



Editorial

Political Geographies of the Far-Right: The Environment, Space and Ideology in a Warming World

Sonja Pietiläinen^a and Ville Kellokumpu^b

June 2023 was Earth's hottest month since global records began (Nasa 2023). At the same time as the temperature gauge went up in an exceptionally hot Finland, an Arctic country warming four times faster than the average (Rantanen 2022), the Finnish government took a big leap to the right. In June 2023, the right-wing National Coalition Party formed a coalition with the populist radical right-wing Finns Party whose campaign based on gasoline populism and the opposition to 'fanatic' climate politics of 'cursed' environmentalists (Suomen Utiset 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The Finns Party took second place with a 20% share of the votes in the parliamentary elections, making its biggest gains in rural and semiurban areas that were traditionally the strongholds of the agrarian Centre Party. Riikka Purra, the leader of Finns Party who has a history of dreaming about killing migrants (see, Mykkänen, Lehtinen & Paananen 2023), became the Minister of Finance whilst Mari Rantanen, a firm believer of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, became Minister of Interior Affairs. Lulu Ranne, who calls IPCC a "propaganda-advancing political organization" (Suomen Utiset 2021), was in turn appointed as the Minister of Transport and Communications, a ministry that also governs Finnish Meteorological Institute.

The new government wasted no time in implementing anti-environmental politics and pushing far-right austerity (Toivanen 2024). After having been in power for half a year, the Orpo-Purra government has launched Thatcherite austerity measures and attacks on workers' rights, for instance, by cutting unemployment benefits, weakening job security, and by attempting to restrict the right to strike (e.g., Kopp 2023; Toivanen 2024).¹ The new government has cut over 30 million euros from environmental protection and taken its first steps in canceling Marin government's climate legislation (Rantanen 2023). Whilst migration and citizenship related legal regulations are still under development, the Finns Party's nativist dream about closing borders finally became true: in late November 2023 the government took the decision to close the land border

a Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Finland, sonja.pietilainen@oulu.fi

b Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Finland, ville.kellokumpu@oulu.fi



with Russia due to an increasing influx of migrants and in time of writing this text, the border remains closed.²

The story of the Finns Party is not an anomaly but instead just one of multiple examples of globally thriving far-right groups and parties that have accessed parliaments, pushed authoritarian reforms and succeeded in normalizing white nationalism and xenophobia. Although far-right parties and groups' politics are shaped by local political and historical contexts, the far-right across the globe shares multiple features, such as authoritarianism and a belief in an ethnically homogenous nation represented through the sovereign territorial state (Ince 2019; Rydgren 2018). In far-right politics nations are framed as containing unchanging essences of, for example, biology and race (Balibar 1990) and being 'rooted' to their homelands (Lubarda 2020). By mobilizing race, religion, and sexuality as the criteria of belonging, the far-right (re)draws a boundary between those who should be granted rights to fulfil their basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, the right to love and solidarity), and those who should not. National purity and a strong hierarchical state are pursued by building border walls and excluding the 'other' from the "nation's living space", territory, but also by redrawing the social boundaries and hierarchies within the nation through verbal, symbolic or physical violence towards those who are understood as 'deviant' and a threat to the nation and its patriarchal social orders (e.g. LGBTQ communities and feminists).

Following the parliamentary rise of far-right leaders and parties and the consequential geopolitical changes (e.g., Brexit, Trump), political geographers have increasingly paid analytical attention to the spatially varied manifestations of far-right politics and practices (Ingram 2017; Reid Ross 2017; Ince 2019; Lamour 2020; Nagel & Grove 2021). Different scales of analysis have evolved, from analysis of far-right's defence of European civilization (Casaglia *et al.* 2020), to statist analysis of territorial sovereignty and hardening of borders (Agnew 2020; Casaglia *et al.* 2020; Kallis 2018; Paasi *et al.* 2020), (anti-)fascist mobilization (Ince 2019; Santamarina 2021), feminist analyses of embodied fascist practices (Gökanksel & Smith 2016), and everyday geographies of the far-right (Lizotte 2020; Luger 2022). Despite the far-right's surge and increasing political importance, as Luger (2022: 3) argues, "there remains a comparative lack of geographic understanding of where, how, and through what socio-spatial processes the far-right operates".

Furthermore, there is also a significant gap in the geographical analysis of far-right's engagement with the environment and climate change (see also Dalby 2021 for bridging this gap), the topic of this theme issue in Nordia Geographical Publications. As emerging literature on the political ecologies of the far-right has noted, anti-immigration is not the only founding pillar of far-right politics: the far-right has become an important countermovement to the green transition and socially just climate mitigation, also intertwining different localized understandings of nature with their nativists and xenophobic claims (McCarthy 2019; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021; Bosworth 2022; Varco 2023). In far-right's politics, emotionally laden discourses about the nation that is 'threatened' by migrants, feminists and environmentalists, are woven with authoritarian neoliberalism, anti-environmental politics, as well as opposition to the green transition. The far-right practices climate obstruction in various (even contradictory) ways, for instance, by denying climate change, harrasing climate activists and scholars, and by blaming migrants and the Global South for the climate crisis (Gemenis 2012; Anshelm & Hultman 2014; Lockwood 2018; Forchtner 2019; Barla & Bjork-James 2021; Ekberg *et al.* 2022; Forchtner 2023).

Ecology and nature are, however, not absent themes in the politics of the far-right (Olsen 1999; Forchtner 2019; Staudenmaier 2021; Lubarda & Forchtner 2022). Even though environmentalism is associated with progressive politics, ecological thinking has traditionally played an important role in nationalist and fascist politics (Hultgren 2015; Forchtner 2019; Moore & Robert 2022; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021). The contemporary far-right draws on Malthusianism, German romanticism, and ecofascist thinkers (e.g., Pentti Linkola) in promoting solutions for ecological crises, such as population control of the ‘undesired’, and revitalizing blood-and-soil connections between ‘the nation’ and ‘nature’ (Hultgren 2015; Forchtner & Kølvrå 2015; Forchtner 2019; Menga 2021; Turner & Bailey 2021). By drawing on certain localized and purified conceptions of ‘nature’ and human-nature relationships (e.g., narratives of ‘rootedness’ or explaining qualities of the nation-state through geography), the far-right (re)produces a gendered and racialized nation, justifies racist politics in the name of ‘environmental protection’ and mobilises different spatial articulations of nature and nature protection.

Geography offers an excellent starting point for investigating the role of the environment in far-right’s nation-building processes because geography has a long history in studying critically how different framings of nature have been expressed in relation to the production of racial and spatial identities and to nationalism (Paasi 1996; Brahinsky 2014; Koch & Perreault 2019). Furthermore, geography has a long history of studying different forms of nationalist, National Socialist and fascist movements, their spatial imaginaries and politics that have also relied on certain naturalized understandings of society and human behaviour (Bassin 1987; Giaccaria & Minca 2016). Many of these themes are also foundational to the development of (political) geography as a scientific discipline. For instance, environmental determinism (which is present also in the contemporary far-right’s politics, see Pietiläinen, forthcoming) was the first version of modern geography (Peet 1985). Indeed, geography and climatology have been used to explain human behavior and social relations as well as the functioning of the state. For instance, geographer Rudolf Kjellén’s and Friedrich Ratzel’s naturalistic conceptions of state space as a living space, *Lebensraum*, became one of the key elements of National Socialist geopolitics (e.g., Bassin 1987; Holdar 1992; Giaccaria & Minca 2016).

To respond to this research gap, the aim of this theme issue is to explore these connections between the far-right and the environment/climate change through a (political) geographical lens. The theme issue displays a wide spectrum of empirical research, geographical contexts, and new openings on studying the political geographies of the far-right. Ranging from urban and local scopes to analysis of far-right civilizationism that goes beyond national scales, we have been particularly interested in bringing together different scalar approaches, as well as discussions about the spatial ontologies of the contemporary far-right parties. This theme issue consists of three research articles, two academic essays and two commentaries that explore the manifold connections between far-right and the environment through a range of rich case studies that provide a wide array of different scalar, theoretical and geographical perspectives.

In the first research article, Valentin Domann analyses how populist radical right parties have shaped a “rural rationality” that has enabled them to normalize a far-right politics on the local scale. Domann examines this process of normalization through two case studies related to traffic infrastructure projects in Brandenburg, Germany. The article shows how the far-right has been successfully able to capitalize on various regional and local resentments driven by urbanization. This calls for, first, a scale-sensitive analysis of how various local issues are being co-opted by the far-right and, second, developing new strategies of progressive local politics that does not end up

reifying various tropes of nativist locality and place-attachment. Domann proposes that there is potential for critical geographers to focus on and dive into (often politically inconsistent and heterogenous) local protest groups and identify various elements within these groups that might be resistant to far-right agitation.

In the second piece, Johanna Hanson examines the climate policies of the Vox party in Spain and finds that while the party rhetorically acknowledges climate change it does so through the traditional nativist and populist political imagination of PRR parties. Contrary to outright denial, Vox seeks to reterritorialize climate change on the national level in order to frame climate policies as “a broader globalist imposition that threatens the purity of the national culture” (Hanson 2024, this issue). Hanson argues that we need to look beyond climate obstructionism in analyzing the far-right approach to climate policy. The limited substantive engagement that Vox gives to climate change suggests that it is only one political issue through which the PRR seeks to articulate its nationalist agenda and foment a culture war. The discursive reterritorialization of climate change from the global to the national level enables Vox to reimpose national interests as the central issue in the face accelerating ecological crises.

In the third research article, John Peter Antonacci explores how recent scholarship in political ecology has drawn on theoretizations developed by Carl Schmitt. Through an in-depth analysis of Schmittian conceptualizations of the political, Antonacci shows what kind of assumptions and intellectual baggage scholars take on board when they uncritically adopt Schmitt’s framework in examining the politics of the planetary crisis. As Antonacci shows, the ‘concrete politics’ of the friend-enemy distinction that Schmitt posits contra liberalism and its tendency of dissolving ‘the political’ into the abstractions of ‘the economy’ and technology is, in the end, as relativistic as the abstract liberalism that Schmitt so disdains. This relativism is what makes Schmittian conceptualizations so dangerous to political ecology – “The distinction between friend and enemy can be articulated in any terms, so long as they are deemed “sufficient” to politicize a political problem” (Antonacci 2024, this issue). Antonacci argues that adopting these frameworks leaves open the possibility to articulate a green “politics of the armed lifeboat” which mobilizes a reactionary xenophobia against migrants and refugees in order to “protect” the environment.

In her academic essay, Alexandra McFadden examines the role civilizationism plays in the environmental politics of the Indian BJP party. McFadden explores how the concept of civilization provides a particular ideological bedrock through which to govern the relationship between citizens and their environment. This contribution highlights the importance of studying far-right ideology beyond the white supremacist far-right in Europe and North America. The empirical contexts of studying the far-right need to be broadened beyond the Euro- and the Anglosphere and conceptualizations developed in these particular contexts need to be tested to tease out crucial geographical differences. McFadden explores, first, how this ideology forms a spatial order between the civilization and its environment and, second, how it affects the food politics of anti-meat and cow vigilantism in India. This serves to remind how far-right ideologies employ the concept of the civilization to produce a particular order of spatial politics that seeks to govern the relationship between the citizens and their environment.

Diren Valayden argues for reframing the relations between accelerating climate change and ecological crises and the increase in authoritarian politics. As Valayden (2024, this issue) notes, “several authors have advanced the thesis that climate adaptation will be shaped by an increase in authoritarian politics or an uptick in organized violence as states deploy counterinsurgency tactics against climate refugees and environmental

activists”. Rather than presenting that climate fascism emerges as an authoritarian response to worsening climate conditions, Valayden inverts this proposition and sees that climate fascism is a contingent possibility in counterinsurgency governance that is especially aimed at pacifying “decadent cities”. Thus, the self-described eco-fascists like Brenton Tarrant and military counterinsurgency share the same imaginary and the same goal: governing cities and urban areas. This imaginary enables stochastic far-right actors like Tarrant to imagine themselves as integral parts of urban counterinsurgency by restoring the natural social order through acts of violence.

In our first commentary, Lise Benoist discusses how the far-right in France promotes various discourses of localism as part of its political agitation. The French National Rally headed by Marine Le Pen has made a slow environmental turn by adopting a “patriotic” ecology of environmental protection that sees place-connectedness and French heritage as the basis for an exclusionary localism coupled with the re-localization of economic production. Various ideas like bioregionalism and degrowth have been repurposed by party affiliates to fit into far-right ideology that seeks to fight “unrooted nomadism” and mobility as the root causes of “societal chaos” and preaching of the natural social order where there is a “sacred” connection with the population and the territory and landscape. Benoist explores the question of how to promote the kind of localism and place-attachment that does not fall into the trap of identitarian connection to land. What would a politicized localism look like that at the same time articulates a critique of capitalist growth and counters the identitarian localism of the far-right?

Sonja Pietiläinen, in turn, examines in her commentary the tactics that the Finnish far-right has employed in harassing climate activists. The burgeoning literature on the far-right has dedicated much attention to online spaces and social media as the locus of radicalization and harassment perhaps leading to a “discursive” focus. Amidst the web of social media algorithms, it is still crucial to keep in mind how far-right agitation unfolds also as a concrete street-level practice of physical violence, intimidation, and verbal harassment. By examining the 2021 Summer Rebellion of the Finnish Extinction Rebellion (*Elokapina*), Pietiläinen shows how the far-right counterdemonstration sought to reshape urban space to “bring back order”. In this process the online and the offline blend seamlessly together as the streamed and videoed acts of intimidation and harassment provide content for the online audience further motivating them to physically attend the counterdemonstration. The reshaping of urban space through various street-level spatial strategies are part and parcel of far-right politics.

The current issue also includes one research article outside the theme of the political geographies of the far-right. Evi-Carita Riikonen explores the return imaginaries of migrants through a digital ethnographic study and aims to uncover how a specific group, Finns in the UK, negotiate their sense of self through these return imaginaries. Riikonen examines how the “translocal sense of self” is produced with these return imaginaries. Ideas about returning do not necessarily relate to the actual act of returning but rather constitutes a reflection of the self in relation to manifold places that the person gives meaning to.

Endnotes

1. The Orpo-Purra government's policies have encountered active resistance in the form of mass demonstrations, political strikes and other actions. At the time of writing this editorial, trade unions are launching large-scale political strikes and mass demonstrations across Finland.
2. Whilst the migrant "crisis" has been interpreted broadly across the political spectrum as Russian "hybrid warfare" due to Finland's accession to NATO. The media has whipped up frenzy about border security and potential "infiltrators disguised as migrants" (Airiola 2023). In the end, the migrants become pawns in the far-right game of geopolitics and border security.

References

- Agnew J (2020) Taking back control? The myth of territorial sovereignty and the Brexit fiasco. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8(2): 259–272.
- Airiola O (2023) Itärajalla tapahtuu jotain, mitä ei sotien jälkeen ole nähty. *Iltalehti*, 26.11.2023. <https://www.iltalehti.fi/kotimaa/a/d4d09e6a-1fd1-481c-a1b9-24aed0fee040>
- Anshelm J & Hultman M (2014) A green fatwā? Climate change as a threat to the masculinity of industrial modernity. *NORMA – International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 9(2): 84–96.
- Balibar E (1990) Is there a "Neo-racism"? In Balibar E & Wallerstein I (eds.) *Race, Nation, Class – Ambiguous Identities*, 17–28. Verso Books, London.
- Barla J & Bjork-James S (2021) Introduction: Entanglements of Anti-Feminism and Anti-Environmentalism in the Far-Right. *Australian Feminist Studies* 36(110): 377–387.
- Bassin M (1987) Imperialism and the nation state in Friedrich Ratzel's political geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 11(4): 473–495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030913258701100401>
- Brahinsky R, Sasser J & Minkoff Zern L-A (2014) Race, space, and nature: An introduction and critique. *Antipode* 46(5): 1135–1152.
- Bosworth K (2022) Populism and the rise of the far right: two different problems for political ecology. *Political Geography* 94: 102531.
- Casaglia A, Coletti R, Lizotte C, Agnew J, Mamadouh, V & Minca C (2020) Interventions on European nationalist populism and bordering in time of emergencies. *Political Geography* 82: 1–9.
- Dalby S (2021) Unsustainable Borders: Globalization in a Climate-Disrupted World. *Borders in Globalization Review* 2(2): 26–37.
- Ekberg K, Forchtner B, Hultman M & Jylhä KM (2022) *Climate Obstruction: How denial, delay and inaction are heating up the planet*. Routledge, London.
- Forchtner B (2019; ed.) *The Far Right and the Environment*. Routledge, London.
- Forchtner B (2023; ed.) *Visualising far-right environments: Communication and the politics of nature*. Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Forchtner B & Kølvrå C (2015) The nature of nationalism: Populist radical right parties on countryside and climate. *Nature and Culture* 10(2): 199–224.
- Gemenis K, Katsanidou A & Vasilopoulou S (2012) The politics of anti-environmentalism: positional issue framing by the European radical right. MPSA Annual Conference, 12–15 April 2012: 12–15.
- Giaccaria P & Minca C (2016) Life in space, space in life: Nazi topographies, geographical imaginations, and Lebensraum. *Holocaust Studies* 22(2–3): 151–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2016.1148876>
- Gökanksel B & Smith S (2016) "Making America great again"? The fascist body politics of Donald Trump. *Political Geography* 54: 79–81.
- Holdar S (1992) The ideal state and the power of geography the life-work of Rudolf Kjellén. *Political geography* 11(3): 307–323.
- Hultgren J (2015) *Border walls gone green: nature and anti-immigrant politics in America*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Ince A (2019) Fragments of an anti-fascist geography: Interrogating racism, nationalism, and state power. *Geography Compass* 13(3): e12420.
- Kallis A (2018) Populism, sovereigntism, and the unlikely re-emergence of the territorial nation-state. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11(3): 285–302.

- Koch N & Perreault T (2019) Resource nationalism. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(4): 611–631.
- Kopp D (2023) Finland's Right-Wing Government Wants to Rip Up Its Welfare State. <https://jacobin.com/2023/10/finland-true-finn-far-right-welfare-state-workers-rights>
- Nasa (2023) NASA Announces Summer 2023 Hottest on Record. <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-announces-summer-2023-hottest-on-record/>
- Ingram A (2017) Geopolitical events and fascist machines: Trump, Brexit and the deterritorialisation of the West. *Political Geography* 57: 91–93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.12.003>
- Lamour C & Varga R (2020) The Border as a Resource in Rightwing Populist Discourse: Viktor Orbán and the Diasporas in a Multi-scalar Europe. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35(3): 335–350
- Lizotte C (2020) The mainstreaming of “vulgar territory” and popular visions of hyper-bordered and feminized territory. *Geography Compass* 14(9): e12503.
- Lockwood M (2018) Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: exploring the linkages. *Environmental Politics* 27(4): 712–732.
- Lubarda B (2020) Beyond ecofascism? Far-right ecologism (FRE) as a framework for future inquiries. *Environmental Values* 29(6): 713–732.
- Lubarda B & Fortchtner B (2022) Far Right and Environment: Past-Present-Future. In Bruno VA (ed.) *Populism and Far Right: Trends in Europe*, 85–113. EDUCatt, Milano.
- Luger J (2022) Celebrations, exaltations and alpha lands: Everyday geographies of the far-right. *Political Geography* 96: 102604.
- Macklin G (2022) The extreme Right, climate change and terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34(5): 979–996.
- Malm A & the Zetkin Collective (2021) *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Dangers of Fossil Fascism*. Verso, London.
- McCarthy J (2019) Authoritarianism, populism, and the environment: Comparative experiences, insights, and perspectives. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109(2): 301–313.
- Menga F (2021) Virtual Forum introduction: Populist ecologies: Nature, nationalism, and authoritarianism. *Political Geography* 94: 102549. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102549>
- Moore S & Roberts A (2022) The rise of eco-fascism: Climate change and the far right. Polity, Cambridge.
- Mykkänen P, Lehtinen D & Paananen V (2023) Rasistista kieltä Halla-ahon vieraskirjassa viljellyt ”riikka” näyttää olevan Riikka Purra – ”Olen ilmaissut itseäni tavoilla, joita en nykyään hyväksyisi”. *Helsingin Sanomat*, 10 July 2023. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000009709571.html>
- Nagel C & Grove K (2021) Virtual forum introduction: Populist nationalisms and new geographies of exclusion. *Political Geography* 89: 102429.
- Olsen J (1999) *Nature and nationalism: Right-wing ecology and the politics of identity in contemporary Germany*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Paasi A (1996) *Territories, boundaries, and consciousness: The changing geographies of the Finnish-Russian border*. J. Wiley & Sons, Hoboken.
- Paasi A, Ferdoush MA, Jones R, Murphy AB, Agnew J, Ochoa Espejo P, Fall JJ & Peterle G (2022) Locating the territoriality of territory in border studies. *Political Geography* 95: 102584.
- Peet R (1985) The social origins of environmental determinism. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75(3): 309–333.
- Rantanen A (2023) Hallitus aikoo pyyhkiä kunnilta vaaditut ilmastosuunnitelmat laista – osa kunnista tekee suunnitelmat silti. *YLE*, 15.9.2023. <https://yle.fi/a/74-20050068>
- Reid Ross A (2017) *Against the fascist creep*. AK Press, Chico and Edinburgh.
- Rydgren J (2018; ed.) *The Oxford handbook of the radical right*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Santamarina A (2021). The spatial politics of far-right populism: Vox, anti-fascism and neighbourhood solidarity in Madrid city. *Critical Sociology* 47(6): 891–905.
- Staudenmaier P (2021) *Ecology Contested*. New Compass Press, Porsgrunn.
- Suomen Uutiset (2021) Ranne: Ilmastopaniikki ei pelasta, vaan tuhoaa perusoikeudet <https://www.suomenuutiset.fi/ranne-ilmastopaniikki-ei-pelasta-vaan-tuhoaa-perusoikeudet/>
- Suomen Uutiset (2023a) Oispa Lunta! YouTube, uploaded by Suomen Uutiset. 21 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4IGXNlw5cQ>
- Suomen Uutiset (2023b) Oispa energiaa! Youtube, uploaded by Suomen Uutiset. 17 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ1cqFeNvwM>
- Suomen Uutiset (2023c) Oispa metsää! YouTube, uploaded by Suomen Uutiset. 6 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4NpgKTDLnc>
- Toivanen T (2024) Austerity with a far-right flavour – The convergence of authoritarian neoliberalism and climate obstructionism in the Finnish far-right. *Political Ecologies of the Far-right Conference*, 11.–13. January 2024, Uppsala University.
- Turner J & Bailey D (2021) “Ecobordering”: casting immigration control as environmental protection. *Environmental Politics* 31(1): 110–131.

- Varco M (2023) Volk utopia: Racial futures and ecological politics on the German far-right. *Geoforum*. 103823.
- Vowles K & Hultman M (2021) Dead white men vs. Greta Thunberg: Nationalism, misogyny, and climate change denial in Swedish far-right digital media. *Australian Feminist Studies* 36(110): 414–431.
- YLE (2023) Finns Party minister apologises over far-right comments and connections. *YLE*, 22.6.2023. <https://yle.fi/a/74-20038203>