and the community (Cercle François Duprat 2023: 8–9). Concrete solutions to achieve this goal include the promotion of local currencies, community-supported agriculture and local community funding (Cercle François Duprat 2023: 10–11).

Localism has therefore been adopted as a key concept in both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary French far-right ecological claims. The 2020 yearly colloquium of Iliade Institute, thinktank heir of the ND, on the theme ‘Nature as a base’ (see, Benoist 2021), even brought them into conversation. At the roundtable titled ‘For a rooted ecology: Localism and the enhancement of terroirs’, Juvin (2020) emphasised the need for limits and separations for the survival of equilibrated ecosystems, which would therefore protect from ‘aggressive or invasive’ external elements, and a personality of the Identitarian movement stressed the necessity for a localism that would respect the ‘ethnic and cultural biodiversity of peoples’ (Langella 2020).

In the next section, I discuss how far-right localism is grounded in an identitarian, naturalist and organicist understanding of the environment, in which an ecological local is opposed to a destructive ‘global’.

## Naturalising rootedness in the local to supplant the left/right divide

Far-right localism is grounded in an identitarian conception of ecology (Francois & Nonjon 2021). According to Olsen (1999: 29), to right-wing actors, ‘the politics of nature is at the same time a politics of identity’, insofar as the environment plays a role in identity creation *and* preservation. The local is not only communicated as environmentally friendly (as in local food production and consumption, for example) but *also* as the embodiment of a specific heritage that encompasses the land and its supposedly *naturally*-rooted inhabitants who dwell on this land in culturally homogenous communities. Opposing the ‘rooted’ to the ‘nomad’ furthermore echoes traditional antisemitism and the fascist ideology of defining the national community on the basis of long-lasting bonds to the territory (Biehl & Staudenmaier 1995; Guillibert 2020). The local is presented as the site where nature and identity meet, and the result of this encounter should be cherished, maintained, and accordingly passed on. This eco-identitarian conception of the land relies on a strong ethno-differentialist worldview whereby different cultures are tolerated as long as mixing is avoided in the name of a ‘right to difference’ (François 2009), a concept popularised by the ND and considered as an evolution from biological racism to cultural racism (Balibar 1990). Madelin (2023: 131) calls its use for ecological purposes ‘eco-differentialism’. Together with an ‘ecological neo-Malthusianism’ (Guillibert 2020) which sees increased population flows as disruptive, not only to the national culture, but also to the perceived carrying-capacity of a certain ecosystem, the result is a xenophobic eco-identitarian localism characterised by the belief that only the holders of a specific identity are entitled and able to take care of a defined territory, echoing the idea that local people are considered natural stewards of their environment (Lubarda 2018; Turner & Bailey 2021).

This identitarian conception of ecology underpinning far-right localism is connected to two dimensions typical of far-right ecologies: ‘eco-naturalism’ and ‘eco-organicism’ (Olsen 1999). In the first, nature provides a blueprint for the socio-political order, leading to the naturalisation of social and political processes. Hierarchies and distinctions of gender, culture/race, are considered ‘natural’. Migrations, same-sex marriage, GMOs, and multiculturalism, for example, are all considered to be ‘unnatural’ and therefore illegitimate. For some, this similarly translates into considering urban settings as ‘unnatural’ decadent landscapes, therefore equating local ‘natural’ lifestyles with rural



ones. Such a nostalgic and romantic conception of nature is a legacy of late 19th century German romanticism which has profoundly inspired the far right across countries and continues to be a reference for anti-modern narratives (Francois 2016). Ideologies of nature also play a role in the second ‘eco-organic’ dimension of far-right ecologies, whereby nature and society are seen as components of one unified entity forming of an ecosystem. Often tinted with spirituality and mysticism (Lubarda 2020), eco-organicism is exemplified by bioregionalism that supposes organic relations between a territory and its inhabitants (Dubiau 2022), and is similarly visible in far-right identitarian localism in its calls to preserve a so-called equilibrium, create resilient communities, and protect a biodiversity that includes both nature and humans. This organicist view underpins the definition of who gets to belong as a naturally-rooted steward of the environment.

While far-right localism is undoubtedly grounded in articulations of the environment typical of far-right ecologies, another central aspect is its attempt to supplant the traditional left/right divide with a globalist/localist one, or a multicultural/identitarian one, in line with a Manichean understanding of the world (Lubarda 2020). This emphasis on the global/local opposition, in which the first is fundamentally thought of as anti-ecological, and the second as ecological by definition, appeals to a positive understanding of localism deprived of ideology (Hogan & Lockie 2013) that obscures several facets of far-right politics. The blurring of the left/right divide is also a consequence of far-right localism being inscribed into a broader critique of neoliberal globalisation or even portrayed as an anti-capitalist strategy by its most radical advocates. Carle (2017, 2022) has shown how, in the French context, themes like the defense of local nature, the promotion of degrowth and the criticism of technology and progress have been articulated across a variety of groups on the far right. The recent developments shown by the empirical examples corroborate such findings. Far-right localism is often coupled to or based on the denunciation of the destructive – environmental and societal – consequences of extractivism and consumerism, tied to the logic of economic growth, inherent to capitalism. Such critiques have led key personalities of the extra-parliamentary far right to proclaim themselves as degrowth proponents (e.g. Alain de Benoist, Julien Langella) and see localism as the ‘linchpin’ of achieving it (Langella 2020). While such calls to localist and degrowth projects are certainly differently motivated to the ones coming from the other end of the political spectrum, the vocabulary and thematic overlap should not be disregarded and the implications should be studied seriously, especially in light of the need to clarify what localism entails.

## Concluding remarks and further research

Far-right localism, as exemplified in this paper, revolves around the defence of an identitarian and nativist rootedness in an exclusionary local, presented as an environmental strategy. As such, it constitutes an example of the mutating far-right articulations of the natural environment that simultaneously take inspiration from ecofascist ideas while, by rejecting any global outlook, still obstruct effective global climate mitigation. However, as the far right is not a homogeneous entity, neither are far-right localist projects or their underlying motivations and goals. Rather, just as any appeals to localism, it very much depends on which actors are mobilising the term and their respective ambitions. Despite transversal themes, while the extra-parliamentary far right links localism to growth and capitalism critiques, NR does not. Far-right localism

is not always connected to anti-modern, bioregional and rural imaginaries and practices. Further examining the mobilisation of ‘green’ nativist exclusionary geographies is necessary as the coupling of defending local nature with the protection of the ethnically, culturally or openly racially defined community, whether the term localism is used or not, is not exclusively a French phenomenon (e.g. Lubarda 2021; Dannemann 2023)<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, far-right localist reactionary and exclusionary conceptualisation of local places are undeniably embedded in nationalist and even European imaginaries and projects. As stated by the Identitarians, the local/regional is only one of the identified three scales of identity that ought to be defended along with the ‘national and civilizational’ (Cattin *et al.* 2013: 27). Lubarda (2021: 131), in his study on Poland, speaks of a ‘nationalist localism’ to characterize far-right local grassroots environmentalism activism that take place *within* the wider goal to defend the nation. Reversely, it might be relevant to speak of a ‘localist nationalism’ when nationalist parties like NR use the local as a tool for the ‘greening’ of nationalist politics. Further investigation of the interplay between localism and nationalism is crucial to understand contemporary mobilisations of place as an environmental strategy by the far right.

Additionally, the far right’s defence of rootedness requires serious and critical analysis of the role of local attachment in relation to environmental perception and action. Far-right localism should therefore be considered by geographers who are interested in (or even promoting) place attachment, local identities and belonging as potentially enhancing responses to global environmental issues (Devine-Wright 2013, 2015; Tomaney 2012). Further exploring non-exclusionary ways of being environmentally attached to, and engaged at, the local level that do not leave the question of identity and rootedness to the far right is crucial (Damiron 2022). Even more so as climate politics (mitigation and adaptation) could become dominated by the inclusion/exclusion divide rather than acceptance/denial one (Dannemann 2023) – as shown by on-going increased border securitisation by both deniers and non-deniers in light of the consequences of climate change (Moore & Roberts 2022). Alternatives of ‘cosmopolite relocalisation’ (Flipo 2022) or ‘open locales/localisations’ (Herbert & Powells 2023; Velegrakis & Gaitanaou 2019), all concerned with global socio-environmental justice, imply a relational understanding of space and place that see the local as an intersection of global processes rather than its antithesis (Massey 2018[2000]). Such a conception of the local, and hence a politicised localism, that simultaneously articulates a critique of neoliberalism and economic growth, is a precondition to counter an identitarian and nativist localism from the far right, that presents itself as a response and a form of resistance to global processes of neoliberal globalisation. Indeed, far-right localism is not only environmentally-motivated. Rather, it is a broader political project notably connected to questions of governance, the building and maintaining of community, memory and heritage preservation and economic relations.

These ‘problematic senses of place’ (Massey 1993: 64) produced at the intersection of accelerating climate change, ecological degradation and economic neoliberalisation, calls for human geographers to keep investigating and disentangling complex affinities between ideologies of nature, identity (re-)production, belonging and resistance in conceptualisations and meanings of place, both in their discursive and practical manifestations.



## Endnotes

1. All citations are originally in French and translated by the author.
2. See also or example in the UK ‘Local Matters’, a splinter group from Generation Identity; in Belgium, ‘Résistance Verte’, an identitarian ecologist group.

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