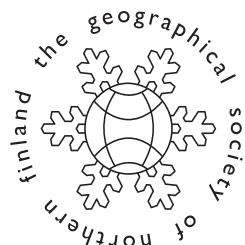


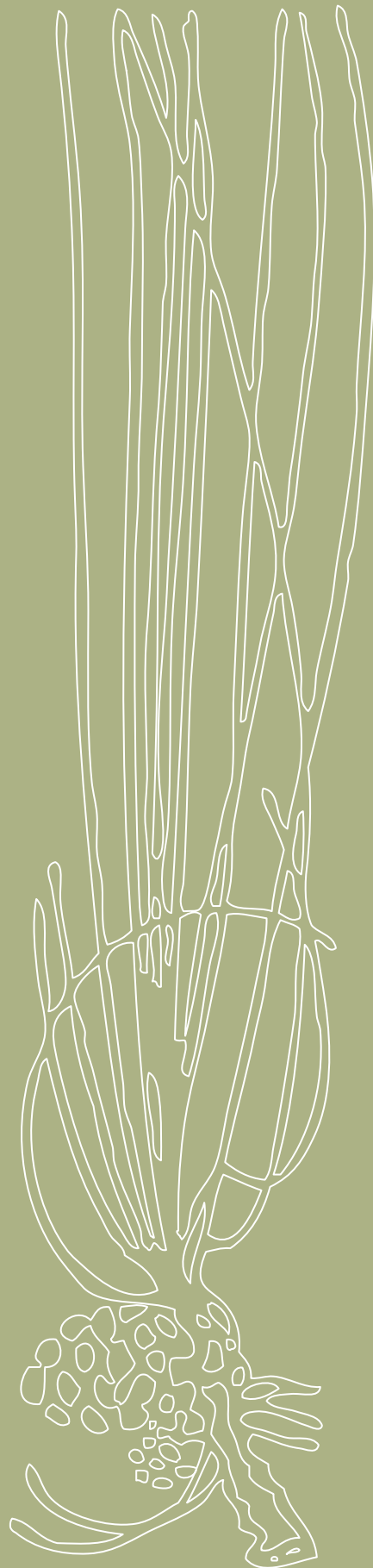
In a world wreaked by climate change and ecological crises, the far-right has also been ascendant globally gaining access to positions of power in political systems. This theme issue explores the political geographies of the far-right and focuses especially on the various conceptualizations of nature and space that the far-right employs in their environmental politics. The theme issue presents three research articles, two academic essays and two commentary pieces. Valentin Domann analyzes the normalization of far-right politics in traffic infrastructure protest movements in Germany. Johanna Hanson examines the Spanish Vox party's attempt to reterritorialize climate change to the national level. John Peter Antonacci scrutinizes what kind of assumptions political ecologists take on board when they employ Carl Schmitt's conceptualizations of politics and the political. In the academic essays, Alexandra McFadden investigates 'civilizationism' in the Indian BJP party's environmental politics and Diren Valayden focuses on counterinsurgency governance and argues for reframing the relations between accelerating climate change and the increase in authoritarian politics. In the commentary pieces, Lise Benoist examines how the French far-right has adopted 'localism' as its environmental strategy and Sonja Pietiläinen explores how far-right agitation against climate protesters unfolds as a concrete street-level practice of violence and intimidation.



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

edited by  
**Sonja Pietiläinen  
& Ville Kellokumpu**



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# Contents

## Editorial

- 4 Political Geographies of the Far-Right: The Environment, Space and Ideology in a Warming World  
*Sonja Pietiläinen & Ville Kellokumpu*

## Research articles

- 13 Shifting notions of the rural: Protests over traffic infrastructure and far-right normalization 📄  
*Valentin Domann*
- 39 Looking beyond climate contrarianism: nationalism and the reterritorialization of climate discourse in Spain's Vox party 📄  
*Johanna Hanson*
- 63 Green GroBraun: Carl Schmitt's political ecology of space 📄  
*John Peter Antonacci*

## Academic Essays

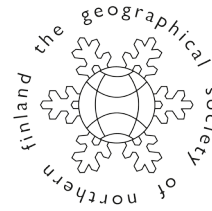
- 83 Hindutva Civilizationism in India: Unravelling the Human-Ecological Conditions 📄  
*Alexandra McFadden*
- 97 Governing "decadent cities": The far-right as agents of climate counterinsurgency 📄  
*Diren Valayden*

## Discussions and interventions

- 111 Far-right localism as an environmental strategy in France  
*Lise Benoist*
- 123 The nightless nights of the 'Nazi camp': The Finnish far-right's anti-climate politics in urban space  
*Sonja Pietiläinen*

## Research Articles (Outside Theme)

- 137 Imagining Finland: negotiating the sense of self through return imaginaries  
*Evi-Carita Riihonen* 📄



## Editorial

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

Sonja Pietiläinen<sup>a</sup> and Ville Kellokumpu<sup>b</sup>

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 Uutiset 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 Uutiset 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).<sup>1</sup> 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

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

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. LBTQ 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 (Gökarksel & 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, harassing 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.

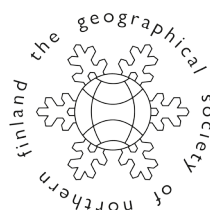
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## Research article

# Shifting notions of the rural: Protests over traffic infrastructure and far-right normalization

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## Abstract

Current far-right attitudes to the climate crisis are highly ambivalent, oscillating between the glorification of nature and ideological fragments of “fossil fascism”. Invocations of “the rural” serve as semantic mediations, enabling populist radical right parties (PRRPs) to apply seemingly frictionless and multi-scalar narratives of far-right ecology to rural protests. Applying relational and scale-sensitive approaches can help to disentangle how far-right discursive and political effort ties into and transforms spatial imaginaries. This paper discusses the role of rurality for populist scalar re-articulations and the impact of the latter on local communities. Drawing on findings from a qualitative longitudinal study in small towns in Brandenburg, Germany, the paper shows how local PRRP chapters create a specific notion of ‘rural rationality’ that helps to normalize far-right politics and politicians at the local scale, contrasting a proclaimed albeit abstract cordon sanitaire.

**Keywords:** *Far Right, Normalization, Rural, Scale, Spatial Imaginaries, Protest*

## 1. Introduction

Following the rapid ascent of far-right parties and candidates in many democratic countries all over the world, we are now confronted with multiple established far-right ruling coalitions. Although their reach for power remains contested, as Bolsonaro and Trump’s recent electoral defeats have shown, processes of mainstreaming far-right thought and the normalization of racist positions and personnel is evident (Mondon & Winter 2020). In many liberal democracies, and especially in Germany with its Nazi past, the political establishment is attempting to uphold a ‘Cordon Sanitaire’ where other parties rule out cooperation with populist radical right parties (PRRPs). In political

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day-to-day business and notably at subnational level, however, these agreements are in a state of gradual erosion (Heinze 2022a: 347; see also Nettelbladt 2022).

This creeping process might best be observed in *issues* that are ideologically less “suspicious” than migration, for example, when it comes to reaching out effectively to mainstream political audiences (Ross 2017: 3). Also, in a democratic system with a multi-level approach, the ‘lowest’ level, the local *scale*, provides a productive entry point to explore how far-right actors re-articulate their positions into ostensibly depoliticized local issues (Domann & Nuissl 2022a). Furthermore, specific *places* where this process might be most pressing are in sharp focus, given that the rural areas tend to show higher voter support for PRRPs and their political processes receive less attention in scientific and mainstream media discourse (Kasabov 2020). Hence, this paper concentrates on what appears to be ideologically unsuspicious far-right everyday politics at the municipal level in rural areas: I am particularly concerned with how local PRRP representatives mobilize notions of rurality in the context of disputes revolving around traffic infrastructure. The paper builds on a wide body of (geographical) research with reference to the ‘demand side’ of radical right populism (on societal context, see Mudde 2007: 229) and there is a lively discussion on how rurally embedded sentiments of anger, discontent and nostalgia affect far-right electoral success (Cramer 2016; Berlet & Sunshine 2019; Furlong 2019; Deppisch *et al.* 2021; Rickardsson 2021; Hartevelde *et al.* 2022). In addition, the representation of ‘the rural’ as a (“parochial”) far-right stronghold has been both assessed (Jarosz & Lawson 2002; Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Gkartzios *et al.* 2020; Kasabov 2020) and contested by a growing number of scholars (Halfacree 2018; Scoones *et al.* 2018; Woods 2018; Roman-Alcalá *et al.* 2021). Looking at the ‘supply side’ (institutional and ideological structure of PRRPs, see Mudde 2007: 256–276), some scholarly attention has been given to how PRRPs utilize notions of “rural populism” (de Lange & Rooduijn 2015; Nilsson & Lundgren 2015; Limeberry & Fox 2021; Pied 2021; Bori & Gonda 2022). Other scholars unpack the far right’s strong ties to car-centrism and the petrol industry (Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021; Moore & Roberts 2022), and their specific forms of climate and environmental populism (Atkins & Menga 2022; Swyngedouw 2022). Very little research, however, has been carried out on how the far-right employs the discourse of ‘rurality’ at the local scale (for an exception, see Jadhav 2021).

Consequently, this paper wants to contribute to ongoing discussions in political and rural geography by disentangling the following urgent questions: How do municipal PRRP actors apply notions of rurality and how do they normalize far-right topics and representatives through this discourse?

Drawing on two case studies of conflicts centred on traffic infrastructure in Brandenburg, Germany, this contribution argues that populist invocations of the rural hint at a crucial semantic dodge, one that enables local far-right actors to address climate-related issues by re-framing them as specifically *rural* rather than politico-ecological concerns. They furthermore use embedded spatial imaginaries of “the rural” to create a “rural rationality”, emphasizing the common sense of rural everyday life. This allows local PRRP chapters to use vertical anti-establishment rhetoric, while at the same time gradually integrating themselves into the municipal establishment.

In order to create a conceptual framework, I will develop a relational understanding of rurality in the context of the widely debated urban-rural divide of far-right electoral success (2.1) and theorize the AfD emphasis on the rural as a mediation of two competing far-right ideological fragments (2.2). Furthermore, the relevant literature on the normalization of PRRPs is reviewed (2.3) and a scalar-sensitive analytical framework



sketched out in order to disentangle the correspondent re-articulations of local far-right actors (2.4). Following an introduction to the case studies and the methods applied (3), I present the results of empirical fieldwork and discuss them in four steps. I describe the dominant spatial imaginaries of rurality (4.1) and analyse far-right “rural rationality” as a scale-mediating strategy (4.2). In a final step, the impact of the latter on the normalization of far-right topics (4.3) and representatives (4.4) will be discussed. The concluding remarks (5) are a summary of the findings and critically assess the limitations and future trajectories of research on rural far-right normalization.

## 2. Conceptual framework

To adequately evaluate the possible effects of local far-right evocations of rurality, the following paragraphs will provide a brief review of the literature associated with rurality, (local) normalization and scale in the context of PRRP research. Step by step, each section clarifies the conceptual approach to the two case studies.

### 2.1 Developing a relational understanding of uneven far-right electoral success

When the debate on the spatially uneven distribution of PRRP electoral success flared up, the level of academic discussions about “rurality” as a term and as a concept was either outpaced or neglected by popular discourse. The strongholds of the far right were depicted globally as traditionalist, parochial rural areas in stark contrast to cosmopolitan and progressive urban and metropolitan spaces (Roman-Alcalá *et al.* 2021). The importance of the rural areas for the electoral success of PRRPs has been widely discussed, and notably (if somewhat ironically) framed as the revenge of “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). In fact, there are solid indications for an electoral urban-rural divide, with a higher voting share for PRRPs on the rural side (Scala & Johnson 2017; Corradi 2021; Rickardsson 2021). That said, there is a consensus on the assessment of problematic aspects of mainstream and media discourses on PRRP success: “In a sense, rural and peripheral areas are being ‘blamed’ for the rise of nationalism” (Pugh & Dubois 2021: 270). This spatial narrative not only leads to externalizing the problem from the social milieus of most academics and media professionals, it also nurtures contempt towards peripheral and rural regions as a whole (Jarosz & Lawson 2002; Kasabov 2020). Furthermore, a dichotomic concept of urban centres and a rural periphery is used as a powerful discursive tool by right-wing autocrats themselves (Roman-Alcalá *et al.* 2021). The mobilizing power of anti-urban PRRP tropes also needs to be understood in relation to the dominant spatial representations of a political rift between these two realms.

So, what is to be found at the empirical core of this dominant narrative in the case of Germany, where the PRRP Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) celebrated a huge electoral ascent during the last decade?

Analyses of the latest electoral data “partially confirm the link between rurality and higher levels of support for the AfD” (Deppisch *et al.* 2021: 12). That said, the study cited did find a non-linear correlation indicating that although AfD support (particularly in eastern Germany) is higher in rural compared to non-rural areas, the AfD gains its

strongest support in *fairly* rural areas, not in *very* rural areas. This is only one of many geographic-electoral studies indicating that rurality does not per se sufficiently explain AfD success. Apart from the spatially uneven distribution of economic hardship, experiences of local marginalization (Harteveld *et al.* 2022) and peripheralization (Förtner *et al.* 2021) provide far more nuanced explanations for a geographic analysis that transcends the urban-rural dichotomy. These shared feelings of relative decline in one's own part of the country compared to other places (see de Dominicis *et al.* 2022) generate regionally rooted forms of resentment, a topic that has been discussed quite prominently (Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016). The debates clearly showed, however, that “studies of subnational variation in PRR support (or other electoral outcomes) need to theorize and model how different factors operate in different contexts, rather than adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach.” (Harteveld *et al.* 2022: 457).

This leads to the question of whether rurality as a conceptual term is of any significance when it comes to researching PRRPs in these areas. Some qualitative case studies assessing the role of rurality for (local) far-right politics point to a fruitful method of applying this dimension without losing complexity (Jadhav 2021; Pied 2021; Walter 2021). Chip Barlet and Spencer Sunshine (2019), for example, demonstrate how organized white supremacists exploit prejudice, rural imaginaries, discontent, and localism in their campaigns, which in turn shape local political consciousness. With this in mind, the approach in the current paper works towards a relational understanding of rurality that allows for recognition of “the diverse networks and flows that criss-cross rural and urban space and the hybrid forms that result as being part of the very constitution of both the rural and the urban” (Woods 2011: 43). It highlights the material and powerful cultural effects of ‘the rural’, simultaneously interrogating its discursive, historic and territorial construction, and ties in with the growing interest in Lefebvrian theories of the rural, framing it as a process of the social production of relational patterns of consumption and production, representations and lived everyday practices (Halfacree 2006; Halfacree 2007; Woods 2009; Lefebvre 2022). This thinking offers empirical access to ‘scripts’ (Woods 2011: 202) of the rural that produce and signify rural everyday life.

I address these scripts as spatial imaginaries of rurality and show how they constitute a political opportunity structure for PRRPs. Julie-Anne Boudreau notes that spatial imaginaries function not only as individual frameworks but as *collectively* shared beliefs that structure everyday life (Boudreau 2007: 2596). Spatial imaginaries, as Josh Watkins emphasizes, are carriers of the performative and forward-looking potential of places and communities: “They make arguments about characteristics of the past and present to advocate what the future (of certain spaces) may look like” (Watkins 2015: 510). It seems therefore that the specific aspects of rurality these spatial imaginaries entail are more important than whether the socio-economic or demographic characteristics of a place are classified as “rural”. Chapter 4.1 and 4.3 shed light on how these conceptual ideas translate into empirical inquiry.

## 2.2 Placing the rural in far-right discourse: The AfD between Eco-populism and Fossil fascism

To understand the discursive and political strategies of AfD representatives at the local scale it is, first of all, crucial to recognize how they are entangled in wider partisan and non-partisan contexts. The party should be contextualized as an important parliamentary

project within the environment of a globally active far right (Mudde 2019), which has in recent years gone through several waves of radicalization (Arzheimer 2019). More precisely, the party can be understood as an exceptional PRRP. AfD's organization is more decentralized and its decision-making modes are more inclusive than is habitually associated with far-right parties – this stems from AfD's strategy to serve as a “movement-party” (Heinze & Weisskircher 2021). This section discusses the various connections between local partisan far-right politics and broader non-partisan and movement-oriented far-right narratives of rural nature, climate and ecology.

The AfD has no genuine roots in agrarian issues, since it was founded in 2013 initially as a rallying party of Eurosceptics. Yet, its later positions towards more anti-migrant, racist and climate change denialist sentiments collide with the active appropriation of rurality. This strategy has also been analysed recently for other populists in the Global North (Limeberry & Fox 2021). But, given the observation that the age of (policy-oriented) agrarian populism is over (Strijker *et al.* 2015: 32), it seems to be merely a symbolic tactic and less the inheritance of genuine agrarian populism as Margaret Canovan defines it (Canovan 1981). Conceptualizing the AfD as populist far right is a common definition stemming from the idea that populism is a “thin-centered ideology”, in this case attached to the ideological elements of the radical right (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1669). Here, two competing ideological strands are conveyed by the concept of “the rural”.

Firstly, far-right thought is fundamentally rooted in the fetishization of nature. The ecological ideology of the radical right has always claimed that the rules of nature apply in equal measure to social relations (Moore & Roberts 2022: 44). Mystifying the forces of nature and naturalness can, in times of ecological turmoil, serve as the essence of right-wing radicalism, as several key thinkers of the Frankfurt School argue (Wallmeyer 2021). ‘Organic’ and Darwinist theories of societal and state organization, “wherein each and every individual forms a cell in the state's body and conformity produces health in body as well as state” (Ross 2017: 26), provided the foundation for historic Nazism. As Bernhard Forchtner (2019: 300) demonstrates, current far-right movements in Germany also draw their imaginary of nature (as “not multicultural, but biodiverse”) from a rich intellectual legacy of ethno-nationalist ideas. One of its latest manifestations is the consolidation of several *völkisch* settler projects in several rural parts of Germany, embodying the very idea of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) and imagining future geographies of racially immunized socio-ecological configurations (Varco 2023). Balša Lubarda describes how far-right ecologism emerges as a key ideology for stabilizing and unifying the ruling coalition of the right in post-socialist European countries (Lubarda 2023).

Secondly, several voices share the analysis that in the current era of climate change mitigation, crisis coalitions between far-right parties and the dominant classes – fearing loss of their accumulated wealth – are forged (Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021; Cox & Skidmore-Hess 2022; Moore & Roberts 2022). Ranging from “petro populism” (Tornel 2020) to “fossil fascism” (Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021), these politics can take on a wide variety of forms. Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective have developed an understanding of this emerging force that goes beyond mere opportunistic partnerships. Drawing on the work of Roger Griffin, they define “fossil fascism” as a set of ultranationalist ideas connecting “fossil fuels to palingenetic or palindefensive purposes” (Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021: 274). In this sense, an ideological core can be identified, one that worships the organic national community and places fossil industries at the centre of its creation and its wealth, which in turn must be protected

in order to defend the community. Despite some weaknesses in the analytical use of the term fossil fascism, which will be addressed later, it helps to identify a core element of the “thin-centered ideology” of PRRPs and explain its recent appeal to several classes, but also the need to harmonize it with other ideological elements.

This emerging strategic and ideological partnership should come as no surprise to observers, since Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2010, 2018, 2019, 2022) has argued in several instances that populist climate change denialism should be understood in terms of its complex relations to mainstream climate politics. The core of his argument lies in the unveiling of liberal climate measures as populist “ecologies of fear”, naturalizing post-politics and marginalizing alternative imaginations of the given socio-ecological order (Swyngedouw 2010: 217). Within this regime, the master discourse itself becomes populist, so that the anti-climate politics of PRRPs should not be seen as opposition to the regime but as a *perversion* of its core narratives (Swyngedouw 2022: 915).

Both the ‘ecofascist’ and the ‘fossil fascist’ far-right positions exhibit the inherently contradictory ideological foundation of PRRPs. As shown, for example, in case studies of (right-wing) “populist ecologies” in Hungary (Bori & Gonda 2022), Italy and Brazil (Atkins & Menga 2022), these contradictions are re-articulated and exploited by the far right in a somewhat contingent but always opportunistic way. Environmental and climate vocabulary can serve “as a container for [the far-right’s] wider social, political, or economic demands” (Atkins & Menga 2022: 224). I argue that the AfD has found a means of communicating and combining its nature-glorifying and “fossil-fascist” ideological elements through excessive emphasis on *the rural* and provide empirical evidence for this in Chapter 4.2.

### 2.3 Normalization of radical right populism

Apart from this ideological context, studies on populist *tactics* help to explain the normalization of AfD politics. Populism worships and idealizes the people and populists claim to be the only genuine and resolute representation of its will (Ionescu & Gellner 1969). As Rogers Brubaker adds, their discourses should be understood in relation “to a *two-dimensional vision* of social space, defined by the *intersection* of vertical and horizontal oppositions” (Brubaker 2017: 362, *emph. in orig.*). With the term vertical opposition, Brubaker addresses the populist strategy of defining an established elite that is imagined as suppressing and exploiting ‘the people’ or acting on behalf of foreign interests. This vertical dimension of the enemy also operates “downwards” and mobilizes bigoted attitudes towards marginalized and (sub-)proletarian groups within a stratified society. When it comes to clarifying horizontal opposition, radical-right ideologies fuel thin-centred populism in order to define boundaries of belonging (to ‘the people’) through racial, cultural and nationalist categories. Here it can mobilize attitudes deeply engrained in capitalist nation states. Cas Mudde (2007: 297) therefore suggests understanding the “populist radical right essentially as a ‘pathological normalcy’, i.e., a radicalized version of mainstream ideas, and not as a ‘normal pathology’, unconnected to the mainstream”.

Against this background, normalization of the far right must be understood as a non-exceptional process in which already embedded forces become dominant (Mondon & Winter 2020). Empirically, this can be clearly observed in two dimensions. Ruth Wodak argues for tracing how specific ideological fragments of PRRPs over time and through semiotic shifts become normalized and part of the mainstream (Wodak 2019). Another,

albeit more obvious aspect of the (local) normalization of radical right populism is the tendency to de-demonize far-right representatives, despite (on higher levels) the cordon sanitaire in place to exclude them (Heinze 2022b). This short definition of normalization as a) the mainstreaming of far-right ideological fragments and b) the acceptance of its partisan representatives within the parliamentary establishment is applied here to the case studies under review and gives structure to the results (4.3 and 4.4) (for a more extensive conceptual discussion of local far-right normalization, see Domann [forthcoming]).

Insightful studies in the context of this latter aspect show how PRRP actors exploit local governance arenas such as municipal councils, townhall meetings, participation, and participatory planning processes, all of which have been studied most prominently for the rise of the Tea Party movement (Westermeyer 2019; Ehrhardt 2020). For the German case, this aspect has been discussed as key to understanding AfD processes of normalization (Nettelbladt 2021; Domann & Nuissl 2022b). In this context, it is vital to note the well-described trend of institutional polarization in local politics between small (mostly rural) and large (mostly urban) communities. While urban politics tends towards an increasingly contentious mode of decision-making, whereby majority ratios in local councils are definitive and parties that dominate national politics are powerful, the situation in small communities is reversed. Numerous structural constraints that foster consociational political arrangements in small municipalities have been identified, such as the interdependencies of local politicians due to family ties or social density, and growing competition with other localities or historic-materialist path dependencies (Jeggle & Ilien 1978; Sonnenmoser & Wuketich 2017). Here, consensus, deliberation, compromise, and concentration of power in the mayor's office tend to become ever more important (Bogumil & Holtkamp 2016). These local politics share many aspects of what Jacques Rancière describes as “archipolitics”, understanding the political as a social space that is homogeneously structured and leaves no room for dissent: “The good city is one in which the order of the cosmos, the geometric order that rules the movement of the divine stars, manifests itself as the temperament of a social body” (Rancière 1999: 68).

Although the cited terms are broader concepts, derived mainly from national and international party politics, this paper argues that they can also be applied with caution to untangle “opportunity structures” (see Koopmans 1999) for and different processes of far-right mobilization at local level. To this end, the following chapter discusses the scalar dimension of local PRRP chapters and suggests that their discursive efforts be interpreted as scale framing.

## 2.4 Far-right scale framing and municipal politics

In political and electoral geography, the relevance of scalar dimensions for the success of parties and narratives has been a topic of discussion for decades. In his analysis of the spatial dimensions of Italian party politics, John Agnew claims that “political parties cannot be adequately understood without attending to the ways in which considerations of geographical scale are intertwined with their ideologies and organizational activities.” (Agnew 1997: 99–100). Acknowledging the fundamental critique of using *scale* as an analytical dimension (e.g., Marston *et al.* 2005) and the widely disputed scale debates of the discipline (see Jones III 2017), recent analyses of far-right politics continue to highlight the value of examining the phenomenon from a scalar perspective

(Graddy-Lovelace 2019; Casaglia *et al.* 2020; Kalb 2020; Lamour 2020; Förtner *et al.* 2021; Roman-Alcalá *et al.* 2021).

Elsewhere (Domann & Nuissl 2022a), we have suggested applying the concept of scale framing to the disentangling of far-right multi-scalar discourses, drawing on the understanding of Helga Kurtz, who comprehends scale frames as

*“discursive practices that construct meaningful (and actionable) linkages between the scale at which a social problem is experienced and the scale(s) at which it could be politically addressed or resolved.”* (Kurtz 2003: 894).

Using this concept, three modes of scalar re-articulations of local PRRP chapters have been identified: localizing, de-localizing and scalar-mediating scale frames (Domann & Nuissl 2022a), the last of which seems to resonate most with locally embedded narratives. And for the case studies in this paper, it has been shown that local AfD representatives specifically problematize wind turbines in rural and diesel ban zones in urban areas in this scalar-mediating manner.

Connecting these findings to research on current AfD framing strategies in relation to climate and ecological crises, it can be expected that the politics of its local chapters will not embrace climate change denialism outright but instead focus on the costs and burdens to local ‘people’. This hypothesis is supported by Anne Küppers, who analysed the AfD member magazine and concluded that “energy transition scepticism” seems to be the most dominant frame here. Without falling into profane denialism (which resonates in its radical form with approx. five per cent of the German population), energy transition scepticism allows for “the question of ‘who pays?’ for climate change mitigation (the AfD’s answer being ‘the core people’)” (Küppers 2022: 16).

As will be shown later, it is of some importance to understand the discursive work of local PRRP chapters as scale framing when it comes to normalizing far-right topics (4.3). But first, the next chapter introduces the case studies under review and the methods applied.

### 3. Doing longitudinal geography: Case studies, methods and interpretation

In order to examine the role of rurality for far-right scalar re-articulations and their normalizing effects, this paper discusses results from two case studies on conflicts revolving around traffic infrastructure in Brandenburg, Germany.

The first conflict (“B158”) stems from the planned construction of a ring road to bypass a suburban municipality close to Berlin (Ahrensfelde) with 14 000 inhabitants (see Figure 1). As the recent spatial development of the Berlin metropolitan region has undergone dramatic changes in the wake of reunification, resulting in rapid and ongoing residential suburbanization dynamics (Hierse *et al.* 2017), the tangential road cutting through the suburb is now a major bottleneck for commuters and suffers regularly from heavy traffic. The road is part of the federal highway B158 and the section is called Dorfstraße (village road). The starting point for the conflict dates back to a time before German reunification when initial steps were taken for the planning of a ring road to relieve the village core of through traffic. In 1991, the municipality applied for the execution of similar plans. The higher-level state and federal administrations



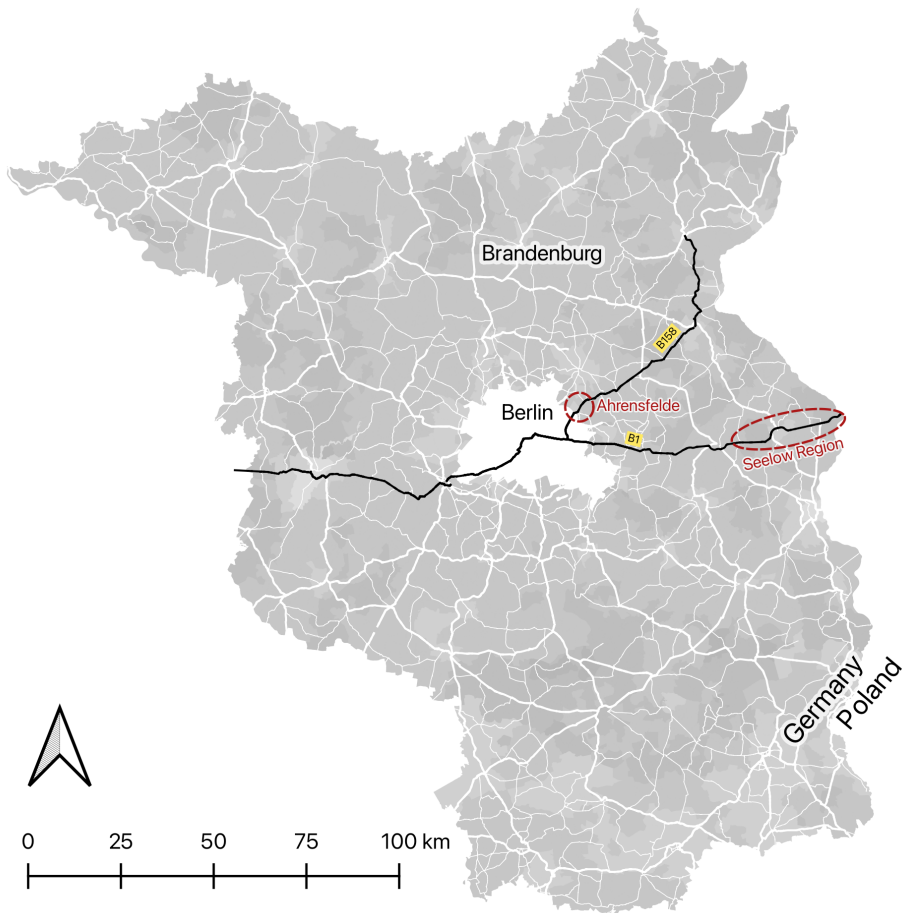


Figure 1. Study area in eastern Brandenburg; sections in focus of local protest groups highlighted in red (source: own illustration based on OpenStreetMap data; map projection: ETRS89).

responsible, however, were immersed in financial debates, since both Berlin and the neighbouring state of Brandenburg would be obliged to contribute to the construction. It took twenty years for the two states to come to an arrangement and initiate the road scheme evaluation that led to the preferred choice of a partially covered multi-lane road parallel to the current tangent. In 2015, the planning process ground to a halt once again due to financial constraints. After three decades of turbulent debate, the fear of substantial noise emissions and the potentially negative impact on the townscape has sparked protest in recent years, with campaigns, demonstrations, gatherings, and public letters calling on those responsible to reconsider their plan and once and for all seek a solution to the issue of 24 000 cars passing through the town on a daily basis (see Figure 2). The preferred solution of a local citizens' initiative and all of the local council members is to construct the entire ring road below the surface until it leaves the developed area of the suburb.

In a second conflict in the rural area around the town of Seelow, a section of another federal highway ("B1") linking the adjacent Polish border to the Netherlands for a length of 778 kilometres is at the centre of the local dispute. The current conflict was prompted by Polish government plans to replace the old road bridge over the River Oder



near Kostrzyn with a new one, which would then be available to heavy cargo transport on its way to Berlin. In response, the “citizens’ initiative B1” was formed in 2013 and began to rally against the dreaded increase of cross-border transit traffic, associating it with noise and environmental pollution. The initiative has already abandoned its more radical demands – opposition to any kind of cross-border heavy cargo transportation – and is now rallying to have the road adapted to the expected traffic, e.g., with ring roads for the affected villages and a broadening of certain road sections to facilitate safer overtake manoeuvres. Ten years into the campaign, the conflict remains unsolved and since no mitigation measures have been implemented, tension is rising (see Figure 3).

Both cases can be understood as suitable observation subjects for the normalization of local AfD chapters. This is exemplified by the party’s gains in each local council election after its founding in 2013. In the Ahrensfelde local elections, its share of the vote jumped from zero per cent in 2014 to fourteen per cent in 2019. For the same period, it rose from zero to twenty per cent in the Seelow local council election. In the Brandenburg state elections in late 2019, the AfD won the direct and the majority vote in both constituencies, ranging from 24 to 27 per cent. Since these results are only slightly above the state average, the municipalities should not be considered strongholds of this PRRP. They do, however, help to understand the daily workings of far-right politics and its gradual normalization.

The two case studies were not chosen for this aspect alone but also as a high-contrast sample of structural rurality (the Seelow region is classified as very rural, Ahrensfelde as suburban with a rural past), subjective rurality (surprisingly more pronounced in Ahrensfelde than in the Seelow region), and a low-contrast sample in terms of the conflict (strong citizens’ initiatives at odds with the federal highway plan to mitigate the impact of traffic and preserve road functionality).

A prospective longitudinal study was carried out in Ahrensfelde and the Seelow region between spring 2019 and early 2023. The deliberate design of temporality in qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) allows data to be analysed diachronically to identify changes (Holland 2011) – in this case the impact of the AfD having been elected to the municipal councils in May 2019 and the attendant processes of normalization. Following Norbert Elias (1997), this allows for understanding society as a figuration under constant processual change; his ontology of “sociogenesis” thus provides a fruitful concept for QLR (Stanley 2015: 254) and spatial research (Knoblauch & Löw 2017).

At the heart of this study are the findings from longitudinal qualitative interviews with several citizens. The temporal dimension of longitudinal interviews makes it possible to understand “the meaning of temporal change to people, while also exploring how people interpret and respond to such change” (Hermanowicz 2013: 194). The interviewees were chosen for their (mostly voluntary) involvement in the local community and their claim to have a (fairly) good knowledge of the issues that currently give cause for community concern. It was important for this study, nonetheless, that none of them is either serving or running for office on a council or in parliament. The sample consists of a variety of informants ranging from local parish priests to volunteer coaches in local sports clubs. It represents a significant segment of small community milieus. Due to the sampling criteria, however, the interviewees (compared to the local population) are older than average (many are already retired) and white, whereas in terms of gender the sample is balanced. The objective was to talk to the interviewees twice, once prior to local elections ( $n[t1]=39$ ) and a second time one year after the elections, by which time the AfD would gain a significant share of the seats on each of the local councils. The



Figure 2. Protest Banner in Ahrensfelde (B158): “We don’t want a multi-lane highway [cutting] through our village!!!”





Figure 3. Protest Banner in the Seelow region (BI): “No 40-ton trucks in transit through our villages”.

Covid 19 pandemic led to the postponement of a second interview phase several times, which had an adverse effect on the trust-building process between the interviewees and the interviewer that is considered an integral part of successful QLR (Miller 2015). The result was a considerably high panel attrition of fifty per cent ( $n[t2]=19$ ).

With regard to the scope and complexity of longitudinal research, Jane Lewis (2007: 551f) suggests adopting a very clear method of analysing the data. Of the seven methods she identifies, this paper makes use of a) cross-sectional analysis (interpreting the interview data for the first period of inquiry), b) repeat cross-sectional analysis (tracing changes between the two periods of inquiry on an individual level) and c) a thematic analysis (changes over time relevant to the key issue across cases) (see Table 1). Coding and diachronic comparison of the interview transcripts help to identify sequences that describe aspects of the past, present and future of the places in the

exact same words and those where slight or massive shifts in meaning over time are observable. Here, the challenge is to identify the minute distinctions in how change or stability is represented. This calls for fine-grained analysis that equates the researcher's work with that of a "word cruncher" (Saldaña 2003: 46).

As suggested by the methodological reflections on qualitative longitudinal research, the interview data is triangulated with other, notably ethnographic data collections (Neale 2017: 6). The main additional resources presented in this paper are document analysis of files, minutes and records of local councils and administrations, and of the political manifestos of all locally represented parties and independent lists, participant observation at field-configuring events (such as protests, demonstrations or town fairs), and non-participant observation of online spaces relevant to the issue (Facebook pages and Instagram accounts of local protest groups, AfD chapters and the local newspaper). In order to reconstruct far-right rural rationalities, AfD material was analysed in a scale-sensitive approach to evaluate where the problem, cause and suggested solution were located. The data was coded in a content analytical approach and where possible ascribed with the associated scalar references (Kurtz 2003; Domann & Nuissl 2022a). Table 1 shows how the different data corpuses and analytical steps form the argument of this paper.

Table 1. Empirical sources and analytical steps used to disentangle the role of rurality for normalization of far-right local politics and politicians.

Aspect of observation	Data and analysis	Period of inquiry	Presented in chapter
Spatial imaginaries of the rural	Cross-sectional analysis of interviews from the first period of inquiry	Spring 2019	4.1
Far-right creation of rural rationalities	Scale-Frame Analysis of observations and documents	03/2019-08/2021	4.2
Normalization of far-right topics	Repeat cross-sectional analysis of interviews, comparison of both periods of inquiry	Spring 2019 vs. late summer 2021	4.3
Normalization of far-right personnel	Thematic analysis of observations and documents	03/2019-02/2023	4.2

## 4. Results

In order to show how local AfD chapters appropriate notions of the rural and to assess the effects, the following sections will 1) present embedded imaginaries of rurality, particularly in the context of car-dependency in the places under review, 2) show how local AfD chapters use aspects of rurality in their discursive work to create smooth rural rationalities not only for their traffic policies but also for climate and environmental issues in general, 3) provide evidence of how these discourses influence local imaginaries, and 4) provide insights into normalization processes in the sphere of mainstream politics and the administration.

### 4.1 Threatened rurality and involuntary car-centrism as opportunity structures

The index on rurality calculated by the Federal Research Institute for Rural Areas, Forestry and Fisheries merely defines the spatial setting of the B1 conflict in the Seelow region as rural (Thünen-Institut 2023). Yet, following the relevant debates on relational rurality (see 2.1) it seems more pertinent to concentrate on the specific representations, practices and perceptions of the current state of these places in an urban-rural continuum. Ahrensfelde, the spatial setting of the B158 conflict, is framed by most of the local interviewees as a “village” that happens to border Berlin. As a result, it faces rapid growth, is witnessing a steady influx of young families, and struggling to cover the demand for building plots and the infrastructure for childcare and education. In contrast, the imaginary of Seelow, with only a third of the population of Ahrensfelde, is that of a regionally important centre with some urban attributes and infrastructure amidst a sparsely populated environment.

In both cases, these changes are perceived as challenging the rural imaginaries of these places. In Ahrensfelde, in particular, newcomers, who are mostly used to an urban lifestyle, are seen as a major threat to the customary way of life. Here, it is feared that the influx from urban areas will put an end to certain time-honoured local qualities such as *“the communal, the peacefulness...”* (Int\_B158\_7\_t1).

This imaginary of accustomed rural livelihoods under threat goes hand in hand with an ambivalent car-centrism. After decades of neoliberal transportation planning, privately owned vehicles have evolved as the sole means of mobility for most interviewees. A different kind of future seems beyond their imagination. Which is why the two roads, B1 and B158, are considered vital lifelines for both communities and individuals; their deterioration is therefore experienced as an existential threat: “In the holidays [when no school buses are running], if you are an old person without a car, you’re lost.” (Interview\_B1\_10\_t1). This imaginary not only holds true for individual mobility but also for the road-based distribution of economic and consumer goods in the study areas, paralleled by the realization, notably for the B1 case, that people on the road are competing with each other for a rare space: “They say we have no choice. [...] So if this new bridge doesn’t come and trucks are not operating, then we’ll be *even more* isolated. So, it definitely has to happen, this traffic through here [but then] I don’t want to drive along this road anymore.” (Int\_B1\_11\_t1). In this perceived ambiguity, the car-dependency of the interviewees becomes even more drastic. The content of almost all the stories

they shared about their daily lives – seeing a doctor, visiting relatives, buying groceries – begins with turning the key in the ignition. This explains why discussions about the two roads are so heated, “because here of course in terms of transport you spend half the day getting to work or getting home from work” (Int\_B158\_4\_t1). Hence cars are simultaneously perceived as, on the one hand, the key to social participation and, on the other, as tin traps that ‘wasted’ countless hours of their lives. So, when it comes to the B1 and B158, what we see for both case studies in terms of traffic is the frustration and car-centrism of the residents, who are equivocally *for* their own motorized traffic and *against* that of others. The above-mentioned idea of an emerging fossil fascism allows us to understand such everyday practices of de-solidarization as opportunity structures for far-right projects. And perhaps an empirical focus on concrete characteristics of the everyday, here for example forms of detachment from the space of others through automobility, can be a way to flesh out the often abstract concept of (fossil) fascism (Henderson 2006; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021: 371).

One major difference between the two cases is the identification of the traffic cause and the attendant sense of (de-)centrality, an aspect that creates slightly different opportunity structures for far-right mobilization. In terms of the B158 conflict in Ahrensfelde, many interviewees were of the opinion that their proximity to Berlin, the economic centre of the region, was the main cause of traffic and its impact. They also saw Berlin responsible for blocking a solution due to its hesitancy to use financial resources for the good of a small suburb on its margins. Many generalize this observation into a broader feeling of being constantly disdained: “You should know, of course, and the street illustrates this, that Berliners don’t give a shit about Brandenburg.” (Int\_A10\_t1).

Yet, the causes of the B1 conflict are narrated quite differently. The decision to re-build the old bridge so that the road can take heavy-duty traffic is ascribed solely to “the Polish”. Thus, the problem is narrated as one of foreign or international politics, leaving no room for local council influence. The new cross-border bridge has meanwhile morphed to a project nicknamed “Pole Bridge” [Polenbrücke] (Int\_B1\_18\_t1). This narration seems to resonate widely and is supported by an alliance of the citizens’ initiative and local administrations. The citizens’ initiative was allowed to publish statements at periodic intervals for the official council magazine and diffuse interpretations such as the following: “Almost every weekend in the region, masses of Polish commuters (a total of approx. three million are said to be working in Western Europe) pass through the region in old polluting German cars, heading for home and leaving only their exhaust fumes behind.” (Baier 2019: 14).

Villages affected by this international traffic are still imagined as located “in the middle of nowhere”, but ultimately closer to the gravitational centre of international commodity flows (Berlin) than to neighbouring Poland. This comparison suggests that despite numerous similarities the different conflict settings provide different opportunity structures for far-right populist agitation of vertical and particularly horizontal scapegoating.



## 4.2 Far-right creation of rural rationality

The prevailing discontent associated with the road construction plans for the B1 and B158 were taken up by the sizeable new local AfD chapters. In 2019, they even rose to an election campaign issue in the Seelow region, when the district chapter called for ring roads alongside the B1, claiming that the anticipated heavy-duty “border traffic” would pose an “unbearable burden on the residents concerned” (Doc\_AfD-WP\_MOL 2019: 5). During the research period, however, the party did not engage with this topic in any significant way on the local councils, merely backing the citizens’ initiative on social media and portraying their dispute as vertical anti-establishment politics (Onl\_AfD-FB\_MOL 2020: 04.02.). With reference to the B158 conflict, the local chapter has not been conspicuously vocal about this road issue in their election campaign, most likely because other local parties and independent lists have addressed the topic prominently. That said, as soon as they were elected to the local councils, the AfD took advantage of their unique position in the multi-level political system, while other local party associations had to deal with their fellow party members at higher levels, some of whom were involved in the planning process. Local independent lists have no counterpart at higher levels. The AfD, in this case, was the only representative in a position to carry the issue all the way to the federal parliament (Bundestag). In a parliamentary inquiry, they emphasized the urgency of a local ring road and cast themselves as the voice of the local people by reporting “numerous discussions with the population living in the area” on this topic (Doc\_AfD-BT 2019).

Local AfD chapters play out yet another advantage over local lists and local chapters of the parties in government at national level. They offer a coherent narrative of their pro-car policies. In contrast, chapters of national parties must consider their party’s more general positions on the climate crisis, while local lists frequently lack an ideological superstructure. Only local AfD chapters offer a non-contradictory *and* ideologically underpinned approach. Here, a specific conception of rurality takes centre stage.

As argued in Chapter 2.2, local AfD chapters make use of a certain image of rurality not simply to mediate the party’s nature-glorifying and fossil-fascist ideological elements but to actually make them applicable to concrete local settings. On the one hand, local AfD chapters portray nature (culturally transformed over generations) as a link between the rural people and their identity rather than as naturalness. In other words, a lived “widespread loss of identity” is exploited as an argument against renewable energy projects and their industrializing impact on the landscape (Steinkraus 2019). AfD posters with the words “Stop environmental destruction!” against a background image of energy turbines in a rural landscape are gaining ideological weight (Onl\_AfD-A\_Insta 30.03.2019).

On the other hand, shifting the focus from the climate ecological crisis to the protection of “rurality” also enables local AfD chapters to transfer to the local scale what is described in Chapter 2.2 as a perversion of the dominant discourse on climate mitigation. One AfD district chapter uses rurality to disavow rather than directly deny the local effects of the climate change. This facilitates their complete omission of the causal relations to climate change in their electoral programme section on the danger of flooding along the river Oder:

*“A region where we are proud of keeping our communities as places worth living in, where the villages are cherished and the community is intact. [...] That is home to us. We have to defend it! An important concern is the protection of our cultural landscape along the Oder. Beavers and*



*muskrats are undermining and destabilizing the Oder dams on a broad front [...], which is why we demand more restrictive beaver management.” (Doc\_AfD-WP\_MOL 2019: 2).<sup>1</sup>*

During the period under review, numerous discursive links to rurality generated by local AfD chapters were found in various policy areas. In its generalizing and fetishizing aspects, the image of ‘the rural’ hardens into a specific logic – a *rural rationality* applicable to a wide range of topics: passing through the study area in the late summer of 2021 – at the height of the general election campaigns – one particular AfD slogan dominated the roadside and made this tangible: “Berlin macht mehr Mist als unser Vieh!” (Berlin produces more crap/nonsense than our cattle). The slogan exhibits two major spatial tropes. Firstly, the reference to “Berlin” functions as a metonym for the federal government, which is located in the German capital, and indicates a super-diverse metropolis, heavily shaped by international migration, atypical lifestyles and left-leaning subcultures. Secondly, “our cattle” conveys the party’s sense of belonging to the hard-working lifestyle of the rural population. The rural rationality expressed here functions as the somewhat bendable legitimization for the local far right to resist “ideological” or “irrational” decisions from the top.

This rationality becomes a powerful tool in far-right scale-mediating framing strategies (see Domann & Nuissl 2022a), as indicated in a Facebook post by a local AfD chapter referring to the discussed ban on combustion engine cars in nearby Berlin: the locally perceived problem (residents would not be allowed to drive to the neighbouring capital) with a cause located at a higher level (“insane” green ideology “far from *reality*”) can only be remedied if the representatives of the rural areas act locally and rationally (Onl\_AfD-Mü\_FB 29.01.2020).

In the context of the road disputes, their rural rationality allows local AfD representatives and their car-centric policies a) to appear pro-ruralist and not as climate-change deniers, b) to charge their position on small-scale politics with an anti-establishment gesture and c) to present themselves as the authentic local voice of rural residents.

### 4.3 Normalizing far-right Issues: Shifting rural imaginaries

The previous chapter has shown that local AfD chapters emphasize rural rationality in order to translate their ambiguous positions on climate and ecology into what appears on the surface to be a frictionless and scalar-mediating narrative. And this framing strategy seems to blend well into the observed narratives of the current traffic infrastructure conflict, which is dominated by the perceived threat of vanishing rurality and feelings of (authoritarian) nostalgia for a village-like past (4.1). This section sheds light on how these rural imaginaries shifted as the road-centred conflicts and associated far-right discursive efforts unfolded. It presents findings from the follow-up interviews conducted approximately twenty-eight months after the first round of interviews.

On a more general level, it can be observed that in both cases, particularly among the older generation, the (expected) increase in traffic is condensed to a perception of their community as losing its rural character completely: “I have lived next to the village road [B158] for almost seventy years. As children, we used to play in the street and say: ‘oh wow, a car’s coming’. Today you have to watch out constantly that you don’t get run over.” (Int\_B158\_21\_t2).

In assessing the current situation, where strong support for the local protest has failed to achieve even the smallest goals, the interviewees mostly agreed with the scalar trope that targeted the supra-scalar “political” centres of decision-making, one that fueled vertical resentment towards “the elites”. In the face of this powerful opposition, they saw little chance of success for local protests: “Whether I organize a citizens’ initiative or not, it’s a losing battle.” (Int\_B1\_10\_t2).

With the portrayal of “politics” as ideologically driven and caught up in complicated regulations, some local narratives on the road construction plans gradually converged with the far-right scale frames observed over the study period. Hence the far-right party was able to connect its affirmation of the rural to a specific rural rationality directed against the ideologically driven policies of higher levels.

This growing discontent with the controversy surrounding the roads, where apparently “nothing is moving forward”, can be described as a general trend in the follow-up interviews. It was observed in several interviews that AfD scale frames of rural rationality were integrated into local imaginaries. In the Ahrensfelde case, these narratives merge with fears of a development project that will see the first new multi-storey apartment building – in the opinion of some interviewees, another concrete threat to the village atmosphere. They describe the local AfD chapter as the only political force to contest these plans and evidence how a far-right rural rationality manages to combine different areas of political discontent:

*“Meanwhile, I feel that if we get another construction area in front of us and I don’t know how many thousand people move in, because there will also be rental apartments [...]. I can see myself in a traffic jam right at my front door waiting to even get onto the [B]158 in the morning. Honestly, it’s getting more and more like a ghetto. [...] I like living in the village, and we’ve got to the point where my husband and I are really looking to move further out to still have that genuine village feeling. [...] I’m a bit worried because [...] if I think of all my neighbours moving out and all the Turks and Iranians moving in, I might feel a bit odd and say: “Okay, me too. I’m out of here.” (laughs)” (Int\_B158\_5\_t2).*

This sequence shows how productively the discursive coupling of car-centric arguments and anti-immigrant racism can be deployed (see Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021: 41).

Having rendered visible the shifts in rural imaginaries that led to the partial normalization of far-right tropes, the following section will discuss the question of how this rural rationality also helps to de-demonize far-right personnel at the local level.

#### 4.4 Normalizing far-right representatives: Creating horizontal alliances

Rural rationality as a far-right scale-mediating framing strategy (see 4.2) declares the local scale to be the *locus operandi* and identifies the enemy of the local population at higher scales. In this sense, it creates an anti-establishment narrative that defines a clear vertical opposition but is open for horizontal alliances. In both case studies, this ties in with a strong spatial imaginary of *internal harmony*, which in turn tunes into the dominant mode of how the communities deal with diverging interests in everyday matters of the “rural”. Since most residents of the two places plan their own and their children’s future on their property, which is bound to the land and, thus, to the community, good neighbour relations are considered of the utmost importance. Consequently, should

disagreements arise, the residents and councillors are expected to discuss and solve them in a polite and objective manner or leave it to authorities such as the mayor to decide on the outcome. Since reunification, local councils have developed a decision-making mode that builds on consensus rather than conflict. Council members, mayors and the local administration are expected to cooperate in a task-oriented way in the best collective interest of the community (Domann & Nuissl 2022b).

The conflict sparked by the failure to implement the ring road/tunnel plans for the B158 should be understood in this context. In 2022, all local council party factions signed a public letter on the matter addressed to the federal ministry for transport (Doc\_B158\_GV 16.03.2022). This allowed the local AfD chapter to join the ranks of the legitimate voices of the elected and at the same time to indulge in antagonistic scalar criticism. In doing so, they are pursuing the tactic employed by highly successful European PRRPs in consociational settings of “keeping one foot in and one foot out of government” (Albertazzi 2008: 110). The party representatives on the local council use a similar tactic to force the administrative head of the district to accommodate what they frame as the “will of the local people” as vocalized by the AfD (Doc\_B158\_KT 21.09.2022). The preliminary climax was a demonstration with approximately 200 participants in February 2023 against the current road construction plans. Almost all local council party groups held short speeches, including the AfD group chairman, who made no reference to his political affiliation. All of the speeches at the rally fed into the same narrative: the village has been neglected in policies “from on high”. They expressed pride in the fact that all locally represented forces voiced a strong consensual statement against the road construction plans. The subsequent protest march, which brought traffic on the road to a halt, was headed by the AfD chairman (Figure 4). His wife, likewise an AfD member of the local council, acted as a steward. No confrontation was observed between the AfD and other protesters for the entire duration of the protest (Obs\_B158 25.02.2023).

The protest group campaigning for ring roads along the B1 in the Seelow region appears to have no reservations about local AfD personnel either. When the group blocked the road with a demonstration, four local AfD members openly supported it and later posted the fact on social media (Onl\_AfD-MÜ\_FB 11.09.2021). Nonetheless, after years of unsuccessful campaigning, protesters here seem reluctant to trust politicians of any orientation. This has led to a certain anti-representational spirit in the car-centred protest group, making it very difficult for the local AfD chapter to profit from the infrastructure issue. The citizens’ initiative accepts them as public speakers only when it comes to demands that are not supported by their more established allies. This tentative “instrumentalization of the instrumentalizers” has also been observed for other local protest groups and their relations with AfD representatives (Bescherer & Feustel 2020: 195).

Although protest groups and local politicians in the Seelow region continue to distance themselves from the PRRP when no political advantage is to be gained, the AfD is in a position to strengthen horizontal ties and settle into the local political elite. This holds true for both places under review, since the spatial imaginary of a harmonious community translates into certain dispositives for local politics that are best summarized as the ideals of (horizontal) “archipolitics”. Against the background of these consociational arrangements and once elected to the local councils, the PRRP can take advantage of the normative imaginary of harmonious cooperation in rural places without much dispute.



Figure 4. A local AfD politician (front row, right) leads the protest march along with other council members.

## 5. Conclusion

This contribution has shown that “unsuspicious” political issues at local level in rural areas serve as sites of creeping far-right normalization. Applying a relational approach helps to conceptualize rurality as socially produced, contested and in flux (see Woods 2011). As such, local conflicts focusing on traffic infrastructure in rural contexts are at the heart of the far-right populist agenda for several reasons. As “modules of ideology” (Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021: 364), cars are associated with several imaginaries highly compatible with far-right ideology. Experienced car dependency can thus be used to mobilize feelings of spatial discontent among those who imagine themselves living in “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), and to deny the protection of privilege that lies at the heart of some car-centric protests. Revanchist, self-serving, competitive, and secessionist values are manifested in spatial car use strategies and shape the everyday consciousness of those dependent on cars (see Henderson 2006). Hence car-centred protest provides fertile opportunity structures for local agitation by PRRPs but demands discursive effort and scalar mediation.

To achieve such mediation, PRRPs employ *rural rationalities*, claiming a genuine understanding of the “core people” and their car dependency. They offer car-centric solutions, and at the same time oppose the “distant politics” of the (urban) decision-making centres, which are in turn framed as eco-ideologically driven. These rural rationalities can create powerful scale-mediating frames that help local AfD actors charge their position on small-scale politics with a pro-car, pro-rural and anti-establishment gesture, portraying their representatives as the resolute voice of the rural people.

Invoking ‘the rural’ in this context has the potential to resolve a twofold dilemma typically faced by PRRPs. Firstly, imagining the community as one of vanishing rurality mitigates the frustrated car-centrism of the local population, which is simultaneously *for* (their own) and *against* (other) motorized traffic, as it entitles the former and delegitimizes

the latter. Secondly, the emphasis on rural dimensions serves as a semantic mediation for the profound ambivalence of PRRP positions on broader ecological issues, since their ideology draws on the glorification of nature *and* the fetishization of fossil fascism.

Observing processes of normalization over time has the potential to trace small shifts in spatial imaginaries – and thus to assess the local mainstreaming of far-right topics. Returning at regular intervals, conducting repeat interviews and observing on- and offline spaces over time unveils these gradual processes but also shows several limitations. When applying a study design open to the complexity of social realities, even the most discerning, ‘word-crunching’ methods of interpretation will be unable to check reliably for unexpected variables; shifts in locally embedded notions of rurality or in attitudes to far-right politics or politicians cannot simply be reduced to one single impact factor. The subsequent triangulation of several empirical longitudinal approaches helps to approximate probabilities, on the one hand, but at the same time calls for considerable effort and the readiness of researchers to expose themselves for years to these sometimes quite depressing processes.

Looking forward, QLR in the context of rural far-right normalization could turn this ‘inconvenience’ into a resource and investigate ways of doing Anti-fascist Geographies (Ince 2019). Constant involvement in settings such as car-centric protest groups, which might irritate critical geographers at first glance, could also be used to identify and actively support elements in the rural protest groups resistant to far-right agitation. “Envisioning Alternatives” (Ince 2019: 6) in times of current uneven geographies that give rise to highly car-dependent peripheries all over the world could be a challenging task. Thinking rurality relationally is a crucial step not only towards envisioning different futures. Essentializing rurality only helps to create (palin)defensive spatial imaginaries, securing the given uneven social and racial order in the face of the climatic-ecological catastrophe on the horizon. It nevertheless remains vital to disentangling the current materially lived, perceived and represented notions of marginalization and peripheralization if their re-articulation as far-right rural rationalities is to be prevented.

## Endnotes

1. Marking the rodent from the border river as a threat is another integral part of climate populism transferred to the local: “the imaginary coherence of the people as ONE is predicated upon staging a supernumerary outsider, who is foregrounded as an existential threat that invades the fundamentally healthy body-politic of the People and is constituted as the object-cause of all manner of problems, potentially leading to a catastrophic disintegration of the Body of the People” (Swyngedouw 2022: 908).



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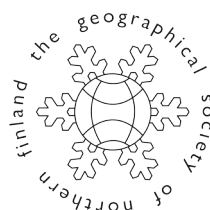
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## Research article



# Looking beyond climate contrarianism: nationalism and the reterritorialization of climate discourse in Spain's Vox party

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## Abstract

Among European populist radical right (PRR) parties, the call for environmental protection has historically been embedded in ethnic nationalist ideas of the interrelation of land, nation, and culture. Despite a large body of literature on PRR environmentalism, however, the PRR's climate politics remain understudied. This qualitative study investigates the climate politics of the PRR by analyzing climate discourse from Spain's Vox party. A discourse analysis of party manifestos, press releases, and public statements from 2017–2022 investigates Vox's discursive constructions of climate change and its potential solutions. The study finds that, although the party acknowledges climate change, it does so inconsistently, and its proposed climate policies do not fundamentally shift its nativist and populist political imagination. Instead, its discourse portrays multilateral climate action as a threat to the nation and locates climate solutions in the preservation of ruralism, traditional livelihoods, and national identity. The article argues that Vox constructs a nationalist climate discourse that reterritorializes climate change on the national level, asserts national innocence in the face of claims of global climate justice, and frames mainstream climate action as part of a broader globalist imposition that threatens the purity of national culture. The article concludes with reflections on what nationalist climate discourse may mean for attempts to mitigate the climate crisis.

**Keywords:** *Climate change, populist radical right, Vox, nationalism, climate denial, climate obstructionism, climate contrarianism*

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## Introduction

Anthropogenic climate change (ACC) is an ecological crisis at an unimaginable scale. Global warming is already bringing about more intense and frequent natural disasters (van Aalst 2006), increasing biodiversity loss and threatening the global food and water supply (Einhorn 2021). At the same time, the “fourth wave” of the populist radical right (PRR) has made nativism more common and even normalized within mainstream politics (Mudde 2019). The limited but growing scholarship on the intersections of these “two key crises” (Forchtner 2019b: 3) has generally characterized the PRR as hostile to climate change policy and often outright denialist (Schaller & Carius 2019). After all, climate change is widely considered “the paradigmatic global environmental problem” (Paterson & Strippel 2007: 149) and the radical right is staunchly anti-globalist in its political outlook (Mudde 2007). But climate denialism is not the whole story, and a range of ethnic nationalist responses to climate change have earned press in recent years: for example, the youth arm of the far-right Alternative for Germany called for a mandatory one-child policy for countries receiving foreign aid (Turner & Bailey 2021) and the acting president of the National Rally in France has called borders “the environment’s greatest ally” (Mazoue 2019). Despite these anecdotal shifts, there has been little academic research into how PRR parties are making meaning of climate change and its causes, impacts, and potential solutions.

This article begins to address this gap through a discourse analysis of the climate communications of Vox (Latin for “voice,” sometimes styled VOX), a PRR party in Spain. The paper first gives a brief overview of the existing literature on climate change and the PRR, then addresses research methods and case selection. A close study identifies how climate change is articulated in Vox’s broader political discourse. The discussion section analyzes the ways in which Vox constructs climate change and potential climate solutions in ways that promote its broader nationalist agenda, while remaining fundamentally obstructionist on climate action. The article concludes with reflections on what nationalist climate discourse may mean for climate politics moving forward.

## The PRR and climate denial

There is a long history of environmental concern within far-right politics (Dobson 2016; Lubarda 2020), and scholars have found the PRR’s conceptualization of environmental protection to be shaped by its three core ideologies: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007). This environmentalism relies on a perennialist notion of “the nation” as an organic, ethnically homogenous community with deep connections to its land and fundamental sovereign rights over its territory (Özkırımlı 2010), often linking the protection of the nation’s ethnic and cultural heritage with protecting the land (Forchtner & Kølvråa 2015; Turner-Graham 2019) and mistrusting those who are not rooted in a particular place, particularly the globalized elite (Lubarda 2020). This environmentalism prizes nostalgia for ruralism and the “countryside” (Forchtner & Kølvråa 2015) and sees borders and territorial sovereignty as key to environmental protection (Forchtner 2019c; Turner & Bailey 2021). The relatively extensive research into PRR environmental politics, however, has largely ignored the PRR’s conceptualizations

of climate change. Instead, it has supposed that climate action is inherently at odds with the PRR's worldview and focused on explaining the phenomenon of climate denial.

The literature generally agrees that, as public consciousness of global warming has increased over the past few decades, belief in climate change and support for climate action have both become politicized along partisan lines (Campbell & Kay 2014). McCright *et al.* (2016) found that individuals holding right-wing political ideologies are less likely than left-wing ones to believe climate change is real and support mitigation efforts, an effect that holds true to varying degrees across the Global North (Yan *et al.* 2021). European surveys have found that individuals are more likely to deny climate change if they espouse nationalist ideology (Kulin *et al.* 2021) or populist attitudes (Huber 2020)<sup>1</sup>, hold anti-egalitarian ideas like opposition to feminism and multiculturalism (Jylhä & Hellmer 2020; Benegal & Holman 2021), or demonstrate personality traits associated with right-wing political views (Häkkinen & Akrami 2014). Demographics matter as well: conservative white men are much more likely to be skeptical of climate change than other demographic groups, an association that becomes even stronger among those who also express anti-immigrant views (Krange *et al.* 2019).

Most scholars have argued that this right-wing tendency toward climate skepticism holds true on the party level as well. In the first cross-national study of its kind, Gemenis *et al.* (2012) surveyed the political platforms of 13 far-right parties across Europe and found that only the Greek Popular Orthodox Rally acknowledged climate change as a significant problem; a few parties professed skepticism in the role of human emissions in causing it and most ignored it. Schaller and Carius (2019) assessed 21 European PRR parties and found only three affirmed the science of climate change: the National Alliance in Latvia, Hungary's Fidesz, and the Finns Party. In contrast, case studies of several parties usually labeled climate denialist have argued that they indeed *do* acknowledge climate change (e.g. Boukala & Tountasaki 2019; Voss 2019), indicating some definitional inconsistencies or other methodological limitations within cross-national surveys.

In this context, a relatively small number of qualitative studies have sought to understand *why* and *how* the PRR expresses climate skepticism, especially given that many of these parties have a history of embracing environmental conservation issues in general. The most common explanation, put forward in an influential article by Lockwood (2018), is that PRR parties approach the question of climate change through their core ideologies, and where there is perceived conflict, ideology simply overrides any interest in environmental protection that they may otherwise have. Other case studies of climate skepticism in PRR parties have concurred, arguing that climate change is a global issue that demands multilateral cooperation and global scientific expertise, so nationalist and populist ideologues reject it altogether (Forchtner *et al.* 2018; Forchtner & Öztavan 2019; Hultman *et al.* 2019; Kølvråa 2019). In other words, it is solution aversion (Campbell & Kay 2014) that motivates climate skepticism. In this argument, the PRR's desire to protect the environment is only limited to “particular, demarcated spaces, one's own landscape and culture” (Forchtner & Öztavan 2019: 230) as opposed to more abstract, global problems (Forchtner & Kølvråa 2015). This explanation assumes that climate change is an inherently different kind of environmental issue and therefore “there is a tension between acknowledging or acting on climate change and subscribing to several core tenets of nationalist political ideology” (Kulin *et al.* 2021: 1112).

A nascent body of literature has begun to challenge this notion that climate denialism is the rule among the PRR. Forchtner and Lubarda (2022) found that Members of



the European Parliament (MEP) belonging to PRR parties often affirmed the reality of ACC (explicitly or implicitly), even as they remained largely opposed to the policy proposals on the table. In a study of the National Rally and Alternative for Germany, Oswald *et al.* (2021: 187) found that they are “much more flexible regarding climate policies than previously anticipated”, and argue it is because structural factors have overcome ideological barriers to acknowledging climate change. Vihma *et al.* (2021) reviewed communications by Scandinavian PRR parties and devised three ideal-typical forms of opposition to climate action, only one of which denies science outright: “climate policy nationalism” argues that climate action is primarily other countries’ responsibility and “climate policy conservatism” that climate action would be too economically harmful. Several qualitative case studies have also found that some PRR parties do actually acknowledge the reality of climate change, though these researchers have typically either regarded this acknowledgment as an unexceptional part of their environmentalism (e.g. Boukala & Tountasaki 2019; Hatakka & Välimäki 2019; Voss 2019) or categorized the parties’ communications as “skeptical” because they remain opposed to mainstream climate solutions (e.g. Forchtner & Öztavan 2019; Kølvråa 2019; Turner-Graham 2019).

This research on the PRR has remained mostly separate from another body of literature that examines the obstruction of climate action more broadly. The latter has largely moved beyond questions of *belief in* climate change and focuses instead on material opposition to climate action. Research into the “climate change countermovement” has identified coordinated efforts to muddy climate science and obstruct proposed climate policy in order to perpetuate fossil fuel extraction (Oreskes & Conway 2010; Almiron *et al.* 2020; Brulle 2022; Franta 2022). These tactics have included climate denial but do not require it (Coan *et al.* 2021). In an influential article, Lamb *et al.* (2020) identified widespread “discourses of climate delay” that accept the basic premise that the planet is warming, but use a variety of logics to evade, postpone, or weaken climate action.

The literature on climate delay and contrarianism demonstrates the need for research that explores not just whether PRR parties profess belief in climate change, but how they understand and approach the issue altogether. If some PRR parties are acknowledging that ACC is real, as a few studies have suggested, are they also moving past climate contrarianism? How are they articulating what climate change means and what should (and should not) be done about it? How are they reconciling the observed tension between the PRR’s environmental concern for its “homeland” and its opposition to global environmental governance? And how does ideology shape the climate solutions they propose? These are the questions I seek to explore in my case study.

## Research design

This study makes use of poststructuralist discourse analysis, which takes as its premise that the things we observe and know about the world are subjective, filtered through our “historically and culturally specific and contingent” perspectives (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 5) and shaped by manifold and inherently unstable structures of language and meaning (Hansen 2006). Discourse analysis is at its core an attempt to elucidate the logic of these patterns of language, or “discourses,” and how they shape what we think of as real and true, how they construct and affirm our individual and collective identities, and what consequences those beliefs have for our social and political lives.



Through a poststructuralist discourse analytical lens, climate change can be understood as both a measurable planetary phenomenon *and* a social construction (see Onuf 2007).

Discourse analysis asks how PRR actors make meaning of the environment and climate change instead of only measuring their position on specific climate policies, allowing for more analytical nuance than positivist approaches. A discourse analytical approach also takes into account that radical political actors can have profound political impacts even without gaining direct power, by moving other parties' discourse and political positions (Rydgren 2005; Wodak 2015) or by shifting what the electorate considers acceptable or desirable (Hale Williams 2018).

Vox is one of the newest PRR parties in Europe (Ferreira 2019). It plays an upstart role in Spanish politics, seeking to disrupt the political landscape (Rama *et al.* 2021) and break the taboo against far-right politics that had existed since the country's transition to democracy in the late 1970s (see Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). Over the last several years, Vox has gained considerably more political support and authority in Spain (Lawley 2022) and has been active in international networks of the far right (Ferrero 2022). Vox has included environmental protection as part of its party platform and party leaders have publicly acknowledged the reality of climate change (De Nadal 2021). Still, Vox's position on climate change remains virtually unstudied in the academic literature (one exception is Moreno & Thornton 2022). This case study does not intend to be generalizable to the entire PRR, or to illustrate how all PRR parties speak about climate. Instead, it is intended as a case that contradicts key assumptions of the literature on far-right environmental discourse in hopes of adding nuance and complexity to existing theory and provoking new research questions for the field.

I focus this analysis on the party itself, instead of its leadership or its nonparty allies (Mudde 2007: 38). To this end, I include in my analysis official party materials, like political platforms and manifestos; statements and writings by spokespeople who are explicitly speaking on behalf of the party; and statements and writings by elected officials and other party affiliates that have been disseminated by the official party communication channels. I exclude statements by party members that have not been amplified by the party itself, recognizing that parties are heterogeneous and affiliates may give statements that conflict with the position of the broader party. There are limitations to this approach: political parties are just one part of a broader landscape of far-right institutions and actors (Veugelers & Menard 2018) and also may mediate their discourse in a way that nonparty actors do not have to (Hale Williams 2018). For this reason, political parties' discourse should not be considered representative of all PRR actors.

Vox regularly posts opinion pieces, press releases, and highlights from party members' political campaigns and parliamentary debates on its websites and Twitter feeds. For this study, I searched these posts for several keywords (English translations in parentheses): *clima* (climate), *cambio climático* (climate change), *calentamiento global* (global warming), *efecto invernadero* (greenhouse effect), *carbón* (carbon), and CO<sub>2</sub>. In total, I harvested 224 sources from Vox mentioning climate change or related terms from January 2017 to March 2022, including four party platforms or manifestos, 104 news updates on the party's activities, 54 blogs highlighting parliamentary speeches or debates, and 62 tweets. Twenty blogs and 28 tweets featured video clips, most featuring party members speaking in parliament or on news programs. I transcribed these using the online transcription service Sonix and cross-checked the transcriptions for accuracy. Where press releases referenced longer speeches that dealt with climate change in greater detail, I retrieved or transcribed the full speech texts. The five-year period was chosen

to include more general climate discourse rather than debates over a single event or policy fight. Translations are my own.

I began my discourse analysis with a round of close reading to identify initial themes and key signifiers. After this preliminary survey, I used an “iterative, emergent, and dialogic” approach (Steacy *et al.* 2016: 166) to read and re-read the material as I noted patterns, investigated allusions, referred back to existing literature, and continually tested the developing theory against the data. Throughout the process, I paid particular attention to the ways in which the parties used the discursive strategies of linking and differentiation (Hansen 2006) to build on or contest mainstream climate discourses, to construct the political terrain of climate change, and to “articulate constructions of ethical identity” (Hansen 2006: 45), taking note of how the parties assign identity, value, and moral obligations to the various actors salient in their climate discourse.

## Vox case study

### Spanish political context

When General Francisco Franco died in 1975 after decades of right-wing dictatorship, the King of Spain instigated a transition to democracy (Bernecker 1998). This elite-led democratic transition was characterized by the *Pacto del Olvido* (Pact of Forgetting), an explicit agreement across the political spectrum that “aimed for nothing short of collective amnesia” about the Spanish Civil War and Francoism in an attempt to promote a peaceful transition (Encarnación 2008: 2). In 2007, the left-wing government’s new Historical Memory Law condemned the Franco regime, dismantled public memorials glorifying the Civil War, and allocated resources to exhume victims of Francoism buried in mass graves (Boyd 2008). Many right-wing actors criticize this breaking of the *Pacto del Olvido* as an attack on Spanish history and democracy, and Franco’s legacy remains contested (Rodríguez-Temiño & Almansa-Sánchez 2021).

Spain has a national government, but much of its governance is devolved to its 17 regional *autonomías*, or “autonomous communities.” The federalist model is reflective of a longstanding tension between a centralized Spanish nation-state and sub-nationalisms that emphasize the different cultures and languages of its regions (Encarnación 2008). This tension has only heightened since the 1990s, as subnational movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country have advocated for increased self-determination or full political independence (Elias & Mees 2017). This “entrenched conflict between peripheral and state nationalisms,” along with the continued success of the mainstream right-wing People’s Party (PP) in winning over far-right voters, kept Spain free of far-right parties for decades (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015: 40).

In December 2013, Santiago Abascal, a longtime PP member from the Basque Country, left the PP in protest of its lackluster response to secessionist activity and co-founded Vox with several other departing PP members. Vox failed to win seats at any level until December 2018, when it won nearly 11% of the vote in the regional Andalusian elections (Rama *et al.* 2021). By 2022, Vox held seats in 13 regional parliaments, the national parliament, and the European Parliament. It formed its first regional coalition government with PP in Castile and Leon in March 2022, cementing its status as a political force (Jones 2022). Scholars attribute Vox’s eventual electoral

success to Catalonia's declaration of independence in 2017 (Dennison & Mendes 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). Vox used the political opening to condemn secessionism and express support for a stronger central government: its 2018 platform called for suspending Catalonia's regional government, centralizing government functions, and providing "maximum legal protection to the symbols of the nation, especially the Flag, the Anthem, and the Crown" (VOX 2018).

Vox combines the anti-immigrant (often specifically anti-Muslim) nativist sentiment common in the European PRR with a project of national unity and centralization that aims to suppress secessionist movements (Ferreira 2019). History is particularly politicized in Vox's communications: the party's election motto in 2016 was "make Spain great again," it has called for repealing the Historical Memory Law, and its leaders often reference past national "glories," like the *Reconquista* of the Iberian peninsula from the Muslim kingdoms and the voyages of Christopher Columbus (Rodríguez-Temiño & Almansa-Sánchez 2021; Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López 2022). Also central to Vox's ideology is cultural conservatism, particularly the "the defense of traditional values associated with religion, the natural family and anti-feminism" (Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López 2022: 273), and the party campaigns extensively against Spain's gender-based violence law, abortion, and LGBTQ rights (Ferreira 2019).

The party's founding manifesto and its first comprehensive national platform in 2018 both focused on questions of sovereignty, immigration, and Spanish culture, and did not mention the environment or climate change once (VOX 2018, VOX n.d.). My research found almost no mentions of climate change from official party channels before the party won seats in national and regional parliaments in 2019. The last three years have seen an explosion of references to climate in official party communications, suggesting that the party's new foothold in Spanish parliaments—and the increasing salience of climate change in Spanish and European politics around the same time (Thackeray *et al.* 2020, Damsbo-Svendsen 2022)—forced the party to articulate positions that lay outside their more natural scope of anti-immigrant, anti-secession policies.

Vox's environmental politics are mostly unstudied, though various sources refer to Vox as climate skeptical (Moreno & Thornton 2022), affirming (Hess & Renner 2019; De Nadal 2021; Mathiesen 2022), or indifferent (Ribera Payá & Martínez 2021; Singh Garha *et al.* 2022). My review of the party's communications has indicated that this disagreement is in large part because Vox's position on the reality of ACC is itself inconsistent, with party representatives alternately acknowledging it as an established fact (e.g. VOX 2019d; VOX 2019f; VOX 2020i; VOX 2020b) and questioning the scientific consensus (e.g. VOX 2019b; VOX 2020c; VOX 2021f). Most often, party materials will acknowledge global warming *implicitly*, for example by supporting investments in renewable energy and electrification as "a means of accelerating decarbonization" (VOX 2019a) or by encouraging the development of carbon sequestration technologies (VOX 2021g). In general, however, the question of whether global warming is real and anthropogenic is peripheral to Vox's discursive construction of climate change. This is because Vox demonstrates a sharp distinction between climate change as a planetary fact (*i.e.*, the greenhouse effect) and political or policy efforts to respond to the "climate emergency." Although Vox will recognize the former as fact, however implicitly or inconsistently, the bulk of its discourse concerns the latter, which it portrays as a threat to national culture and sovereignty. The following sections outline Vox's most prevalent discursive articulations of climate change.

## Rejecting the “progressive consensus”

The most common discursive articulations of climate change by Vox are not actually about climate change itself, but about the global climate mitigation and adaptation strategies advocated by what Vox calls the “progressive consensus” (VOX Europa 2020c), which includes entities like the UN, EU, civil society advocates, and all other Spanish political parties<sup>3</sup>. The discursive separation of *climate change* from *climate action* usually takes place through negative modifiers, which impugn those working for a particular climate agenda without denying the reality of climate change outright. The most common of these phrases are “climate religion” (VOX 2021e), “climate terror” (VOX 2022a), “climate hysteria” (VOX 2022d), and “climate alarmism” (VOX Europa 2021). “Climate religion” even serves as an extended metaphor: Greta Thunberg’s speech at the EU was a “climate homily” (VOX Europa 2020b) and climate advocates on the left are “apostles” asking the common people to “rend their garments”<sup>4</sup> out of guilt over their GHG emissions (VOX 2019c). A religious construction of climate concern paints it as a new kind of fundamentalism, foreign to Catholic Spain. “Climate hysteria” and “climate alarmism,” on the other hand, cast its political opponents as irrational, while characterizing Vox as a sensible party willing to prioritize what is best for “the people.” Vox uses these phrases often, skirting the topic of global warming itself and turning attention instead to the purported absurdity of climate policy.

Vox further discredits globalist climate action by comparing it to a new leftist ideology, like communism or socialism, that seeks to use the power of the state to restructure the economy and impose new political mandates on the public. Vox representatives have called new European climate regulations “climate totalitarianism” akin to the policies of Maoist China (VOX Europa 2020a) and argued that climate policies are “social engineering” (VOX 2020a). In this way, advocates for climate action are associated with anti-democratic action and characterized as a nefarious outside force.

This is part of a broader anti-globalist discourse that characterizes climate policy as one piece of a larger slate of cultural and ideological impositions on the Spanish nation. This discourse is most notable in the frequency with which climate policy is included in a long list of issues which, collectively, are portrayed as a threat to a traditional Spanish way of life. As an example, one regional Vox party leader wrote an editorial warning of the left’s project of cultural hegemony, the goal of which is

*collectivizing natural resources through climate terror, [ending] civil and political freedoms with Historical Memory Laws or with LGBT demands, appropriating property through taxes and subsidies, and annihilating the family as a core social unit through abortion and euthanasia (VOX 2021b).*

Although “climate terror” is characterized as a pretext for doing away with private property, the target is not just the economic system, but everything that constitutes the Spanish nation, from the family unit to the nation’s narrative of its own history. This constellation of issues (Tillery & Bloomfield 2021) conflates global climate policy with Historical Memory Laws and “gender ideology” in a vast, joint threat against Spain<sup>5</sup>. This discursive constellation is particularly remarkable for the frequency with which it arises in contexts in which the main topic under discussion seems to be completely unrelated, from education (VOX 2020f) to unemployment rates (VOX 2022g). This discourse sets up a Manichaean culture war between the good (Vox and the Spanish nation) against the bad (globalism, feminism, the left). In Vox’s statements, global climate action becomes a

recurrent but peripheral signifier in a discourse about protecting traditional Spain from an onslaught of cultural change.

## Energy sovereignty and decarbonization

A second common theme in Vox's climate discourse frames climate politics in terms of energy sovereignty. Other studies have noted some PRR parties' support for replacing imported fossil fuels with renewable energy, regardless of their positions on climate, because they favor energy independence (Forchtner & Kølvrå 2015; Forchtner 2019b; Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach 2022). Despite the occasional mention that renewable energy will make Spain more self-reliant, however, Vox's discourse on the energy transition is largely oppositional.

This comes in the context of a rapidly changing energy sector. As of 2019, Spain imported all but a quarter of its energy from foreign sources, including all of its oil and gas; fossil fuels comprised 72% of Spain's total energy supply (IEA 2021). EU regulations and market forces have decimated the Spanish coal industry (Planelles 2020), leaving nuclear energy as the largest single source of domestic energy production, but Spain will begin to close its nuclear power plants in 2027 (IEA 2021). Spain's 2021 climate law, which Vox opposed, bans domestic fossil fuel development and will end the sale of gas-powered cars by 2040 (Associated Press 2021). Spain is also bound by the EU goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 (Solorio 2017). The country's plans to meet these targets include a "full energy system transformation," which will prioritize energy efficiency, electrifying the transportation sector, and scaling up its domestic renewable energy from wind, solar, renewable hydrogen, and biogas (IEA 2021: 30).

In the context of these massive changes, Vox's primary discursive concern is not the emissions of Spain's sources of energy, but whether they fortify Spanish sovereignty and industry. For example, Vox criticized the 2021 ban on new fossil fuel development by saying that Spain had become "the first nation in history to be obligated by law not to explore and exploit its own resources" (VOX 2021a). Although Vox sometimes acknowledges lowering GHG emissions as a desirable goal, it is framed as a second-order value to Spain's economic well-being (VOX España 2020; VOX 2021h; VOX 2022c). When these are perceived to be in conflict, Vox often argues that it is not worthwhile to subordinate economic priorities to environmental ones, since Spain's GHG emissions are negligible in the broader global context. A common refrain is that Spain's annual carbon emissions are only 0.7% of the global total, and these emissions "are not so relevant as to condemn the entire economy to ... a suicidal transition that causes unemployment, lack of [economic] protection, and misery" (VOX 2020g). Any serious plan to tackle climate change, they argue, should come from the real culprits: the United States, China, and India (VOX 2020h; VOX 2021c).

The language of energy sovereignty is also embedded in a nationalist discourse that attributes better qualities to energy produced at home than to energy produced abroad. A speech Abascal made in the Spanish parliament, for example, argued that "Spain must commit to energy sovereignty. We cannot be closing the thermal power plants in Spain and forcing thousands of families into unemployment while we buy energy from Morocco produced with coal" (VOX España 2020). Energy dependence is characterized as a degrading position: energy policies that undermine sovereignty will make citizens into "slaves of polluting powers" (VOX España 2020). A related articulation of energy sovereignty argues that current energy transition policies will



*increase* emissions by increasing dependence on foreign fossil fuel sources: renewable energies like wind and solar are occasionally praised as key to energy independence (VOX España 2020) but are more often criticized for being unreliable and intermittent (VOX 2020e; VOX 2021a; VOX 2022e). Vox often argues for investments in nuclear and hydrogen power as low-carbon energy sources that are more reliable than solar and wind, and points to Germany as an example of a country that closed its nuclear plants and saw its emissions rise (VOX 2020e).

Notably absent from Vox's discussion of energy sovereignty is a recognition of how dependent the current energy system is on imported fossil fuels. Although Vox frames its support of nuclear and coal plants as a means of prioritizing domestic energy production (VOX 2022b), the primary threat constructed in their discourse is not current or future dependence on foreign fossil fuels, but external regulations that will impede the dignity and industry of the Spanish. The irony is that Spain's plans for ambitious investment in renewable energy will increase its energy independence (IEA 2021). This suggests that the core concern in Vox's position is not achieving energy independence, but opposing the perceived erosion of national sovereignty.

### **“A richer, greener, and more sustainable nation”**

Although the bulk of Vox's discourse on climate change is oppositional, there is a smaller but significant discursive thread that presents Vox's ideas for how Spain should structure its climate change mitigation policies. At its core, this discourse equates positive climate mitigation policies with supporting ruralism and traditional ways of life.

Vox's most commonly proposed climate policy solution is to sequester carbon dioxide through creating natural “carbon sinks” or investing in new technologies for carbon capture (VOX 2020i; VOX 2020d; VOX 2021h; VOX 2021g). The most frequent proposal for creating these carbon sinks is the development of massive irrigation infrastructure. As one Vox representative argued in Parliament:

*Wouldn't it be logical to think not only about reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Spain, but also about absorbing them through support for emerging technologies like CO<sub>2</sub> capture and storage, or even more simply, through irrigated forests and irrigated land, so that we can convert the great natural resources of this country ... into an opportunity to turn Spain into a richer, greener and more sustainable nation, while at the same time fixing the population in “emptied Spain” and creating hundreds of thousands of jobs? (VOX 2020i)*

Agricultural water use is a key problem for climate adaptation in Spain. Industrial agriculture in the arid southeast is made possible by pipelines that bring water from the north, a system from the 1970s that is increasingly strained by drought and industrial agriculture (Borgen 2017). In this context, the proposal of a national irrigation plan to mitigate emissions does several things discursively. First, it echoes Vox's broader call for national unity and centralized authority instead of regional governance by *autonomías*. It also equates the verdancy of the land with its sustainability, reframing water-intensive industrial agriculture as a literal “greening” of arid areas of Spain. In doing so, it rejects a mainstream environmental discourse about energy consumption in favor of an environmentalism that puts forward rural and land-based professions as solutions to maintain the land and decrease carbon emissions (VOX 2022f).



Vox's proposals to mitigate climate change through irrigated agriculture, hunting, and livestock ranching relocate environmental knowledge and action away from “poster-carrying environmentalists” (VOX 2019g) in the cities and back to the “countrymen” who have “tended those animals” and “sown seeds in the earth” (VOX 2022h). This discourse is taking place in a context in which ruralism has a high political salience: the Spanish rural population has shrunk by 28% in the past half-century, as low economic opportunity has driven Spaniards to the cities, and parties on the left and right in Spain both decry *España vacía*, or “empty Spain” (Mamonova *et al.* 2020). In this context, a national hydrological plan is presented as a solution that will both sequester carbon *and* fix rural depopulation by creating economic opportunity for rural families. In the words of Abascal, “the ‘empty Spain’ of which they speak so much—it is thirsty Spain. It is the Spain which the water does not reach” (VOX España 2020). In Vox’s discursive construction, “climatic balance” (VOX 2019e) is achieved not through government regulations or emissions reductions, but through thriving rural families working in harmony with the land and keeping up their traditional ways of life<sup>6</sup>.

## Discussion

### Vox and climate contrarianism

One of the goals of this case study has been to explore whether the PRR’s emergent acknowledgement of climate change is a continuation of its climate obstructionism or a more meaningful shift toward engaging with climate solutions. Although Vox acknowledges climate change, inconsistently and often implicitly, the findings of the case study demonstrate that this PRR party, at least, still takes an obstructionist position on climate.

Fundamentally, the party’s discursive articulations of climate serve to stand in the way of climate action. Many of Vox’s articulations of climate change borrow heavily from common contrarian tropes that contest climate policy: they paint climate advocates as powerful, corrupt, hysterical, or fundamentalist (Roper *et al.* 2016) and reject or completely disregard the vast changes that meeting climate change will require (Almiron *et al.* 2020). Many of Vox’s repeated arguments are paradigmatic examples of “climate delay,” including that climate action is others’ responsibility; that mitigation measures proposed would be too economically or socially damaging to implement; and that less transformative measures will suffice to meet the problem (Lamb *et al.* 2020). These findings affirm other analysis that PRR representatives across Europe remain generally opposed to mainstream climate action even as their outright climate denial is limited (Forchtner & Lubarda 2022).

Vox’s only significant departure from climate contrarianism is its suggestion to sequester carbon and create agricultural jobs through massive irrigation projects. To my knowledge, this proposal has not before been documented in the PRR literature. Still, the climate mitigation proposition is specious. Cropland can be a carbon sink (European Environment Agency 2022) and irrigation can sequester carbon when it remediates desertification (Olsson *et al.* 2014), but large-scale agricultural irrigation has more mixed impacts. Technological developments in the early 2000s meant to make Spanish irrigation more water-efficient have also made it much more energy-intensive

(Soto-García *et al.* 2013; Aguilera *et al.* 2019) and the reservoirs created for irrigation emit methane, an exceptionally potent greenhouse gas (Aguilera *et al.* 2019). In any case, climate change is likely to strain Spain's water supply and limit the water available for irrigation (Pellicer-Martínez & Martínez-Paz 2018; Haro-Montegudo *et al.* 2022), making massive increases in irrigation unrealistic. Vox's proposed national hydrological plan is therefore not a viable way to achieve the climate mitigation necessary meet Spain's climate goals, and can be reasonably classified as a tactic of climate delay (Lamb *et al.* 2020). These findings are aligned with the only other known study of Vox's positions on climate, which identified common climate contrarian tropes in a 2020 parliamentary debate over a proposed climate law (Moreno & Thornton 2022).

Simply categorizing Vox as “obstructionist” or “contrarian,” however, obscures the specific discursive strategies with which Vox is making meaning of climate change and the implications that may have for climate politics. Indeed, I argue that Vox's climate discourse is best understood not only as a way to obstruct the climate action it opposes, but as a means to assert the party's broader nationalist agenda. Vox's climate discourse advances the “natural” connection of nation and homeland that has long featured in PRR environmentalism, hearkens back to a traditional past, and perpetuates ideas of national innocence in the face of climate crisis. In doing so, Vox portrays the struggle over climate action as a struggle to preserve a homogeneous and traditional national identity. This nationalist climate discourse has significant implications for climate politics.

In the remainder of this section, I outline how Vox's climate discourse builds on PRR constructions of nationalism and traditional national identity, first by reterritorializing climate impacts and solutions from the global to the local level, and second by situating climate solutions in the context of traditionalism and nostalgia. I then discuss what this nationalist climate discourse might mean for climate politics moving forward.

## Bordering and the reterritorialization of climate change

Vox's climate discourse is notable in that it articulates climate change and climate action solely in terms of their impact on the nation's particular territory. This narrow spatial construction builds on the PRR's longstanding discourse about nature protection and the nation's pure and symbiotic relationship with its landscape. In doing so, it reterritorializes climate change from a global problem to a national one and casts stronger borders as a means of protecting the nation's people and land from foreign environmental harms.

Vox predominantly articulates climate change and its potential policy responses in terms of their potential threats to or benefits for the national landscape, without mention of its potential impacts outside its borders. For example, Vox calls for climate solutions that will make the countryside greener and more agriculturally abundant and criticizes those that might lead to further depopulation of rural areas (VOX 2020i). By primarily articulating climate change as a problem within the spatial context of the national homeland instead of as a global phenomenon or atmospheric abstraction, Vox embeds climate change into the PRR's longstanding environmental politic that sees the protection of nature as the protection of the nation's territory (Forchtner 2019a; Turner & Bailey 2021), overcoming the tension between national landscape protection and climate change pointed out elsewhere in the literature (see Forchtner & Kølvrå 2015).

This national construction of climate change also draws on PRR conceptualizations

of nature that emphasize populism and a natural state of harmony between the nation and its land. Vox links environmental know-how specifically to those in agricultural professions, particularly farmers, ranchers, and hunters (VOX 2022h). This experience is differentiated from, and valued over, the perspectives of scientists, policymakers, and other globalist elites. Vox also argues that Spain's emissions are negligible and that the true source of the problem lies in the much higher emissions of other countries (VOX 2020g), a common argument against climate action (Lamb *et al.* 2020, Vihma *et al.* 2021). These claims do more than evade responsibility, however: they articulate both climate change *and* global climate politics as foreign transgressions against the true nation's natural harmony with its territory. In this construction of climate change, the logical solution becomes stronger "bordering" that wards off foreign influence, regulations, and cultural impositions in order to protect the natural territorial balance of a sovereign people and their land (Turner & Bailey 2021)<sup>7</sup>. This construction of climate change as a fundamentally foreign problem impacting the homeland contests the universalizing language of globalist climate action and obscures the very real ways in which the causes and impacts of climate change do transcend man-made borders.

Despite this construction of nationalist bordering as a solution for environmental protection, however, Vox rebuffed the prospect of climate-driven migration as leftist alarmism on the rare occasion it was mentioned at all (VOX 2021d). Other scholars have also noted a surprising lack of attention by the far right to climate-related displacement and migration, even as those on the left and center begin to consider it a major concern (Forchtnier *et al.* 2018; Küppers 2022)<sup>8</sup>. This may be because discussing the catastrophic climate impacts that could drive displacement around the world would challenge the parties' efforts to delay and temper climate action and again territorialize climate change as a global issue. Still, as climate-related displacement rises, "bordering" stands to have a large influence on the state- and international-level politics of climate change, and this intersection remains an important area for further study.

## Nostalgia and the temporal articulation of climate solutions

Vox's climate discourse also locates climate solutions within a nostalgic understanding of national heritage and identity, rejecting notions of economic or cultural "progress" that are seen to threaten a traditional way of life. This feeds into a reactionary social politic and promotes a revisionist history that sidesteps the rupture in self-identity that a true reckoning with climate change might demand from the Global North.

In Vox's discourse, desirable climate solutions are associated with ways of life that have meaning and value because of their links to a traditional past. This is articulated through the vision of irrigation reversing the decline of rural communities and the valorization of traditional and land-based professions (VOX 2020i). Vox indicates suspicion of the sweeping changes that might be imposed in the context of a climate emergency and warns of climate being used as a "pretext" to impose a radical leftist cultural agenda of feminism and LGBTQ liberation (VOX Europa 2021). In this way, Vox contests the claim by many climate advocates who argue that climate action necessitates a fundamental reimagining of how our world must operate, from our economic and political systems to our notions of community and belonging (Klein 2014; Seymour 2020). In Vox's nationalist articulation, the only valid climate solutions are those that encourage returning to the past, strengthen national identity, and avoid purportedly transgressive influences that might alter the nation's way of life.

It is apparent that a central preoccupation of Vox's discourse goes beyond protecting the traditional *cultural* markers of national identity to maintaining the collective self-identity of Spain as a country with a moral, upstanding past. After all, the discursive link between the nation's traditional, rooted past and a healthy climate obscures important elements of the historical roots of ACC. Most notably, it omits Spain's colonial history and the role of European colonization in developing the modern fossil fuel economy and resource extraction at a global scale (Mrozowski 1999; Beattie *et al.* 2014). Arguments that other countries are responsible for most contemporary emissions also ignore the fact that the vast majority of historical GHG emissions have come from the Global North, due to high levels of per capita consumption and national wealth that was also made through colonization (Warlenius *et al.* 2015). In light of this history, the discursive construction of the nation as unimpeachable in the context of climate change is parallel to Vox's discourse that rejects reckonings of "historical memory" of civil war and colonialism and seeks instead to "defend a version of history glorifying the nation" (Soroka & Krawatzek 2019: 169). This impulse to protect national constructions of innocence echoes emerging theory about the interconnections of masculinity, whiteness, and the ontological insecurities driving climate denial and attachment to fossil fuel capitalism (Daggett 2018; Agius *et al.* 2020; Malm & The Zetkin Collective 2021; Vowles & Hultman 2022).

Through this lens, climate nationalism's discursive appeal to a more traditional and rooted past can be interpreted as a way of contesting both globalist politics *and* the climate justice discourse that blames the Global North for the colonial legacies of fossil fuel extraction, recklessly capitalist economies, and planetary-scale ecological crisis (Schlosberg & Collins 2014). Linking climate solutions to ruralism and a nostalgic and traditional way of life affirms the construction of a positive and homogeneous national self-identity that has continuity through the past and present, a core feature of nationalism (Özkırımlı 2010).

## Looking beyond obstructionism

These findings suggest that climate change is not actually a central issue for Vox's political discourse or agenda. The party shows little substantive engagement with the reality of a changing and disrupted climate, despite it being arguably the most pressing and consequential "issue" confronting humanity. For Vox, climate change is merely one of many political issues to use to articulate a vision of a globalist/nationalist, transgressive/traditionalist, hysterical/rational, urban/rural culture war.

This case study illustrates the inherent limitations of typologies that seek to label actors as climate deniers, skeptics, or obstructionists (O'Neill & Boykoff 2010). It is important to identify the themes and patterns of climate opposition, but by only looking narrowly at whether actors are climate skeptical or climate obstructionist, literature can overlook the more nuanced ways in which actors may be making meaning of climate to serve broader political purposes. Vox's climate discourse emerged in response to the rising salience of climate politics and often uses the same obstructionist patterns identified by the literature, but an analysis that examines only whether Vox stands for or against climate policy would fail to identify key aspects of how Vox's climate discourse actually functions within the political sphere. This has serious implications for climate advocacy. Research must understand how constructions of climate change operate

in the broader political context and how those constructions shape the landscape on which climate politics is contested.

Future studies could investigate whether other far-right parties' climate discourse falls into similar patterns. Vox is an upstart political party; are older or more established PRR parties approaching climate in a different way? Is this kind of nationalist climate discourse echoed by nonparty actors, who may not feel any pressure to engage substantively with climate solutions? International networks of the far right have disseminated similar discursive playbooks on gender politics (Paternotte & Kuhar 2016; Corredor 2019); to what extent is this kind of climate discourse coordinated across borders (see McKie 2021)? Perhaps most important, what kind of discourse can most effectively inoculate the public against nationalist and exclusionary visions of climate action?

## Conclusion

Despite Vox's (inconsistent) admission that climate change is real and its proposal of a mitigation strategy, this case study has found that Vox's climate politics remain obstructionist. Still, the party's beginning foray into proposing climate solutions that fit into its ideological framework and political agenda indicate the potential for a new politic of climate nationalism that engages with climate politics more seriously. A more robust nationalist approach to climate change is perhaps most apparent in the politics of Marine Le Pen's National Rally, which has explicitly positioned itself as a pro-environment and pro-climate party in France while maintaining its nativist politics (Boukala & Tountasaki 2019; Aronoff 2022). It is easy to imagine nationalist discursive constructions of climate change shaping the mitigation and adaptation strategies under consideration. So what might the propagation of this climate nationalism mean for climate politics?

On one level, nationalist climate discourse has the potential to impede international climate action that addresses historic responsibility for climate change. The construction of climate innocence evident in Vox's discourse obviates debates around global justice that will only become more pressing as climate change worsens. In particular, it precludes conversations about reparative action in climate adaptation, like providing financial support for "loss and damage" in developing countries, already a fraught topic in global climate negotiations (Byrnes & Surminski 2019).

On another level, the discursive reterritorialization of climate change from the global to the national obscures many of the ways in which climate change *does* challenge the naturalization of borders in the first place. It even challenges the construction of the international state system itself, as sea level rise may force entire island states in the Pacific to relocate (Yamamoto & Esteban 2010). A nationalist approach to climate change will have trouble making sense of and meeting this kind of change. More broadly, climate discourses that only consider or prioritize the wellbeing of the ethnic nation could have disastrous humanitarian consequences. Drought, fires, heat waves, and rising sea levels will displace anywhere from 200 million to 1.2 billion people by 2050, many of them across national borders (Durand-Delacre *et al.* 2021). There are currently no protections in international law for people displaced by climate change or environmental harms (Berchin *et al.* 2017).



The prospect of climate-driven humanitarian crises, vanishing states, and wildly inequitable climate impacts show the limitations of a purely nationalist frame in conceiving of or meeting the challenges of climate change in the coming years. Still, in Vox's discourse we see a commitment to try to maintain ideas of national borders, sovereignty, and identity in the face these crises. In this context, climate advocates must understand that the discourses with which social understandings of climate change are constructed will shape which climate mitigation and adaptation strategies are seen as reasonable, feasible, and desirable (Onuf 2007). It will be vital for critical scholars and climate advocates to create compelling new "social imaginaries" (Stoddard *et al.* 2021: 675) that help us to extend the circle of care and concern beyond our most proximate communities and make new meaning and identity from a future shaped by climate change.

## Endnotes

1. Huber (2020) found that individuals with strong populist attitudes were more likely to be skeptical of climate change, whether they held left- or right-wing ideologies; in contrast, Yan et al. (2021) found this link only applicable to right-wing populism.
2. In Spanish, carbón translates as both "carbon" and "coal." I excluded sources that referred to coal without other reference to climate change. I also excluded sources that used "climate" metaphorically (e.g., "political climate").
3. Of course, among these actors, there is a great deal of variance in approaches to climate change.
4. The tearing of clothes is a biblical sign of grief or shame (Job 1:20).
5. "Gender ideology" was first coined by the Vatican in 2016 and is now frequently used to refer negatively to movements and policies that advance "emancipatory conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality" (Corredor 2019: 617).
6. Urban residents are overrepresented in Vox's vote share (Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020), indicating that the emphasis on rural identity may not be in response their voters' lived experience but to a traditionalist nostalgia for rural life.
7. Interestingly, Vox's construction of climate change also calls for weakening its internal borders by centralizing water resources and forest management. Again, this emphasizes the importance of a national border and homogenous nation-state (see VOX 2020a).
8. Turner and Bailey (2021) identify an emergent discourse across the European PRR linking immigrants to environmental degradation. I found little to substantiate this, perhaps because "eco-bordering" primarily concerned environmental issues more broadly, and thus did not appear in my search for climate-specific communications.

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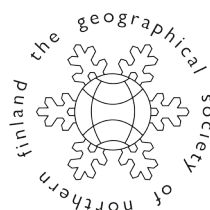


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## Research article



# Green Großraum: Carl Schmitt's political ecology of space

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## Abstract

How scholars conceptualize the driving forces of planetary crisis is intimately connected to how they conceptualize solutions to it. Recent scholarship has drawn on the work of Carl Schmitt, Nazi jurist and political philosopher, to articulate concepts in political ecology. These works of political ecology, however, do not engage with the problematic political history of the work and concepts developed by Schmitt. This article asks: what kinds of assumptions do we adopt when deploying Schmitt's geographical, political, and ecological conceptual apparatus? First, the article draws on the work of Minca and Rowan (2015, 2016) and Giaccaria and Minca (2016) to argue that Schmitt's thought is geographical, that Nazi geographical thought was intimately tied to geographies of conquest on the part of the Nazis. It argues that Schmitt's concept of Großraum or "greater space/ sphere of influence" is bound up with Schmitt's and the Nazi's politics of an ethnically/ racially motivated politics of "Friend versus Enemy." The article then evaluates Schmitt's concept of the political and considers its implications in relation to the environmental crisis of contemporary conjuncture, arguing that Schmitt's amorphous conceptualization of the political allows the distinction between friend and enemy to be left open to interpretation, making it possible for both intellectuals and green political parties to articulate xenophobic and reactionary political positions in environmental terms.

**Keywords:** *Planetary crisis, political theory, Carl Schmitt, political ecology, Third Reich Geography, world-ecology*

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## Introduction

Our conceptualizations of planetary crisis shape our politics. How we respond to global environmental change depends on the strategies we use to conceptualize the problems we face, and informs our thinking as to how to solve them. At the same time, our politics shape our conceptualizations of planetary crisis. Our assumptions—at once political and analytical—make themselves felt in our formulations and narrations of the driving forces of the crisis. How we approach this thorny dialectic is of profound significance. The ways that we think about the origins and historical development of crises is intimately related to how we think about solving them. If our narrations of global environmental change foreground the burning of fossil fuels as a primary driver of climate change (Malm 2016) then the abolition of fossil fuels appears as a solution to the crisis. If we center capital's mobilization of systems of power over and domination of human and extra-human natures through formulations of empire (Moore 2016, 2017, 2018) an internationalist anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics is called for.

But not all conceptualizations of planetary crisis serve a liberatory politics. Recent scholarship has drawn on the work of Carl Schmitt, Nazi jurist and political philosopher, to articulate concepts in political ecology. These works of political ecology, however, do not engage with the problematic political history of the work and concepts developed by Schmitt<sup>1</sup>. The most problematic element of Schmitt's political thought here centers on his conceptualization of the political as the field in which one makes distinctions between friend and enemy (Schmitt [1932] 2007: 26). To make the distinction, the political philosopher accepts that "history is a crucial device through which the relation between enemies is given meaning" (Lievens 2016).

This article aims to engage in a reflexive<sup>2</sup> critique of Schmitt's conceptualization of the political. It asks: What kinds of assumptions do we accept when we uncritically draw on the work of Carl Schmitt when thinking about politics and crises, particularly in relation to contemporary planetary crisis? This article will interrogate what such an ecological reading of Schmitt entails. First, it suggests situating Schmitt within broadly defined "Ecologies of the Third Reich", which is a play on Giaccaria and Minca's (2016) "Spatialities of the Third Reich", that is used to name the complex, interdependent co-production of Nazism as abstract project and Nazism as concrete process. The abstract biopolitical and ecological category of *Lebensraum* will be situated within these environmentalities. Second, Schmitt's critique of the abstract, biopolitical category of *Lebensraum*, in favor of the concrete, geopolitical category of *Großraum*, will be laid out, illuminating the form and content of Schmitt's metamethodological approach to history, which entails an effort to critique liberalism and universalism for their inability to draw lines of enmity between friend and enemy (Lievens 2016: 402). *Großraum* is here framed as a concept that Schmitt formulates in response to what he calls crises of de-territorialization<sup>3</sup> (Schmitt 1939). Finally, the article will conclude by reflecting on the significance of the deployment of a Schmittian conceptualization of the politics of planetary crisis. It argues that Schmitt's amorphous conceptualization of the political allows the distinction between friend and enemy to be left open to interpretation, making possible the articulation of xenophobic reactionary political positions to be articulated in environmental terms.

Schmitt's influence on contemporary social scientific research should not be understated. Concepts first developed by Schmitt, such as the "state of exception",<sup>4</sup> "concept of the political",<sup>5</sup> "*Großraum*"<sup>6</sup>, and theories of international law have, in recent years, been elaborated on and deployed by social scientists. Debate within the

field of international relations has developed in relation to the idea that climate change might serve as a crisis by which Schmitt's state of exception can, and/or should, be implemented (for an overview, see Habtom 2023). This converging of far-right and green politics is not limited to discussions at the academy. Green parties, from Austria (Opratko 2020) to Germany (Von der Burchard 2023) and New Zealand (Brown 2016), have recently articulated anti-immigrant political positions, aligning with far-right parties to call for the deportation of refugees fleeing climate disaster and war, and to curb the number of migrants allowed to enter these countries. As we shall see, this is no accident. Reconstructing Schmitt's conceptualization of the political as the articulation of the distinction between friend and enemy allows us to better grasp the contours of this unlikely alliance.

### Third Reich ecologies and ecologies of the Third Reich

To ascertain the kinds of ecological thinking that might emerge from an engagement with Carl Schmitt's body of work, we must first locate him within the holistic structure of the "Ecologies of the Third Reich." Here, we investigate if Schmitt is critical of Nazi ecological thought, and if he is (un)interested in it. This investigation allows us to reconstruct a Schmittian reading of ecology. This reconstruction will begin by exploring the relationship between German academic geography, the Nazis' imperial ambitions, and the development of the concept of *Lebensraum*.

In an effort to develop a "Tentative Spatial Theory of the Third Reich" Giaccaria and Minca (2016: 19) identify two related but distinct bodies of literature regarding the spatialities of Nazism. The first, which they term "Third Reich Geographies," encompasses work that engages with "the body of spatial theories and concepts that populated the Nazis' racialized imperial fantasies and animated their *Lebensraum* policies" (Giaccaria & Minca 2016: 5). This body of literature engages with the role played by the production of knowledge in the Nazi project, focusing specifically on the colonial legacy of German academic geography, and its role in informing the Nazis' search for *Lebensraum*, or living space.

They identify a second body of literature, what they term "the actual Geographies of the Third Reich," which investigates the history of the Third Reich from a geographical perspective, aiming to reframe aspects of the history of the Second World War in spatial terms (Giaccaria & Minca 2016: 10). This body of work moves from an analysis of the ways that the production of geographical knowledge informed the Nazi project to an investigation of the concrete historical experience of Nazi territorial expansion and contraction.

Giaccaria and Minca's ultimate aim in charting a "Tentative Spatial Theory of the Third Reich" is to

*bridge the 'Third Reich (academic) geography' with the (actual) 'Geographies of the Third Reich' in order to cast new light on three key aspects of the Nazi 'spatial Weltanschauung' (worldview): (1) between biopolitics and geopolitics, (2) between a topographical and topological approach to the government of people and space, and (3) between spatial ideology and spatial practice (Giaccaria & Minca 2016: 4).*

What Giaccaria and Minca offer in formulating the distinction between “Third Reich Geographies” and “Geographies of the Third Reich” is a theoretical framework that provides a way of thinking about the “body of spatial theories and concepts”, the biopolitical lens, the topographical and the ideological content of Nazi thought employed by the Nazis as the *abstract* elements of the Nazi project, and the actual, geopolitical, topological, and the spatial practices lived and used by the Nazis as their historically *concrete* manifestation.

What is impressive in Giaccaria and Minca’s approach is that, instead of collapsing the abstract and the concrete onto each other in an effort to provide a sort of essentialist dualism, they keep them in dialectical tension, which allows them to investigate the fundamentally co- productive and historical relation between spatial ideology and spatial practice. They strive for a broadly conceived cultural materialist (see Williams 1973) understanding of Nazi geography, in which ideas matter in the history of Nazi geographies and in which geography matters in the history of Nazi ideas.

Giaccaria and Minca’s cultural materialism enables them to mobilize an appreciation for the role of the *real abstraction* in history (see Bentancor 2016; Jakes 2020; Sartori 2014; Toscano 2008). When we, as intellectuals, conceptualize something as an abstraction, we usually recognize it as such—an abstraction is a partial, selected, and incomplete picture, it is an analytical or conceptual tool used to make sense of a complex social world. Abstractions abound in the history of thought, included but certainly not limited to their racial, gendered, and class- based expressions. The problem of the *real abstraction* asks us to consider: *what happens when these abstractions are taken to be real, and are deployed as such by states, empire, and capital?* As I argue below, the Nazi’s idea of *Lebensraum* was an abstraction, derived from German geographer Friedrich Ratzel’s conceptualization of the nation as population. We can recognize that *Lebensraum* was an idea. But this idea was taken seriously, deployed as if it represented concrete reality. War and genocide were waged in the name of this abstract idea. This abstraction had *real* consequences in the material world.

To our benefit in attempting to locate Schmitt in Environmentalities of the Third Reich, Giaccaria and Minca’s work situates the ideas and biographies of key Nazi geographers and spatial thinkers within the structure of the bio- and geo-political co-production of Third Reich Geographies and Geographies of the Third Reich. They detail the work of Walter Christaller, whose work was employed by the Nazis to develop Germany’s geographical and economic strategies for *Generalplan Ost*, as well as Friedrich Ratzel, the geographer who coined the term *Lebensraum*. On this basis, we can recognize the work of Nazi geographers in their historical and political context, illuminating the perspectives and assumptions which inform their thought. I argue that in doing so, actors both directly engaged with the production of geographical knowledge (abstract Third Reich Geographies) and actors reflecting on and employing this knowledge (those who lived the concrete Geographies of the Third Reich) emerge as implicated in the “Spatialities of the Third Reich.”

In a similar framing move, we might understand the Nazi’s interest and engagement with ecology along similar lines, that the structure of the “environmentalities of the Third Reich” is comprised of both abstract “Third Reich Ecologies” and concrete “Ecologies of the Third Reich.”

The object of Jason W. Moore’s methodological and historical framework of world-ecology is structured along similar conceptual lines as Giaccaria and Minca’s “tentative spatial theory of the Third Reich.” Moore argues that capitalism should be understood as a world-ecology, or “a way of organizing nature.” Key to thinking capitalism as a

world-ecology is a dialectical distinction, similar to Giaccaria and Minca's. For Moore, capitalism is a mode of organizing nature. Central to this project is capital's ability to code, quantify and rationalize environments towards the end of endless accumulation. This is capitalism as an epistemic *project*. The *process* of accumulation moves through the subordination and conquest of environments, securing labor, food, energy, and raw materials, keeping systemwide costs of production down and profits high (see Moore 2015: 2). Project and process here, as in Giaccaria and Minca's conception, are intimately linked—the way that Nazis, and capital see the world, and the way they move through it, continually interpenetrate one another.

Applied to the context of the Third Reich, “Third Reich Ecologies,” which are systems of meaning employed by the Nazis, constitute an epistemological praxis that embodies *Nazism as ecological project*. This ecological project, the codification, quantification, and rationalization of abstract social nature, to serve the “higher goods” of Nazism, were articulated along the generally abstract lines of population (“population as general abstraction” Marx [1973]1993: 100) which embodied the real abstraction of *Lebensraum*, or “living space”.

The concrete historical expression of “Ecologies of the Third Reich” should be understood in relation to the dynamics of imperial and monopoly capitalism. It is generally accepted by political economists studying the Third Reich that Nazism functioned as an alignment of the interests of the Nazi party, the German military, and German capital (see Neumann 2009; Poulantzas 1979; Tooze 2008; Toprani 2014). Nazism as project was oriented towards the attainment of the higher goods of a German *Volk* freed from the spatial constraints of population, and of German capitalists being able to compete with Anglo-American firms. The rearmament of Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, which was the goal of the German military apparatus, was both supported by and required the capacity of large German industrial firms to succeed. Conquest of territory would provide these large firms with cheap<sup>7</sup> raw inputs not found in Germany (Tooze 2008; Toprani 2014, 2016). The party would provide, and be provided with, legitimacy in and through the undertaking of these imperial ambitions. Nazism as process thus mobilized the epistemological formulation of *Lebensraum* as project through the dynamic of the real abstraction, which was realized as a process in historical terms by waging of a war of appropriation, genocide, and conquest.

As Moore argues, to fully understand the connections between capitalism, ecology, and empire, we must center in our analyses the “geo-cultures of accumulation” that have animated and oriented capital accumulation, conquest, and genocide over the *longue-durée* of the history of capitalism (Moore 2019). Here, ideas matter in the history of capitalism. If the guns and maps and factories are the hardware of historical capitalism, then ideology works as its software (Moore 2023), where the production of knowledge constitutes the production of abstract social labor and abstract social labor (see Moore & Antonacci 2023).

Moore writes that capital's abstractions—conceptualized to render “natures” socially abstract—should not be understood as mere social constructions. Rather, these abstractions are both violent and real. The violence of abstractions come through their sacrifice of too much of reality in the name of clarity. The reality of them comes through their ability to structure capital's ways of knowing and acting in the world (see Moore 2015: 27).

*Lebensraum* was the quintessential “real abstraction” for Nazism as ecological project. *Lebensraum* was an abstract “bio-geographical” concept developed by German geographer Friedrich Ratzel in 1901. The “bio” in “bio-geographical” connotes both

the fundamentally ecological character of *Lebensraum* (Ratzel was strongly influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution) and the fundamentally bio-political nature of the idea (returning to the conceptualization offered by Giaccaria and Minca of biopolitics as a key element in the abstract "Third Reich Geographies").

Abrahamsson (2013) charts the adoption of Darwin's ideas by German geographers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contextualizing the development of *Lebensraum* as abstraction. Key to understanding Nazism as ecological project is to see the link early 20<sup>th</sup> century German geographers made between the general abstraction of population (which they perceived of as pertaining to the "limits" imposed by external "laws of nature") and the real abstraction of *Lebensraum* (a normative praxis by which to "solve" their problem of population).

Abrahamsson writes that the reception of Darwin by German geographers was informed by

*the nascent national project of the Second Reich, which saw Germany as being left behind in the Western European race to acquire colonies. The colonial project was simultaneously conceived as answering to economic and demographical challenges (Abrahamsson 2013: 38–39).*

The ecological principle animating the conception of *Lebensraum* turned on the relationship between a population and its environment. Ratzel produced a

*synthetic concept [...] its aim was to theorize the biological conditions and changes within a delineated area to describe the relationship between a species and a particular environment. Thus, the Lebensraum is "the geographical surface area required to support a living species at its current population size and mode of existence (Abrahamsson 2013: 13; quote from Smith 1980: 53).*

A growing population, seen as an indicator of national health, would require an expanded territory to support it. Imperial expansion would thus make the growth of a population possible in metabolic terms—enough food to feed a population is required. Imperial expansion, especially in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, meant inter-imperialist struggle. Space would be struggled over by different populations in a zero-sum competition (see Abrahamsson 2013: 40).

The normative and practical element expressed by *Lebensraum*-as-concept was clear. For the German population to thrive, it would need space, and this space could, and "should," be won through geopolitics: the conquest of territory, the establishment of colonies, and the building of an empire.

German geographers' adoption of Darwin employed the Malthusian imaginary, that an increase of population would be constrained by the capacity of the earth to support it (Malthus [1798] 2015: 16) on a global scale. Nations could become great powers only by occupying a larger territorial space than their competitors, allowing them to support a larger and healthier population than their rivals. "Natural selection," the struggle between peoples for space, would dictate the global balance of geopolitical power (Abrahamsson 2013: 39).

The Nazis took this struggle for space as a world-historical and trans-historical fact, demonstrated "scientifically", and saw their world-historical mission as one to lead the German people to victory in the struggle against competing empires and races, such as the "Judeo- Bolshevik" Soviet "empire," and the "eternal enemy" embodied in Europe's Jewish population (Chapoutot 2013: 48). At stake, for the Nazis, was biological "health" of the *Volk*. Chapoutot writes



*The Nazi view of history was heavy with this biological and historical fear, this (literally) depressive outlook on the passage of time as a weakening and degenerating force [...] In order to avoid the decline in geopolitical conditions, biological degeneration, and cultural decadence, it was necessary to attack and to strike the enemy and release Germany from the vice that was suffocating it (Chapoutot 2013: 2–6; see also Chapoutot 2018).*

Appropriated by the Nazis, *Lebensraum* served as a way to see their supposed role in world-history, observe and politicize natures, rendering them socially abstract, and thus amenable to control. As a spatial concept it was biopolitical, topographical, and ideological. Through scientific analysis, the “amount” of *Lebensraum* required by the German *Volk* would be clearly identified and articulated. Here, the dialectic of the enfolding and unfolding of human action with the rest of nature is useful. *Lebensraum* as a real abstraction was born in a particular historical context, that of Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that only the history of German geopolitical economy, abstracted from the rest of nature, matters. Nature has a history as well (Lewontin & Levins 1997). The imperial ambitions of German statesmen and capitalists informed the quick adoption of *Lebensraum* as project and praxis.

The historical linkage of coloniality, population, capitalism and geopolitics only makes sense when we center the bio- and geo-physical conditions present in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. A few examples illustrate the point. Germany had modest reserves of coal, and no oil reserves within its territory (Tooze 2008; Toprani 2014), having to purchase most of its oil either from Romania or from Anglo-American firms, imposing constraints on profitability. The failure of Prussian state-sponsored forest and soil science in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to maintain harvest yields (Scott 1998) put similar pressures on German capital in relation to the provision of cheap food and cheap wood for industrial production. A dearth of cheap natures, accessible for appropriation by German capital meant that, in relation to other European capitalist powers that had colonies they could exploit for material resources, German capital was relatively uncompetitive. Only the conquest and control of territory could return Germany to global power status.

In the mobilization of population as general and *Lebensraum* as real abstraction, German academic geography enfolded these bio- and geo-physical conditions, as concrete historical facts, into their abstract conceptualizations of the connections among capital, space, and population. These conditions, of unfavorable bio- and geo-physical conditions and of the contradictions of monopoly capitalism converged here, and unfolded through both Nazi academic geography’s projects and the actual process of the construction of German empire.

The aim of this discussion of the relationship between Nazism and ecology has been to articulate a vision in which “Third Reich Ecologies” and the “Ecologies of the Third Reich”, or “Nazism as Ecological Project” and “Nazism as Ecological Process” are fundamentally co-productive. In this schema, the Nazis would take the identification and conquest of *Lebensraum*, born out of the academic body of spatial theories and concepts as their statist and world-historical ecological project, which itself enfolded particular historical bundles of social and natural relations present in Germany during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Lebensraum* allowed the Nazis to abstract, identify, and quantify territory to realize their “higher goods” of a dominant and prosperous German population and German capital. The employment of *Lebensraum* as a real abstraction, as an abstraction with material force in the world, resulted in the unfolding of Nazism

as an ecological process, manifested as a geopolitical conflict over these seeable and knowable ecologies over topographical space.

By identifying *Lebensraum* as a key *abstract* element of Nazi spatial and ecological thought, and by identifying Schmitt's critical engagement with it in theoretical and historical terms, we can begin to locate Schmitt as a thinker within the holistic body of “environmentalities” of the Third Reich, allowing us to appreciate the central place that questions of geography occupied in the corpus of his thought through this articulation of the concept of a *Großraum*, or greater space. This distinction opens a window into appreciating the genealogy of thought linking Schmitt to the antinomies of political-ecological thought in the contemporary conjuncture.

## Concrete ecologies of the Third Reich: Carl Schmitt and concrete order thinking

Schmitt's efforts to define the political as the distinction between “friend” and “enemy” led him to search for concepts that could adequately politicize notions of space. Two interrelated aspects of his body of thought—(1) the effort to develop distinctly German legal concepts and (2) the effort to legitimize German imperialism—inform this thinking about space. Crucially, notions of race and ethnicity here begin to populate his notions of “friend” and “enemy” in more explicit fashion.

First, as Schmitt's involvement with the Nazi party deepened, particularly after 1.) the March 1933 passage of the Enabling Act (*Gesetz zur Behebung der Not von Volk und Reich*) enabling the German chancellor (Hitler) to pass laws without approval of the *Reichstag* or President, and 2.) his joining of the Nazi Party in May of 1933, so too did his thought develop. Schmitt saw the rise of the Nazi Party as a “legal revolution” that would require a “systematic attempt to develop an entirely new political-legal language, the language of Nazism” (Suuronen 2020: 342). His contribution to this legal revolution came in the form of his writing of *State, Movement, People* (*Staat, Bewegung, Volk*) (Schmitt [1933] 2001). Written to reflect on the abolition of the Weimar constitution and to call to supplant it with a distinctly National Socialist (as opposed to liberal) form of law, Schmitt theorizes both the structure and source of legitimacy of the new National Socialist state. Crucial to understanding how the new state structure marks a departure from the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal state is the role that political unity and uniformity play, that “The political unity of the present-day state is a three-part summation of state, movement, and people” (Schmitt [1933] 2001). The state-movement-people triad takes as its role to lead the German people in its struggle against the “enemy”<sup>8</sup>. As such, for Schmitt,

*The ethnic identity of the German people, united in itself, is thus the most unavoidable premise and foundation of the political leadership of the German people. [...] Without the principle of ethnic identity, the German National-Socialist state cannot exist [...] it would immediately be handed over to its liberal or Marxist enemies, now haughtily critical, now obsequiously assimilationist (Schmitt [1933] 2001: 48, emphasis in original).*

Schmitt here abandons his decisionist concept of law in favor of concrete order thinking (*konkretes Ordnungsdenken*), a theory of law that highlights race as the origin of law and thought. Concrete order thinking conceptualizes the formation of a multitude

of legal systems in racial terms, that the fact that there are a multitude of legal and political systems arises from the notion that there are a “plurality of peoples and races” (see Suuronen 2022: 26).

Connected to the effort to define strictly German legal principles was Schmitt’s effort to legitimize German imperialism. If concrete order thinking took as its aim to develop German legal concepts situated within a struggle between different racialized modes of thought, then the development of Großraum as a concept can be read as an effort to think about the relationship between race, space, and struggle. The deployment of concrete order thinking in order to precipitate a Nazi legal revolution meant securing German law against

*[t]he idea that the enemy could make judgements about the friend, which, through the Nazi legal revolution, could now be “dismissed as an intervention of ‘foreign judgement’ (Schmitt 1933”, quoted in Suuronen 2022: 28).*

As we shall see, the concept of Großraum was also pitched at the level of critique of liberal interventionism’s judgement of German imperialism, this time at the level of the interstate system.

In *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation* ([1942]2015), we can see how Schmitt’s polemicization of history works in relation to his thinking regarding race, struggle, and consciousness. Schmitt here argues that “World-history is a history of sea powers against land powers and land powers against sea powers” (Schmitt [1942] 2015). This world-historical battle is not understood by Schmitt as only waged on the level of military combat—it is a battle of different races, whose very consciousness is determined by the kind of space they inhabit. On this point, mirroring the relationship he posits between race and legal thought, he writes

*The human receives a particular historical consciousness from his ‘space’ [...] an urbanite thinks the world otherwise than does a peasant farmer, a whale-fish hunter has another living space [Lebensraum] than an opera singer, and to a pilot the world and life appear otherwise not only in other lights but also in other quantities, depths, and horizons (Schmitt [1942] 2015: 47–48).*

In a footnote written in relation to Schmitt’s usage of the language of *Lebensraum*, editors Berman and Zeitlin refer to Schmitt’s explanation of his use of the term offered in his 1947 interrogation at the Nuremberg trials. He claimed “that the term *Lebensraum* was inapt to describe his thought in the period 1933–1945” (Schmitt [1942] 2015: 48, footnote 76).

Scholars of Schmitt’s thought have demonstrated that he instead favored and employed alternative spatial concepts in relation to *Lebensraum*, most notably those of *Großraum* and *Nomos* (see Derman 2011; Elden 2010; Minca & Rowan 2016). If *Lebensraum* does indeed represent a “real abstraction” laden with biological and ecological meaning, and if Schmitt rejected *Lebensraum* as a useful spatial category in favor of others, one might agree with Minca and Rowan and be “highly skeptical that Schmitt had ever taken the Earth into account, if by Earth we mean anything like ecology” (Giaccaria & Minca, cited in Latour 2015). It would be perfectly reasonable to argue, using a reformulation of Giaccaria and Minca’s language, that Schmitt was *not* a Third Reich ecologist, that is to say, his work was not geared towards developing abstract categories and bodies of knowledge about ecologies. This is, however, not to say that Schmitt’s work can be dissociated from broadly conceived “Environmentalities

of the Third Reich”. Schmitt’s rejection of *Lebensraum* as an abstract concept should be read in relation to what Ojakangas calls the “metaphysical core” of his work, “what [Schmitt] calls the concrete” (Ojakangas 2006: 14).

Concrete order thinking—the deduction, discovery, and transcription of norms from existing orders (Chapoutot 2013: 51), employed a “sociology of concepts” (Ojakangas 2013: 14) which would serve as a method by which to deconstruct concepts by situating them within the “conceptually articulated social structure” of a given historical epoch. These deconstructions would illuminate the historically embedded nature of the concepts in question, which for Schmitt were always political and bound to a concrete situation.

Minca and Rowan and Balakrishnan both contextualize the meaning of “concrete” in Schmitt’s thought, which appeared in his 1934 (2004) “On the Three Types of Juristic Thought”. Schmitt sought to critique both an abstract positivist conception of law (in line with an abstract Roman civil law) and of decisionist law (summarized in Balakrishnan 2000: 194–196), in which either a “scientific application” or “sovereign will” legitimates a legal system. This critique led him to search for a new normative basis for the legitimacy of legality, which he found in “concrete order thinking,” which “framed law in relation to deeper forms of legitimacy, rooted in culture, geography, and history” (Minca & Rowan 2016: 135). Law, for Schmitt, could never be legitimate if it was based on abstract idealist codes. Rather, Law for Schmitt could only ever be “legitimate” if it were based on the “concrete” history of a particular place; that German law should be based on German history, German culture, and German norms. By 1933, when Schmitt writes *State, Movement, People*, it is clear that Schmitt refers here to the absolute ethnic identity of the German people as the sole legitimate basis of law (see Suuronen 2022: 29–30).

This critique of a “state-based, positive legal order [...] coincided with a valorization of the pre-state, ‘Germanic’ traditions of feudal law” (Minca & Rowan 2016: 195). Minca and Rowan have highlighted the significance of this development in Schmitt’s thinking regarding “concrete order thinking” claiming that it laid the foundation for his understanding of “the spatial foundations of law” (Minca & Rowan 2016: 135).

By articulating *Großraum* as an alternative normative spatial praxis to *Lebensraum*, Schmitt’s use of “concrete order thinking” enabled him to critique liberalism’s abstract universalism more directly. While *State, Movement, People* was concerned with preventing foreign judgement from making itself felt in German law on the domestic level, Schmitt saw a need to articulate this same need—to prevent foreign intervention—on the level of the interstate system. *Großraum*, as a spatial concept, was Schmitt’s solution to the problem of a de-territorialized international politics. Universalizations that disregard space, such as humanity, had, in Schmitt’s view, been weaponized post-Versailles by the Allied powers, subverting the “non-discriminating concept of war,” which “did not distinguish between morally right and wrong parties.” The turn to a “discriminating concept of war” thus threatened to undermine the basis for international law, framing war as a moral crime against humanity rather than as a conflict between two sovereign nations (Derman 2011: 182).

*Henceforth, wars would no longer be waged between legal equals but between just parties and criminals who had violated the laws of mankind (Derman 2011: 183).*

The manifold political stakes of the liberal deployment of abstract humanitarian universalizations were clear: foreign powers, claiming defense of the “laws of mankind”

would have justification to intervene in the territorial affairs of other states, amounting to a negation of their territorial sovereignty. The French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 served as an important historical example of a deployment of interventionism; failure of Germany to deliver coal to France as reparations for the “crime” (as framed by the liberal victors) of Germany’s engagement in the First World War led to France’s “justified” seizure of the territory. Schmitt, having come from Plettenburg in the Rhineland, was deeply impacted by its occupation, provoking a deeply nationalist and outraged response from him (see Balakrishnan 2000: 80–81).

Schmitt’s identification of abstract law with Maritime Britain and of a concrete law with the European continent is significant—not only in that it represented a deployment of the logic already developed through the concept of concrete order thinking, with its emphasis on the racial and ethnic bases of law. *Großraum* entailed a new spatial division of powers, premised on

*a vision of a new German Reich, whose form and function stood in opposition to British imperialism: unlike the maritime British empire, which espoused a creed of abstract universalism through its globally dispersed territories, the German Reich would seek a limited sphere of influence for its concrete völkisch ideology through a continental great space [Großraum] (Balakrishnan 2020: 182).*

Writing in 1939 to articulate a legitimate basis for German imperialism, Schmitt pitches the concept of *Großraum* (and *not Lebensraum*) against liberal universalism as a normative principle able to politicize space. He writes

*The true, original Monroe Doctrine [...] contains three simple thoughts: independence of states in the Americas; non-colonization in this space; non-interference of extra-American powers in this space, coupled with non-interference of America in non-American space. [...] What is essential is that the Monroe Doctrine remains true and un-falsified as long as the idea of a concrete, specific Großraum is accepted, [a space] on which extra-regional powers may not interfere. The opposite of such a principle grounded in concrete space is a universalistic world-principle encompassing the entire Earth [...] this leads naturally to the interference of everyone in everything (Schmitt [1939] 2011: 46).*

Just as “foreign judgement” was a problem for German law, so too is foreign intervention a problem for German imperialism.

The solution, for Schmitt, would come in the form of acceptance of *Großraum* as an organizing spatial concept.

*[This question concerns] the opposition between a clear spatial order based on the non-intervention of extra-regional powers and a universalistic ideology that transforms the Earth into a battlefield for its interventions and [which] stands in the way of the natural growth of living peoples. We are thus not simply imitating an American model if we make reference to the Monroe Doctrine; we are merely excavating the healthy core of an international legal Großraum-principle, and developing it appropriately for our European Großraum (Schmitt [1939] 2011: 52).*

Schmitt’s articulation of a critique of *Lebensraum* through the development of the concept of *Großraum* should be read, as Elden (2010) does, as a thoroughly geopolitical argument. The abstract biopolitical logic of “Third Reich geographies”, captured in the conception of *Lebensraum*, is supplanted by the concrete geopolitical logic as a “Geography



of the Third Reich.” Here, Schmitt’s concrete order thinking as method should thus be read as an act of reflection on Germany’s concrete geopolitical positionality. His critique of abstract-centric thinking in the development of Großraum-as-concept deploys a depiction of abstract thought as a rhetorical and ideological position employed by the British to intervene in the affairs of rival states, to be contested by a conscious move, by the *Reich*, to re-territorialize global politics. To engage in the deployment of abstract thought is, for Schmitt, a political move to de-legitimize a state’s territorial sovereignty and imperial ambitions.

Moreover, Schmitt saw the introduction of abstract “space-disregarding” categories, and the resulting necrosis of the state as a territorial power, as an historical fact. As a result, the development of the concept of *Großraum* was a “search for alternative political forms capable of spatializing the political under changing geopolitical conditions” (Minca & Rowan 2016: 275).

Here, it is essential to unpack what Schmitt means by “the political,” articulated in one of his most influential works, *The Concept of the Political* ([1932] 2007). There, Schmitt attempts to identify what constitutes “politics”, separate from all other fields of social-scientific inquiry. He writes:

*The political must therefore rest on its own ultimate distinctions, to which all action with a specifically political meaning can be traced. Let us assume that in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil, in aesthetics beautiful and ugly, in economics profitable and unprofitable. The question then is whether there is also a specific distinction which can serve as a simple criterion of the political and of what it consists. [...] The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy (Schmitt [1932] 2007: 26).*

For Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political*, the aim of politics is thus to annihilate “the enemy” to achieve political unity *within* the polity—which, as we have seen, by 1933 entailed the construction of absolute ethnic identity within the state (Schmitt [1933] 2001: 20). Axtmann (2007: 535) reminds us that, for Schmitt, “the political receives its real meaning precisely because it refers to the real possibility of physical killing”. Remembering that his historical metamethodology involves the (re)narration of history to articulate a polemic (Lievens 2016: 401), Schmitt in *Land and Sea* ([1941] 2015) narrates a world-historical arc in which land powers engage in struggle against sea powers. Here, on the global level, the political struggle takes place on the level of ideas—ideas that organize space, and thus, for Schmitt, life.

Land powers (and here, Schmitt is thinking of Germany) fighting land wars fight *political* wars, political in the sense that states make war against the military forces of enemy states, rather than against civilian populations (Berman 2015: xxiv). Sea powers (here, Schmitt means England) fighting sea wars, on the other hand, fight wars on the sea indiscriminately, where sea war takes as its aim the evisceration of the enemy’s economies. Here, the political military interferes in the private, civilian sphere of the economy, which “pulls the social world [...] into warfare” (Berman 2015: xxiv).

Echoing Schmitt’s critique of liberal interventionism through the deployment of *Großraum*, the political on the global level in *Land and Sea* takes the form of a struggle between the organizing ideas of abstract universalism versus concrete particularism.

Schmitt found the category of “nation” an appropriate form with which to re-territorialize the political. The elements required for *Großraum* as a political order to be realized include 1.) a *Reich*, which guarantees internal social order and conducts foreign policy with other great powers, 2.) an ideological apparatus that legitimates and

consolidates the *Reich* and organizes the *Großraum*, and 3.) a space from which foreign powers would be banned from intervening in (Minca & Rowan 2016: 276). Central to the composition of the *Großraum* was a “politically awakened nation [*Volk*,] possessed of a guiding ‘political idea’ or ideology” (Derman 2011: 185).

Since abstraction, for Schmitt, was a rhetorical and ideological weapon to be used towards the erosion of non-interventionist principles enshrined in the failing interstate system, it was incommensurable with an emergent concrete *völkisch* political form. The *Reich* would need to seek alternative concrete categories to articulate the conditions and stakes of geopolitical conflict, freeing itself from the “rules of the game” articulated by British universalist doctrine.

This deployment of the sociological category of “nation” represents a key development that Schmitt makes in his critique of abstraction generally, and of *Lebensraum* as real abstraction in particular. The move from an abstract, liberal-universal principle of “population” (animating *Lebensraum*) to a concrete conception of a particular, geographically and politically discreet “nation” (animating *Großraum*), as a significant socio-political vector, opens a window into the structural position occupied by Schmitt in our broadly conceived “Environmentalities of the Third Reich”. An interrogation of Schmitt’s employment on the category of “nation” vis-à-vis “population” demands critical reflection of which aspects of a Ratzelian conception of ecological geography Schmitt rejects, and which he retains. The claim that Schmitt was influenced by Ratzel is a popular move, usually without reference to the biological element in Ratzel’s writing (see, for example Elden 2010: 24).

As explored above, the sociological category of “population” as employed in the Ratzelian conception of *Lebensraum* constituted a central “general abstraction” for “Nazi Ecology as Project,” which was framed as an abstract biopolitical, spatial, and ecological expression of “Third Reich Ecologies”. Foucault argues that the modern art of government, and the study of politics as a field, takes population as its central problematic, where government’s knowledge (*savoir*) takes as its object the processes pertaining to the development of the population and its relationship to the economy (Foucault 2007: 106). Governmentality thus takes as its end not only the act of governing, but also the improvement of the “the condition of the population, to increase its wealth, its longevity, and its health” (Foucault 2007: 105).

Foucault here articulated a key co-productive link between the production of abstract ideas and the concrete prosperity of a nation. He sees the development of bodies of knowledge concerning population, born out of “demographic expansion [...] linked in turn to the expansion of agricultural production through circular processes” (Foucault 2007: 103). This echoes the enfolding-unfolding dialectic expressed above as operative material forces in the world: “these three movements—government, population, political economy—form a solid series that has certainly not been dismantled even today” (Foucault 2007: 108).

Schmitt’s substitution of “nation” for “population” is a crucial shift. As Abrahamsson (2013: 38) notes

*the reception of Darwinian thought into the German sphere was widely divergent. Often, though not always, the battle lines were drawn along ideological lines, Darwinism, being associated mainly with a liberal-universalist ideology, being associated British civilization [was] distinct and different from Germanic Kultur.*

“Population” spoke to the relationship between a species and its environment and was thus an abstract “space disregarding universalization”. For Schmitt, his lack of employment of the abstract category of “population” turns on a view of abstraction as a method to de-politicize and de-territorialize what is a fundamentally political and territorial issue.

The geopolitical formulation of *Großraum* “was concerned above all with a certain ‘political idea’ rather than racial categories,” yet it “remained entirely compatible with racist conceptualizations of the relationship between a given space and a given people” (Minca & Rowan 2015: 278). For Schmitt, what was irreducibly political and territorial, was the “higher good” of Nazism, a thriving concrete German nation freed from foreign intervention, interventions that were enabled by abstract universalism. The growth and prosperity of the German people were, for Schmitt, antithetical to the universalistic ideologies promoted by liberal powers to justify their interventions into the internal affairs of rival states (Minca & Rowan 2015: 278).

Schmitt’s relationship to “Environmentalities of the Third Reich” thus represents a peculiar and implicit engagement with ecology, with the “natural growth of living peoples”. Schmitt rejected the abstract, universalizing category employed by the Ratzelian *Lebensraum*-centered ecological imagination, with its mobilization of conceptions of population, on the grounds that “population” abstracted from a concrete, situational, *political* conception of geography. As such, it would be inadequate to conceive and contextualize the geopolitical “stakes of the game,” that “populations” struggling over resources are not merely “populations.” Rather, for Schmitt, historical “nations” engage in a life and death struggle over the course of European geo-history, over the contours of *Großraum*.

Schmitt thus does not reject the Darwinian-Malthusian ecological imaginary, that space is limited and that struggle over it will ensue. He rather seeks to *politicize it sufficiently*. Schmitt’s political history thus provides an account of his own political-historical conjuncture. *The way an historical narrative is periodized fundamentally shapes that narrative*. The historical moment under Schmitt’s analysis, the end of the First World War, is conceptualized by him as a moment of crisis for the old liberal international order. The introduction, after the First World War, of abstract liberal “space-disregarding universalizations” offered the Anglo-American geopolitical powers a legal justification for the infringement of German sovereignty, emerged from their de-territorialization of the political. Liberalism thus provides a geopolitical justification for interventionism. By re-territorializing politics, a return to a conception of the political as fundamentally place-based, would allow for a new politics (that of sovereign territorial *Großräume*) to emerge.

While the political, rather than the ecological, is the object of Schmitt’s analysis, affinities with ecological thinking (especially contemporary ecological thinking) can be drawn. Indeed, to think through the politics of crisis is an imperative that animates much of social-ecological thinking today. As noted above, Minca and Rowan (in Latour 2015) argue that while Schmitt’s articulation of *Großraum* did not explicitly endorse Nazi racialized thinking, it remained compatible with it. Schmitt, articulating the geopolitical maxim of *Großraum* in order to win favor from Nazi elites (see Balakrishnan 2000: 176–189), shared their perceived “higher goods,” expressing support for Nazism as concrete historical project.

Schmitt’s critique of *Lebensraum* should not be read of a critique of Nazism as project, nor should it be read as a critique of, or as a fundamental break with, Nazi ecological thinking as such. It is a critique of liberalism as a political position, imbued

with the logic of crisis-thinking, periodized in relation to Schmitt's present moment. Turning to the present day, an analysis of contemporary deployment of Schmittian political thought in relation to ecology will demonstrate how Schmitt's thinking is in fact compatible with ecological concerns, and how it generates a particular (and problematic) conceptualization of planetary crisis.

## Conclusion

What are we to make of Schmitt's concept of *Großraum* vis-à-vis the contemporary planetary crisis? What are the implications of deploying it in an effort to articulate a political ecology? We can conclude by reflecting on Schmitt's argument on its own grounds. Schmitt's project, which centered on the identification of the political, aimed to polemicize and re-territorializing politics. This project needs to be understood in relation to its object of critique—liberalism; tending to disregard space and rendering impossible the identification of the enemy. Cropsey (1995: x) contextualizes succinctly, writing

*Schmitt's own mortal enemy is liberalism, which he demonizes as the pacifistic, all-tolerating, rationalist-atheist antithesis of 'the political.' Liberalism is thus complicitous with communism in standing for the withering away of the political and replacing it with the technological—the reduction of humanity to the last man.*

This abstract liberalism, post-Versailles, had become for Schmitt a dominating and organizing principle of life, on both the level of the polity and beyond it. What was needed was a return to concrete politics, a recognition that the political is always bound to a particular situation. Only by returning to these concrete situations could friends and enemies be identified, and political action taken based on these identifications.

Did Schmitt's critique of liberalism succeed, in that he found concepts that would allow political life to be reorganized on its own terms, as he argues is needed in *The Concept of the Political* ([1932] 2007: 26)? For Leo Strauss, a contemporary critic of Schmitt, he did not (Meier 1995).

*Strauss saw that if Schmitt applauded strife itself as humanizing simply because it preserves mankind from the moral torpor of the technological terrarium, then Schmitt was no better than the value-free liberals he condemned, for both he and they admitted any end as equally choice worthy with any other. Schmitt might stipulate for a higher, i.e., a more violent, commitment to the adopted value [...] but Strauss made it clear that that would be a distinction without a significant difference (Cropsey 1999: x).*

The political, for Schmitt, rests on the distinction between friend and enemy, but the criteria by which to judge either friend or enemy remain relative. What appears as concrete remains abstract.

Schmitt's is a relativist argument—the distinction between friend and enemy can be articulated in any terms, so long as they are deemed “sufficient” to politicize a political problem. This relativism is what makes Schmitt's political ecology so dangerous. Wark (2017) diagnoses the problem convincingly, articulating the ambiguity of Schmitt's concept of the political, in that politics is often asserted as a catch-all solution, where

war between friend and enemy—but never class war—makes it possible to transcend crisis.

Wark's observation makes clear the relative lack of substance behind the concept of the political. Schmitt's decision, in 1933, partly responding to Strauss' critique (see Meier 1995) and partly in response to the Enabling Act and his joining of the Nazi party, was to turn to conceptualizing the enemy as the Jew (see Suuronen 2020: 349–356, 2022: 21–29.)

A decade ago, Christian Parenti (2012) articulated a link between global climate change and the emergence of what he calls “the new geography of violence”. In his rendering, the manifold and multiple bio- and geo-physical changes produced by a changing climate pose direct danger to capitalist civilization. How states and societies respond to these challenges—politically—will shape the future of planetary life. As such, he argues that

*There is a real risk that strong states with developed economies will succumb to a politics of xenophobia, racism, police repression, surveillance, and militarism and thus transform themselves into fortress societies while the rest of the world slips into collapse. By that course, developed economies would turn into neofascist islands of relative stability in a sea of chaos (Parenti 2012: 20).*

He terms this political response to the climate crisis “the politics of the armed lifeboat.”

Green politics are not inherently immune to the kinds of reactionary xenophobia described by Parenti (2012). Schmitt's concept of the political leaves open the possibility of articulating political ecologies that mobilize xenophobia as a rallying cry for green politics and policies—it is not hard to imagine the Malthusian, anti-population imaginary being deployed by green parties in an effort to “protect” environments against “overpopulation” by migrants, refugees, etc. The tendency of increasing migration due to global environmental change is a growing one. Here, when we observe the Austrian, German, and New Zealand green parties' turn to anti-immigrant politics, we get a sense of what Schmitt's politics of enmity entails at the contemporary conjuncture. The Malthusian imaginary rears its head in Germany, where German cities are framed as “hopelessly overwhelmed” by growing numbers of refugees feeling war and climate-related disaster (Von Der Burchard 2023). Austria's green party, in coalition with the conservative “Peoples Party”, has been described as among one of the most rightwing in Europe, where cuts to immigration, coupled with the vilification of Muslim migrants, has been labelled an exercise in “climate apartheid” by UN special rapporteur Philip Alston (Opratko 2020).

Bearing in mind that the effort to define the political takes as its end the elimination of the enemy, the prospect of politicizing ecology with an amorphous and contingent friend-enemy distinction appears dangerous. Green politics ought to take as their end the liberation of life on earth—and not at the expense of a convenient and contingent enemy. To frame Carl Schmitt as appropriate thinker to address global environmental change, and to formulate a basis for a political response to planetary crisis that articulates a return to 20<sup>th</sup> century *Großraum* opens up the danger of a return to a state of war based on ethnonationalist division. How we decide to—or not to—think *Großraum* will play a central role in how we address the central crisis of the contemporary conjuncture.



## Endnotes

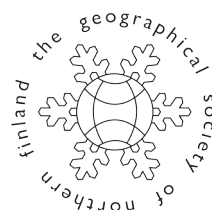
1. See, for example, Bruno Latour's *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (2017) and *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018). For a critique of Latour's deployment of Schmitt, see Tooze (2020).
2. I employ the term "reflexive" in line with Bourdieu and Wacquant's formulation of the concept: sociological reflexivity involves the interrogation of our "received concepts," to uncover and take as our object of analysis "the *social and intellectual unconscious* embedded in analytic tools and operations" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 36).
3. De-territorialization is here understood to represent a process by which modern geopolitics, as a way of organizing interstate relations, with its focus on the exclusive territorial sovereignty of states, becomes eroded. When de-territorialization occurs, states no longer have exclusive sovereignty over their territories; other powers can interfere in the internal workings of rival states. De-territorialization is thus, for Schmitt, a force of de-politicization.
4. The "state of exception" was a legal-political position taken by Schmitt in the 1920's. It argues that the foundation of modern state sovereignty is the ability for "the sovereign" to decide when, where, and how the law can be broken. This concept was employed by both advocates and critics of US foreign policy in the wake of 9/11. The question was: is the US justified in its breaking of international law in its efforts to combat "global terror." This concept is receiving new attention, where scholars question whether climate crises will engender a new "state of exception," if states will be able to disregard international law to deal with climate emergencies.
5. The "concept of the political," developed by Schmitt in 1932, aims to articulate that "politics" have their own logic, unrelated to economics, sociology, aesthetics, etc. It has been used by political scientists to argue that their framework of analysis, "political science," is a distinct discipline. In this sense, it is similar to Durkheim's ([1895] 2014) "What is a Social Fact" for sociology, aiming to establish the boundaries for an analytical field.
6. Schmitt's idea of "*Großraum*," or a "greater imperial space," has been used primarily by scholars of the Third Reich, who investigate the concept vis-a-vis the more well-know "*Lebensraum*" to demonstrate the inconsistencies of Nazi policies. It has also been used by scholars to investigate "informal" imperialism.
7. I use the term "cheap," rather than terms like "inexpensive", deliberately. For "inexpensive" has an almost exclusively economic connotation. Cheapness, as used by Patel and Moore (2017) captures two interrelated moments of the relation of appropriation: raw inputs (including food, labor, energy, and raw materials) are made cheap in an economic sense, but they are simultaneously de-valued in an ethical and political sense- they are under-valued. This cheapening, especially of the work and lives of racially/ ethnically/ gendered laboring populations, is, in Patel and Moore's view, central to capitalism's movements in and through ecologies.
8. Both Marxists and non-Germans are constituted as the enemy of the German people in *State, Movement, People* (Schmitt [1933] 2011: 3, 35, 48–50).
9. In 1933, Schmitt revised *The Concept of the Political* to more explicitly engage with Nazi Party doctrine. These revisions will be returned to in the conclusion.

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## Academic Essays



# Hindutva Civilizationism in India: Unravelling the Human-Ecological Conditions

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## Abstract

India's Hindutva movement, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party, has risen to power in the world's largest democracy and second-most populous country. Various scholars have examined how Hindu nationalism is rooted in civilizational themes; others have examined how ancient Hindu elements are employed in BJP environmental politics. Yet a comprehensive and interdisciplinary conceptualization of civilizationism that places it, firstly, at the heart of Hindutva and, secondly, confronts it as not solely a discursive or thematic tool but as the manifesting of physical control over citizens' relationships to their material environment is lacking. This means approaching 'civilization' in the far right as a human-ecological structure and not only a historical bedrock of ethno-territorial and theocratic power. In order to conceptualize Hindutva civilizationism, I re-examine two well-known cases of Sangh Parivar environmental politics: (1) Hindutva geography and spatial violence; and (2) anti-meat and cow vigilante politics. Beyond serving as a discourse that ignites violence and far-right extremism, I showcase how the sounding board of 'civilization' encapsulates the relationship between sociopolitical and environmental far-right objectives, highlighting the ways that far-right civilizationism seeks to define human relationships with natural and built environments. Conceptualizing civilizationism in this way strengthens understandings of how the racial, ethno-national, and religious features of far-right politics are rooted in ecological doctrine that is often based on the social-material features of past 'civilization'. This supports the primordial significance of civilizationism in far-right ideology beyond only the white supremacist far-right and 'Western Civilization'.

**Keywords:** *bio-ecological power, geography, religion, Sangh Parivar, environmental politics, ethnonationalism, cow vigilantism, anti-livestock politics*

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## Introduction: Civilizationism, Hindutva, and Environmental Politics

Far-right movements, like the Hindutva movement in India, are broadly defined as the political manifestations of nationalism, authoritarianism, populism, xenophobia, racism, and anti-democracy (Mudde 2019; Davey & Ebner 2019). Yet, though various far-right ideological camps around the world share multiple or all of these ‘isms’, their histories, geographies, and/or sociopolitical strategies can vary. However, they share a common ideological thread in their making of the old new through objectives to order national landscapes and populations in a capital-compatible image of a civilized character, place, and time. In the United States and Australia, white supremacists obsess over their settler colonial feats, for instance the introduction of British livestock herding and fencing to the landscape, cited as embodiments of civilized social and natural order that justifies white settler presence. In Europe, far-right parties like Vox in Spain and the AfD in Germany mull over concepts of land, heritage, and blood that they locate in, for example, the Spartans, Prussians, and the Crusades. Hence, despite their differences, their narratives contain the same bones. These narratives seek not only to strengthen a ‘civilizing’ discourse among a populace but also to maintain and control the relation of that populace to their local environment through, for instance, cultural sites and agriculture. These strategies comprise the ideology of civilizationism.

Civilizationism is an overlooked yet fundamental touchstone of far-right ideology that can highlight the relationship between the social and environmental features of far-right politics. Moreover, looking at the far-right more broadly, investigations of far-right civilizationism have been limited to the aforementioned “white supremacist” far-right and their appeals to “Western Civilization” (Brubaker 2017; Stewart 2020; McFadden 2022). Compared to Western far-right movements, despite its ferocity, Hindutva has received limited attention (Leidig 2020: 2), especially in contrast to more infamous examples of far-right extremism like white supremacy and neo-Nazism. Consequently, an initial motivation for this paper was to recast ‘civilization’ in far-right ideology as a more fundamental philosophical driver that also underpins the non-Western far-right.

For India’s Hindutva movement, far-right ideology is strongly linked with the civilizational discourse of evolving sects of Hindu nationalism. Scholars have examined the evolution of Hindu nationalism during British colonialism (Zavos 2000; Joshi 2001), including how decolonial movements drew on ‘Indian civilization’ (Bhattacharya 2011), its violent rise (Baber 2000; Melachthon 2002; Anand, 2007), and its political formation and power as a non-Western brand of right-wing extremism harboring an obsession with civilized nature and culture (Leidig 2020; Saleem *et al.* 2022). The underlying civilizational discourse and ancient Hindu themes of the movement have been pointed out to varying degrees (Baber 2000; Bhatt 2001; Jaffrelot 2019; Submaraniam 2019). Civilization has also been a focus in recent investigations of Hindutva’s employment of civilizational populism as a rhetorical tool for national-cultural nostalgia and the characterization of ‘uncivilized’ marginalized groups (Saleem *et al.* 2020; Bhattacharya 2011; Yilmaz and Morieson 2023). These civilizational tendencies are often defined as a precursor to nationalism and a rhetorical tool for populism; therefore, civilization is not the core conceptual focus, and the conceptualization of civilizationism as an encompassing and fundamental ideology of the Hindutva far-right has not been advanced.

Subsequently, such explorations have not addressed Hindutva civilizationism’s implications for shaping human relations with their physical environment(s). More



generally, far-right civilizationism has been approached as a discourse that promotes the cultural and political dominance of a movement, culminating in racism, religious hate, and xenophobia, often towards Muslim groups (Kaya & Tecmen 2019; Amarasingam *et al.* 2022). While this approach is insightful, it omits various considerations of how far-right discourses, visions, and rhetoric have tangible ecological ends. Consequently, I argue that the movement's obsession with Hindu civilization results in more than the generation of civilizational discourse to maintain hierarchies and marginalization in a modern context; it constitutes an ideological method of shaping citizens' social and physical relationships with their geographical, ecological, and biological world.

Additionally, researchers have recently explored the civilizational nature of Hindu nationalism on the world stage and its rising power vis-à-vis other 'civilizational states' (Sullivan de Estrada 2023; Mawdsley 2023; Chatterjee & Das 2023; Singh & Winter 2023). The bedrock of civilization here is shared language, ethnicity, and religion, and how the power of a shared civilizational history is being leveraged in domestic and foreign policy. In this paper, I focus largely on the domestic consequences for Indian land and citizens and argue for an expanded understanding of 'civilization' in far-right ideology as not only aiming to dominate socio-political discourse but also as a system of environmental conditions. This addition is critical since civilizations are intrinsically intertwined with their environmental contexts and are thus human-environmental structures. 'Civilization', from the Latin words 'civiz' (citizen) and 'civitas' (city), refers simultaneously to the human condition of subjugation under the law of a sovereign body (society and politics) and the environmental context of sedentary city-building, agriculture, and so on (a systematized relationship with the environment). Hence, civilization is a human structure that is as much built on law, ethnicity, politics, religion, and trade as it is on an environmental structure that shapes and mitigates people's relationship with their environment. Particularly where interdisciplinary inquiry is the objective, this perspective can enhance our understanding of the contemporary implications of 'civilization' by shedding light on the relationship between ideology and the environment. This goes too far for investigating the far right.

Hindutva's 'Hindu civilization' is based on real historical cities and empires, specifically those from the Indus and Vedic eras, contemporaneously reinvented as unique and continuous in light of the ideals and morals of 'civilized' modern Hindus today. This discourse supports the synthesizing of an ethnic, religious, and nationalist identity that reinvents ancient Hindu characteristics to suit the modern globalized agenda of the BJP. However, it also supports a set of environmental rules, systems, and structures affecting the bodies and ecologies of Indian citizens. The contemporary environmental politics of the BJP clearly exemplify these physical-ecological manifestations of Hindutva civilizationism. Notably, 'environmental politics' is a term that, due to its vast frame of reference, can convolute interdisciplinary explorations such as this one. In this essay, I refer to 'environmental politics' broadly as the various ways in which the environment is controlled, utilized, managed, interacted with, cared for, exploited, or regulated by social groups. This involves an understanding of how the physical environment, both natural and built, is shaped and managed by a political movement or moment drawing on insights from both social and natural sciences (Doyle & McEachern 2015: 11). I do not intend to enter the debate on where nature ends and the artificial begins, except to say that 'environment' is used here to inquire about our relationships with the biological and ecological landscape, which is entangled in both nature and our own constructions and manipulations of it. I do not mean then to specifically refer to environmentalism: how groups are implicated in sustainability and care for nature, but rather to more

generally refer to the ways that groups seek to order their environment as per their ecological and geographical, for example, conceptions of the world around them.

In this essay, I explore far-right civilizationism as more than a source of imaginative and linguistic inspiration for Hindutva power, but as an ideology that systematically shapes, controls, and manages human-ecological relationships and realities. I examine two cases of Hindutva environmental politics: (1) the spatial politics of Hindutva and its civilizational geography in India; and (2) the BJP's anti-meat and cattle farming biopolitics. These cases serve as examples of how Hindutva civilizationism not only brandishes its ancient Hindu civilizational emblems discursively, but employs this strategy to seek to manage and control human ecology, imposing the physical parameters of a modern 'Hindu civilization'. Through conceptualizing 'civilizationism' as a core feature of Hindutva, this paper demonstrates the ways in which civilizationism works to insert itself into human-environmental systems and relations. Such conceptual focus views far-right ideology as more than radical expressions of capitalist accumulation and ethno-nationalism, but as movements aimed at the co-opting of geography, bodies, and ecology by reinventing and perpetuating 'civilized' environmental conditions and contexts. Consequently, the paper supports interdisciplinary inquiry into the far-right, providing a conceptual basis for research that examines the relationship between far-right narrative and the implications for human relationships to land.

## Background: Ancient Themes in Modern Ethnonationalism

Hindutva, the primary form of Hindu nationalism, gained prominence during India's independence movement in the late 19th century and has since become increasingly influential, particularly with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. The core agents of Hindutva in India are known as the Sangh Parivar, a group of organizations that includes the BJP but also two 'non-political' faces: the Rashtriya

Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organization that aims to train and unite the Hindu community on the ground and spread Hindutva ideology, and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), founded by the RSS as a 'World Hindu Council' (Mawdsley 2006: 381). From the 1990s, Hindutva actors began seeking formal institutional power, and Hindutva started to assert itself in the mainstream (Leidig 2020: 14). The RSS groomed several politicians that later became BJP members, most notably Modi, with the election of whom Hindutva truly was mainstreamed (Leidig 2020: 1).

Fekete (2018) highlights differences between the 'extreme right', often involved in street violence and direct activism, and the 'radical right', a political wing that legitimizes itself in formal institutions. In India, these two far-right factions have come together under the RSS, a civil grassroots movement that has a web of networks that promote Hindutva in civil, religious, and political society, and the BJP, the political wing supported and mentored by the RSS (Leidig 2020:14). Together, they have advanced a neoliberal chauvinist agenda conjoined with intense Hindu fundamentalism, now comprising the nation's core political character. On modern terms, they call for India to restore itself to the "grand Hindu" socio-economic and technological force that it was before 16<sup>th</sup>-century "Muslim invaders" purportedly brought ruin (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 20– 21). This marriage of global economic expansionism and ethno-nationalism draws heavily on a narrative that situates the Indian nation as a product of a distinguished

Hindu civilization. However, as we will see, ‘Hindu civilization’ in Hindutva not only inspires their political agenda but also shapes the management and control of citizens’ relationships to their geographical and biological landscapes.

Undoubtedly, the RSS is the thought leader and incubator of Hindutva ideology in the BJP. It has remained devoted to particular threads of ancient Hindu culture, including ancient texts such as the Manusmriti, known to be highly ethnocentric and supportive of the caste system, the subordination of women, and xenophobia towards non-Hindus (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 12). Golwalkar, who remains an ideological touchstone for the RSS, saw Muslims, Christians, and Communists as a threat to Hinduism, a threat that disrupted the “‘natural’ unity and harmony of the Hindu race and Hindu civilization, which stretches back to time immemorial.” (Moore & Roberts 2022: 61). A combination of modern fascist paranoia and the glorification of ancient Hindu society has led the RSS to pronounce Hindu India a “civilization in crisis.” (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 11–12). Corbridge argued that Hindutva ideology developed the concept of India as a country that made sense and attained its unity “only in terms of the cosmology and civilization of Hinduism” (Corbridge 1999: 237).

Crucially, some scholars have taken care to distinguish Hindutva as strictly distinct from Hinduism. However, this can obscure the theological underpinnings of Hindutva, for example, by arguing that Hindutva is not a brand of religious extremism but rather the politicization of religion (Leidig 2020: 21). This begs the question of how politicization makes an ideology less attached to a religion and whether this exercise is mostly semantic. It is clear that Hindutva draws heavily, albeit selectively, on real Hindu scripture, history, and spiritual practice. In some cases, these threads are extremified, but many facets of ancient Hinduism are extreme on modern terms in their own right—something not unique to Hinduism. Significantly, others are not, and Hinduism functions for millions as distinct from Hindutva and compatible with non-extremist practice. However, I would argue that Hindutva remains a form of religious extremism while agreeing that it has politicized Hinduism; arguably all religious extremists are political by nature. Yet, I would take this a step further and argue that not only is ancient Hinduism politicized in Hindutva but also essentialized in the environmental fabric of India through far-right civilizationism.

Moreover, just as Hinduism is not Hindutva (and nationalistic pride does not equate far-right nationalism), civilizational beliefs do not always eventuate in right-wing extremist ends. India’s civilizational past is a source of spiritual and historical exploration for many Hindus. Additionally, spiritualized ideals embedded in an ‘ecological’ Hindu civilization defined as having a harmonious and nature-based essence are demonstrated in left-wing ecofeminist tradition and new-age yogic culture. This includes the celebration of ancient Hindu ‘local sciences’ “grounded in the civilizational ethos of India[n] civilizational knowledge”, where ‘India’ is surprisingly often code for ‘Hindu’ (Nanda 2005: 222; Mawdsley 2006: 385). The alignments between these postmodernists’ envisioning of an alternative science of ancient Indian civilization being evocative of Hindutva’s civilizational conception of ‘superior’ and ‘holistic’ Hindu science led Nanda (2005: 233) to proclaim: “It is time to draw clear boundaries between science and myth, and between the Left and the Right.”

In Hindutva, the spiritual, scientific, and ethno-religious glory of Hindu civilization is inextricably linked to its geographical, biological, and ecological fabric. It was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the father of twentieth-century Hindu nationalism and the ideological author of the RSS, who first connected Hinduism to civilization and defined civilization as the material manifestation of a people (Bhattacharya 2011: 124), as

*“the expression of the mind of man. Civilization is the account of what man has made of matter[...]. Wherever and to the extent to which man has succeeded in molding matter to the delight of his soul, civilization begins.” (Savarkar 1922: 33).*

For Savarkar, the material state of Hindu civilization relies on the spiritual:

*“[civilization] triumphs when [man] has tapped all the sources of Supreme Delight satisfying the spiritual aspirations of his being towards strength and beauty and love, realizing Life in all its fullness and richness.” (Savarkar 1922: 33).*

Thus, he encouraged Hindus to pursue and support science, technology, and industrialization as the physical manifestations of their spiritual achievements (Corbridge 1999: 227).

Since Savarkar, Hindutva has evolved; however, this definition of Hindu civilization has passed down through various leaders of the Sangh Parivar to Modi. Modi generally codes ‘Hindu civilization’ as ‘Indian civilization’ in his long speeches on Indian civilizational history, where he refers to the immortal nature of India as the most ‘refined human civilization’ (Dominique 2022). Modi’s globalization and industrialization of India’s economy have been sold to Hindu India as compatible with traditional Hindu lifeways and as part of a continuum of Hindu civilizational excellence. Bhattacharya (2011: 119) has dubbed this the ‘continuity theory’; great separations in time between Indus and Vedic period cultures and extensive ethnic and religious diversity are ignored to project one singular, naturalized physical and spiritual lineage of Hindu civilization. In terms of Western far-right civilizationism, Stewart identified how the ideology does not seek a break away from a capitalist world order but rather promotes an alternative vision (Stewart 2020: 1213). This is certainly true of the BJP, which seeks to renegotiate the terms of modern capital accumulation along the lines of ‘traditional’ Hindu civilization. In this way, India is both ancient and new, modern and traditional. Though he was not the first, this is evident in Modi’s election campaign, which sought to draw ancient Hindu themes into India’s modern context by spiritualizing science and subsequent technological progress (Subramanian 2019: 6). As alluded to, Modi continues to add credence to what has been dubbed ‘Vedic science’, for example, claiming that genetic scientists existed during the Vedic Era and that the chariot of the Hindu god Rama was the world’s first airplane, while one of his ministers, Biplab Deb, claimed that Hindus created an ancient form of the internet (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 23). However, referencing ancient Hindu civilization goes beyond Modi’s enrapturing the public under an ancient-modern national persona of holistic corporatism. It also works to assert a set of material conditions that dictate citizens’ geographical, biological, and ecological relations and dispositions.

## Geographies of Hindutva Civilizationism

Given that the supreme cultural qualities of ‘civilization’ are commonly rooted in its material advancements, which include city building, religious monuments, and ‘advanced’ and ‘pure’ agricultural systems, this is an unsurprising yet little-mentioned function of civilizationism. In other words, ‘civilized’ progress is founded upon the ways that the

physical environment is understood, treated, and managed by the governing society, and consequently citizens' ecological relations. The conceptualization of civilizationism in far-right ideology illuminates this, widening the focus on discursive civilizational power, politics, and othering.

The Sangh Parivar is known for invoking Hindu civilization in the national imagination in order to claim sacred and cultural monuments, sites, and buildings as solely Hindu spaces, leading to ongoing geographical violence between Hindus and Muslims (Leidig 2020: 13; Oza 2007). However, Hindutva employs civilizationism not only to develop sacred and historical spatial imaginary but also to reinforce and enact a set of spatial relationships between people and their land and environment that conform to historical borders drawn to represent 'civilized' territory and spiritual-architectural features.

Sangh Parivar leaders regularly employ the concept of 'Akhand Bharat' (an undivided nation), which states that Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar are an inherent part of the Indian nation. These territorial proclamations are reliant not on the idea of 'India the nation-state', but on the physical features of 'India the site of Hindu civilization.' The Indian nation is positioned as a modern continuation of this ancient project that is defined by an expansive South Asian landmass. The vastness of the landscape that held ancient Hindu civilization is cited as a testament to its cultural strength and is invoked through nostalgia for the Vedic era (the Hindu 'Golden Age') and the depiction of Muslims as "tyrant invaders" (Leidig 2016), who breakdown the boundaries of civilized peoples. Consequently, not only does Hindutva civilizationism help to elucidate far-right ideals that look beyond nation-state borders (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 6), but it also temporally surpasses nationalism, without excluding it, in Hindutva ontology, by examining the relationship to a time that vastly precedes the nation-state of India.

As part of their civilizationist mission, the Sangh Parivar has redefined the meaning and relevance of domestic sites based on their significance to 'Hindu civilization'. Leading to violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims, the Sangh Parivar's claim to sacred sites rests on the idea that such buildings and monuments have a uniquely Hindu architectural and technological style, which reflects their superior spiritual character. This infamously includes claims on Muslim cultural and religious sites, such as the pilgrimage center of Ayodhya, which was a focus of violent BJP-VHP mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently, the Taj Mahal and various mosques alleged to have been built on top of Hindu temples (Corbridge 1999: 233–234; Malhotra 2022).

Given that Hindutva references the borders of ancient Indian civilizations and the physical characteristics of their structures as evidence of a 'superior' ethno-environmental Hindu society, the ethnic, religious, and national aspects of civilization provoked in the Indian imaginary and featured in populist rhetoric are inseparable from the 'civilizing' of environmental conditions. Sites of worship and public infrastructure are cited as proof of having surpassed the material achievements of 'uncivilized' cultures, which also validates the spiritual superiority of Hindus. Hindutva civilizational discourse is not only enforcing ideals that 'other' non-Hindu Indians but is simultaneously mitigating their access to sacred and public spaces. Evidently, civilizationism functions as an ideology that depends on the replicating and actualizing of a geographical landscape indicative of the relevant 'civilized' character. Its attempt to shape discourse, rhetoric, and narrative is inseparable from the environmental conditions it pursues. Hindutva ideology seeks not only to convince followers of their civilizing vision but also to manage the relationship between Indians and their environment, habitats, and sacred



places. The exercise of control over human-geographical relations constitutes control over fundamental principles of social and ecological life, encompassing national and populist far-right visions under a civilizationist ideology with material consequences.

Approaching civilizationism as more central to far-right ontology and with a human-ecological lens helps to pinpoint the movements material-environmental ends. Hindutva civilizationism does not only exemplify a civilizational Hindu-national vision and identity but also the constructing of a spatial relationship between people and their lands and cultural sites. This shows how far-right ideology goes beyond territorial nationalism and the consolidation of Hindu nationalist identity for political ends. While Hindutva rhetoric fights to embolden Hindu Indians to unite as one ethnic ‘civilization’, this vision relies on the tangible, in this case spatial, realization of this in India. Hindutva civilizationism sets terms for religious worship, habitat, and boundaries, therefore shaping interactions with the environment.

## Food Fascism: Anti-beef and Cow Vigilante Civilizationism

Evidently, Hindutva employs civilizationism not only to promote a ‘civilized’ national imaginary but also to maintain and manage people’s relationships with their natural and built environments. This includes their own biology. The human-environmental dynamics of Hindutva civilizationism are evident in the BJP’s policing of livestock agriculture and access to meat through anti-beef regulations and cow vigilantism. In India, civilizational rhetoric has been employed in the sanctification of cows, whereby their slaughtering and consumption are viewed as a direct attack on civilized Hindu values. The economic implications for Muslim and lower-caste livestock farmers are significant, as are the violent attacks that they and consumers have experienced. Yet, this has also resulted in another manner of violence; the exercise of control over citizens’ biological and ecological sovereignty through restricting and repressing diet and subsistence choices. This section exemplifies Hindutva civilizationism as a project that seeks to achieve the physical manifestation of ‘civilized’ ecology and biology in India through controlling access to meat and livestock farming activities. I also contradict some alternate claims by suggesting that Hindutva civilizationist ‘food fascism’ is compatible with India’s BJP-sanctioned agrochemical industry and its success in the global market.

Since the colonial era, the cow in India has been a symbol of division between Muslims (who eat beef) and Hindus (who do not). Cow protection societies formed in the 1880s, leading to deadly clashes. By the end of the 19th century, cow protection movements had helped define modern Hindu nationalism in India (Corbridge 1999: 232). Cow vigilantism has continued into the 21st century, with attacks on Muslims and lower-caste Hindus involved in the cattle industry. One Muslim man was accused of eating a cow 30 years earlier and beaten to death. These kinds of cases have earned cow vigilantism the description of “Islamophobic gastronomy” (Patel 2018); however, lower-caste Dalits are also targeted. Seven Dalits in Modi’s hometown of Gujarat were beaten and urinated on for their occupation as tanners (Manor 2019: 123). In 2022, Hindutva anti-meat politics and cow vigilantism peaked, with demands for meat bans sweeping the country, including a boycott of halal meat in Karnataka. BJP mayors in Delhi demanded that meat shops be shut for nine days during the Hindu Navratri

festival and threatened to bulldoze non-compliant shops. In July 2022, armed mobs in Uttar Pradesh led violent attacks based on suspicions about the sale of beef (Jaiswal 2022). Notably the majority of higher-caste Hindu Indians are not cow vigilantes or activists and personify a more lax and nondiscriminatory vegetarianism (Staples 2020: 8).

Sharma (2023a) aptly interpreted the visualization of environmental themes in Hindutva politics and highlighted that, under Modi's leadership, it has evolved in its use of spiritual and environmental optics to project itself as an ecological Hindu nation, particularly through protecting cows. However, Hindutva cow protectionist politics does not only entail representational objectives. Based on the spiritual designations of cows and diet as it were in 'Hindu civilization', the BJP not only seeks to purify Hindu vegetarianism in the national imaginary but also to shape and control the biological sovereignty of Indians and the country's agro-ecological landscape by abhorring beef. Through civilizationism, the BJP asserts physical control over their citizens' bodily choices by defining and restricting their relationships to food and agricultural practices. This culminates in biological violence against non-Hindu Indians and lower caste Hindus by controlling food sovereignty, access to nutrition, and subsistence livelihoods.

The intensely violent attacks on beef farmers and consumers led human rights groups, activists, lawyers, and researchers to sign an open letter accusing the BJP of "bringing the Muslim community to economic destitution," arguing that this constitutes "food fascism" with real nutritional consequences for poor Indians (WP 2022). Food does not innocently land in people's diets; it is intertwined with political, economic, ethical, and environmental systems, patterns, and consequences. 'Correct' food and agriculture for the BJP entails a 'pure', 'moral', and 'clean' way of living that is compatible with the spiritual-biological virtues that have been assigned to Hindu civilization. Divergence from this, by farming or eating beef, exemplifies an 'unclean' and 'uncivilized' relationship with ecology and one's own body. Notably, this attitude has leaked into Western countries via new age yogic culture, casting vegetarianism as ethically and somatically purer. The consequence is both an economic attack on small-scale and subsistence livestock farmers and on the biological sovereignty of Indians, based on ideals about what makes a 'civilized' relationship with agroecology and diet. This is reminiscent of Malthus' 'civilized' and 'savage' lives (Malthus 1826). The former is a clean and sustainable way of being worthy of freedom, while the latter is wildly uncontrollable in its consumption and must be regulated (Moore & Roberts 2022: 18). For Malthus, 'savage' existence was indigenous, non-white, and colonized (Malthus 1798); however, the Sangh Parivar recruits this distinction in their own civilizationist food fascism by punishing and regulating 'savage' members of society who do not conform to 'civilized' eco-biological norms.

Such ideals have led to the Sangh Parivar increasingly demanding a bodily investment in meat abstinence. This has even extended to other animal foods. In opposition to a school meal program that planned to introduce eggs to combat malnutrition, BJP leader Gopal said that children may become man-eaters if given non-vegetarian food (Sharma 2019). This is problematic not only for its impacts on livestock smallholders and the fueling of religious hate, but also because animal foods, particularly beef, are among the most bioavailable, nutrient-dense human foods, and India is a country wracked by malnutrition (Beal & Ortenzi 2022). Consequently, blocking access to animal foods for a large portion of a population in a state of nutrient deficiency dictates and deprives the bodies of poor Indians, exerting a violent and life-altering form of biopower. Since the malnourished in India do not have access to a diverse and supplemented vegetarian

diet, they are left to rely almost exclusively on grains. This is particularly problematic for women and children, with over half of women and children in India suffering from anemia, a condition that increases morbidity (Varghese & Stein 2019). Notably, journalists, farmers, and nutritionists have alerted to the consequences of sweeping criticisms of animal farming for the poor, patricianly in the Global South (Mugerwa & Iannotti 2021).

Bhattacharya (2011: 119) highlights how the “notion that there is an immanent personality of [Hindu] civilization, a ‘unique’ personality that was formed in the moment of [its] foundation,” is enshrined in the Hindu nationalist imaginary. For the Sangh Parivar, vegetarianism is the spiritual lynchpin of this civilized personality. However, this character is drawn from, and has consequences for, direct relationships with India’s food environment. Sanctifying the cow reflects a way of being that is closer to the divine, which in Hinduism represents a closeness to nature. This rewrites Indian history by ignoring the ritual killing, eating, and sacrifice of cows and wild game evidenced throughout Hindu history, including during the Indus and Vedic eras (Jha 2002; Bhattacharya 2015). Meat has been a part of the local diet since humans first occupied the Indian subcontinent about 70,000 BC (Bhattacharya 2015). Southern Indian Brahmins ate meat up until the 16th century, and in the North, they only gave it up in the late 19th century (Bhattacharya 2015). The politics of access to meat has been a significant source of colonial power. Colonialism had a significant impact on land use, agriculture, and trade and provoked famines, which resulted in the shaping of the modern Indian diet into one dominated by rice, wheat, and dals (Bhattacharya 2015). The British indirectly pushed vegetarianism onto the masses by raising taxes on meat and fish and taking over control of forests. The latter forced tribal hunting communities to seek work, and the British paid them in grains, not previously a staple in their diet (Bhattacharya 2015).

With prohibitions and changing cultural values on meat, grains became increasingly dominant in Indian agroecology. Today, the country’s agricultural landscape is heavily dominated by multinational agrochemicals and industrial crops. This has led to vast environmental destruction of Indian lands and soils and the social and economic destitution of Indian farmers, causing droves of farmer suicides (Siddiqui 2021: 10). As a leader of the extensive critique of India’s multinational agrochemical industry, Vandana Shiva (2021) has described this process as the destruction of the “infrastructure of life.” Significant to this paper is how the aggressive industrial crop sector that swallowed up Indian land and soil is conveniently compatible with attacks on livestock farming, which is largely decentralized and dominated by smallholders and subsistence farmers that are non-reliant upon agrochemical processes and products (FAO 2022). Compared to the factory farming system endemic in countries like the US and Brazil, Indian livestock farms are largely non-intensive, and feeding only in stalls is rare (Dorin & Landy 2009: 134).

Furthermore, livestock have been an essential part of the mixed farming system in India and contribute to saving natural resources through their “synergistic relationship with cropping activities,” including providing organic fertilizer and replacing fossil-fueled machinery with their labor (Dikshit & BIRTHAL 2013: 21). These are services that multinational companies vie to replace. Evidently, the local, regenerative, and subsistence nature of livestock farming in India stands in contrast with Modi’s allegiance to multinational industrialists. Moreover, the food it produces challenges the BJP’s vision of ‘pure’ Hindu-vegetarian civilization. However, Jakobson and Nielsen (2022: 121) have argued that there is a tension between BJP’s anti-beef politics and the integration

and proliferation of Indian meat exports in global value chains, which is said to further “the opening of the Indian agrarian economy, spurring capitalist accumulation by integration with growing transnational markets.” Yet, meat exports have been declining in India over the last decade, particularly in the last few years (Statista 2021; ATLAS 2022). In any case, exports do not interrupt the BJP’s food fascist policy or its civilizing of Indian citizens since the export of meat removes it from the local market. Moreover, nothing prohibits Modi from inflicting food fascism on his own citizens while increasing foreign meat exports. Alternatively, in its current smallholder subsistence state, the cattle industry appears to offer opportunities to interrupt the agrochemical crop sector by providing organic services and replacing grains and vegetables in Indian households. As mentioned, livestock can and do replace industrial and chemical services in India, posing a clear threat to agrochemical businesses, their government beneficiaries, and elite farmers.

Cited as evidence of the tension he manages between Hindu-vegetarian ideals and promoting a free-market economy, Modi was accused of taking funding from the meat industry during his 2014 election run (Jakobsen & Nielsen 2022). However, the companies implicated were: Frigorifico Allana Ltd. and Frigerio Conserva Allana Ltd., both industrial packaged food companies of plant products; and Indagro Foods Ltd., a chemical company. They were said to be subsidiaries of Allanasons Ltd., the largest buffalo meat producer in India, when in fact all these companies fall under the Allana Group, a manufacturer and exporter of food and chemical products (Dhawan 2015). While this proves an association with buffalo meat production, the funding comes directly from companies that are exclusively processing industrial crop products and chemicals. Moreover, given the “cereal-centric” state of Indian agriculture (FAO 2022), the BJP need not rely on the livestock sector. While India is an up-and-coming player in meat exports, the export of crops like rice and sugarcane envelopes animal products, and the production of cereals, fruits, vegetables, and crops like sugarcane greatly surpasses that of meat and are, as discussed, more industrialized operations (ATLAS 2022; FAO 2022). Consequently, the BJP’s mission to civilize the Indian agricultural landscape and citizens’ diets through anti-beef policy and cow vigilantism appears compatible with their multinational economic agenda, which infamously favors crop-centric agrochemical corporations (Jakobsen 2018; Siddiqui 2021).

In summary, the Hindutva government’s conjoint attempt to perpetuate multinational agriculture and maintain a vegetarian population should be understood not just as the envisioning of a corporate ‘civilized’ Hindu national identity and vision exemplifying BJP populism but also as the dictating of India’s agricultural landscape and diet that imposes a set of fundamental ecological and biological structures and relations on people in India.

## Conclusion

Hindutva civilizationism, an ideology that is fundamental to far-right thought, politics, and action, supports more than the discursive and visionary goals of the movement. This essay employed and developed the concept to highlight its consequences for human-environmental relations, with tangible consequences for how those living in India interact with national borders and places, local agro-ecology, and their own biology.

The BJP's territorial and spatial rhetoric, which seeks to expand India's borders and claim monumental and religious sites, is an attempt to (re)produce a specific geographical reality; 'civilized' Hindu ideals are not only projected within the national imaginary but rely on the structural features and a landscape of 'Hindu Civilization' taking shape. Similarly, BJP cow vigilantism and food fascism exert control over India's agricultural landscape and the food sovereignty of Indians by shaping citizens' ecological and biological relations. Both entail the physical, nutritional, and economic subjugation of Muslims and lower-caste Hindus.

These cases exemplify that civilizationism is both an ideological and environmental project and support an understanding of far-right politics as not only seeking discursive power through racial, ethno-national, and religious appeals to 'civilization', but also entrenching control over human ecology in order to produce a 'civilized' landscape and populace in India. Additionally, the Hindutva movement in India serves as a reminder that Euro-centric and white supremacist beliefs do not solely define far-right ideology and underlines the adaptability of the far-right to different cultural, historical, and environmental moments and contexts. I propose a conceptualization of far-right civilizationism that encapsulates its historical, dynamic, and evolving environmental features and foci. Recognizing how far-right strategies not only shape politicized identities but also dominate our relationships to ecology, geography, and our own biology provides a clearer picture of the kind of human-ecological reality that is being pursued and makes one better equipped to critically approach it.

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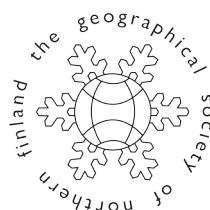
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## Academic Essays



# Governing “decadent cities”: The far-right as agents of climate counterinsurgency

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## Abstract

Ecological crisis has given rise to a range of discussions over “climate fascism,” “green nationalism,” “fossil fascism,” and “eco-fascism.” Several authors have advanced the thesis that climate adaptation will be shaped by an increase in authoritarian politics or an uptick in organized violence (e.g. at the borders of nation-states) as states deploy counterinsurgency tactics against climate refugees and environmental activists. My article inverts this proposition by arguing that far right politics emerges as a contingent possibility in the mode of counterinsurgency governance. I propose the framework of “relations of counterinsurgency” as a means of understanding how counterinsurgency manages crises of urban governability by remaking the spaces of uneven urbanization. I then argue that to theorize contemporary far right climate politics, we should ask what the term eco-fascism does rather than what it is. My argument is that, as climate change makes increasing claims upon political institutions, relations of counterinsurgency allow far right actors to constitute their agency and subjectivity.

**Keywords:** *counterinsurgency, climate change, uneven urbanization, far right, eco-fascism*

## Introduction

In his short book, *Fascism*, Mark Neocleous (1997: 17) notes that war is “the fascist universal.” According to fascist mythology, the alienation created by modernity is not to be overcome through class struggle, but by realizing the will of the nation. Here, nationalism is not simply cultural or even racial belonging: the nation is a spiritual entity through which each and all can be reconciled to the natural order of life. According to fascists, this natural order of things expresses the racial genius of the nation. War and

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violence emerge as absolutes; they are natural because the natural order is a necessarily violent one, designed to expel and exterminate the weak, diseased, and sickly. In waging war, not only does the nation cleanse itself and return to the natural order of things, it also shapes or renews the spiritual character of nationals. War is “the fascist universal” for it confers existential significance, alongside the nation, in a social order imagined on a naturalized basis (Neocleous 1997: 17).

While Neocleous argues forcefully that war is a central concept of fascism (together with nature and nation), his analysis takes for granted the spatial practices (and their variegated expressions beyond the national) that a territorial notion such as war would suggest. As many scholars have argued, warfare is now largely an urban affair; cities are not just military targets but they are also the battlefield (Graham 2011; Coward 2008). Moreover, counterinsurgency strategy largely dominates the tactics and strategies of contemporary battlefields across the globe. *Pave* Neocleous, my aim is to draw out the spatial logic that organizes and links counterinsurgency and the far right within one movement as a global political force. While scholars have established a link between counterinsurgency and the far right in terms of how returning soldiers “bring the war home” (Belew 2018; Ahmad 1971), this paper draws out a theoretical connection, that I will argue frames climate politics.

Although counterinsurgency theory can be traced to pre-20<sup>th</sup> practices of war, it is only during the post-WWII wars of decolonization that it becomes an art of war *sui generis*. It becomes a theory and practice of reconstituting empire and a new global order against the struggles for self-determination across the world (cf. Grandin 2010). In most accounts, counterinsurgency is presented as a repressive power whose aim is to produce a social order by pacifying restive populations (Kienscherf 2011; Williams 2011; McQuade 2012; Wall, Saberi & Jackson 2017). In fact, counterinsurgency often ‘invents’ the insurgency through its own violent intervention. And when it claims that its goal is to win the hearts and minds of a population through social reforms and humane forms of warfare, here again, it often ‘constructs’ that so-called population as a bounded unit with common behavioral patterns and attitudes (see Schrader 2016). As Stuart Schrader (2022) argues, counterinsurgency must be taken as a regime of global governance “inseparable from” capitalist processes of world-making: “Understanding this process of remaking worldwide social space requires analyzing how states act to take what is assumed to be general or generalizable (e.g. the threat of communist subversion) and try to achieve geographic extensiveness preemptively or in response.”

In this article, following Schrader’s spatial analysis, I argue that contemporary far right ecological expressions, tendencies, and movements are a product of counterinsurgency as governance. Critical geographers and urbanists have pointed out that spatial practices play a constitutive role in how the far right has managed to get a foothold globally. Accordingly, acts of describing space (e.g. as disordered or unruly) are also normative because they help to delimit borders between self and others, define the boundaries and composition of communities, and help imagine social orders and belonging (Koch 2022; Ince 2011; Santamarina 2021). Such spatial practices are not only the prerogative of states in their exercise of sovereignty but also form part of the everyday and the political action of social movements and non-state actors (Lizotte 2020; Ince 2011). Focusing on spatial practices, as Natalie Koch (2022: 7) argues, also shifts the attention from regimes or pre-constituted spaces (such as the nation-state) to “practices of government as site of analysis.” Thus, I situate counterinsurgency as a governance practice that produces social relations that delimit the range of possible climate action and from which far

right politics draw its vernacular and subjectivity (i.e., its contemporary form more than its ideology).

Ecological crisis has given rise to a range of discussions over “climate fascism,” (Parenti 2011) “green nationalism,” (Conversi & Hau 2021) “fossil fascism,” (Daggett 2018; Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021) and “eco-fascism” (Biehl & Staudenmaier 2011). Several authors have advanced the thesis that climate adaptation will be shaped by an increase in authoritarian politics or an uptick in organized violence (e.g., at the borders of nation-states) as states deploy counterinsurgency tactics against climate refugees and environmental activists (Gelderloos 2022). My article inverts this proposition by arguing that far right politics emerges as a contingent possibility in the mode of counterinsurgency governance. Next, I propose the framework of “relations of counterinsurgency” as a means of understanding how counterinsurgency manages crises of urban governability by remaking the spaces of uneven urbanization. I then argue that to theorize contemporary far right climate politics, we should ask what the term eco-fascism does rather than what it is. My argument is that, as climate change makes increasing claims upon political institutions, relations of counterinsurgency allow far right actors to constitute their agency and subjectivity. That the far right is developing into a historical force in the era of climate politics, is because counterinsurgency is a world-making mode of governance.

## Towards Climate Fascism?

Is “climate fascism” on the horizon? Christian Parenti (2011) predicts just that in *Tropic of Chaos*. Climate change, he argues, will deepen existing inequalities created by the Cold War and neoliberal politics, leading to social disorder on a planetary scale. States of the Global North will respond to the chaos with global counterinsurgency. This program of “militarized adaptation” or what he also calls “the politics of the armed lifeboat,” will bring forth “climate fascism” (Parenti 2011: 11). Accordingly, this fascism will be characterized by rising political repression and authoritarianism in the Global North and counterinsurgency in the “failed states” (characterized by anomie) of the Global South. Tropics, littoral zones, shorelines, borders, fences, and walls will be sites of multiple political crises triggered by the convergence of ecological and societal collapse.

If such a dystopian account appears familiar, it is because our imagination has been conditioned by blockbuster Hollywood movies that exploit the notion of collapse. However, what is concerning in Parenti’s account is his failure to question his central categories such as the notions of “failed states” and societal “anomie.” The former is a post-Cold War concept concocted by the United States (U.S.) security apparatus and was explicitly designed to legitimate imperial interventions (Call 2008). As for the latter, ethnographic accounts of the Global South have consistently refused this most conservative aspect of Durkheimian sociology. In fact, they show that societies persist despite exposure to repeated crises because of the collaborative and ethical practices of inhabitants (see Biehl 2013; Simone & Pieterse 2017). That is, their endurance is *social* and not anomic. Such is the literary account of climate catastrophe also offered by Octavia E. Butler (2019) in *Parable of the Sower* who cautions, with lessons drawn from the plantation history of the U.S., that violence remains within, and not outside, of *social* relations and determinations, no matter how arbitrary it becomes.

In fact, as I will argue, Parenti gets the relationship between counterinsurgency and climate change upside down. Ecological crisis will not birth counterinsurgency as “climate fascism,” but instead it is the existence of counterinsurgency as a “mode of governance” (Harcourt 2018) that conditions the possibility of responding to climate change. Within this range of responses, far right politics – whether it is to be called “climate fascism,” “fossil fascism,” “green nationalism,” or “eco-fascism” – is a contingent possibility. Here, I understand governance in Foucauldian terms: it involves discursive and institutional arrangements that order social relations, the implementation of forms of political reasoning that seek to condition the behavior and practices of individuals and groups, and the presupposition of a (subject) population as an object of knowledge and target of coordinated actions. Counterinsurgency, then, is more than a tactic of warfare; it is a form of governmental action that seeks to fabricate a social order (cf. Neocleous 2000).

To argue that counterinsurgency is a mode of governance, is to argue that it constrains the field of possible political actions and conditions the range of issues that can be properly politicized. Counterinsurgency governance delimits the political by manufacturing an oppositional catchall category labeled ‘insurgency.’ Politics thus becomes the legitimate range of issues that support order, security, peace, prosperity, and democracy as defined by certain (liberal) assumptions. If some group is to question why prosperity should mean GDP growth amidst inequality, it might find itself unceremoniously labeled as supporting a communist insurgency. Similarly, when anti-police brutality activists question the equation of security with the protection of private property, they are characterized as a bunch of anarchists bent on destroying the social order. In the same vein, then, counterinsurgency has delimited the range of what can be considered climate politics proper (cf. Mirzoeff 2011). To the extent that climate politics does not force the re-ordering of social relations, it can be admitted as a legitimate concern of public debate. Therefore, the opposition between counterinsurgency and a just climate change policy appears quasi-absolute given that a climate emergency requires immediate and wide ranging changes to social, political, economic, and cultural practices.

The point I’m making by bringing up an analytic of governance is that counterinsurgency is more than just repressive – it’s a power that produces social relations and subjectivities. To be sure, states have used counterinsurgency operations to protect the interests of extractivist and polluting industries above communities and peoples (Dunlap & Brock 2022). Critics such as Parenti, and more recently Malm and Zetkin Collective (2021: 239), maintain that fossil fascism is a (potential) social formation where repressive violence meets authoritarian politics to protect “dominant class interests.” In contrast, I contend that from a governance perspective, we can observe how counterinsurgency produces – and not merely represses – social relations, agencies, and subjectivities.

## Relations of Counterinsurgency

In counterinsurgency theory and practice, uneven urbanization has attained the status of a general condition of global threat – “the generalizable,” in Schrader’s terms – that is to be treated as object of knowledge and site of intervention. Uneven urbanization is not understood as the inevitable but necessary bump on the road towards successful

development. A new pessimist mood marks the urban turn in counterinsurgency strategizing: render the cities of the world safe so that they don't pose a threat to the homeland (Bunker 2014). This pessimist mood has run parallel with a security discourse that has diagnosed underdevelopment as a source of threat (Duffield 2014). Within this discursive constellation, then, uneven urbanization appears as a general condition, against which counterinsurgency can and must be deployed as a mode of governance to secure social order. To not govern through counterinsurgency invites the danger that uneven urbanization will create gang, terrorist, and pirate networks with access to global networks and infrastructures that will destabilize global stability. When counterinsurgency strategists speak of stability, they of course mean the maintaining of patterns of capitalist urbanization that create social inequality. The processes that birth uneven urbanization are assumed to be the natural order of the social.

As a governance project, therefore, counterinsurgency seeks to constitute itself in relation to urban populations and practices that it designates as threats. By *relations of counterinsurgency*, I refer to a governance project tasked with identifying those whose urban praxis threaten the continued reproduction of uneven urbanization and who must be compelled into accepting the terms of their dispossession, displacement, and exclusion. Counterinsurgency is not authoritarian – it is not seeking obedience, which would imply a form of inclusion into an existing order – but it is instead predicated on the disappearance of modes of life and ways of being that threaten the smooth (re) production of an urban order based on accumulation and private property.

Counterinsurgency's commitment to the cleansing of certain modes of life and ways of being reflects the deep contradiction between urbanization and regimes of accumulation. Scholars have theorized the multiple ways in which the production of space and processes of accumulation are co-constituted (Lefebvre [1970]2003; see also Harvey 2006; Massey 1994; Soja 1989). Despite the fact that those theorists are at odds with each other in conceptualizing the exact nature of this relationship, what is common to all, is the fact that spatial inequalities play a key role in organizing the productive capacities of the world economy at scale. In turn, the cycles of investment, disinvestment, and re-structuring produce the uneven and unequal geographies of globalization. Since WWII, urbanization and suburbanization have come to play major roles in mediating the co-constitution of accumulation and unevenness. As such, there is a deep contradiction between urbanization and accumulation, namely that capitalist processes produce *social insecurities* which must be balanced with a need for *political security* – now increasingly expressed at the urban scale. Thus, the "social cleansing" of those modes of life deemed a threat to the frictionless reproduction of an urban order that mediates the possibilities of accumulation and uneven globalization (Smith 2001). Simply put, counterinsurgency as mode of governance, manages the 'need' for social insecurities and urban security.

For instance, the response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, is one of the most documented examples of this relation of counterinsurgency. As the hurricane flooded mostly poor Black districts in racially segregated New Orleans, and the afflicted were left to face the elements on their own, the first response was a security one. The National Guard (with members returning from the Iraq war) and hired mercenaries (Blackwater) moved in to protect the city from "looters" while the Louisiana Department of Corrections built a make-shift prison on a bus terminal parking lot to cage those arrested. The term "looters" did a lot of ideological lifting, by drawing on the deep history of racism, to suggest that Black New Orleans was not entitled to survival strategies. It reveals that the operating "racial regime of security" (Camp 2009)



was designed precisely to strike the balance between maintaining an urbanized order that produces *social* insecurity and protecting a private property regime from threats (looters).

The security response to Katrina in New Orleans is indicative of the overt 'urban turn' in counterinsurgency theory and practice (Kilcullen 2013; Bunker 2014; Evans 2016). Military strategists note that the greatest threat to American and global security are not "failed states" but "feral" and "criminal" cities (Norton 2003; Bunker & Sullivan 2011). Others insist that the megacities of the South – which appear as inherently, if not 'naturally,' violent – are bound to pull the U.S. military into armed intervention (Harris *et al.* 2014). Military analysts apply this urban framework not only to cities of the Global South; they also understand unrests in the various settlement patterns of the Global North (the banlieues, ghettos, and estates) as symptomatic of a general crisis of urban governance (see Saber 2019).

If in their writings, military analysts obsess over a number of cities such as Mogadishu, Rio de Janeiro, Detroit, or Nuevo Laredo, their real concern is not 'the city' as a unit but the processes of uneven urbanization. For example, the counterinsurgency guru David Kilcullen (2013: 42–43) argues that the "urban metabolism" of the city should be the site of analysis *and* target of military operations. In his analysis, the flow of information, people, and resources are inputs into the city's system that if not metabolized and disposed of through 'good governance' will produce economic inequality, crime, and conflict. The extent to which the city's "carrying capacity" processes those metabolic by-products will determine its "stability, sustainability, and resilience." Cut through the fancy terms such as metabolism and carrying capacity derived from urban studies, and what is at stake are the processes of uneven urbanization. Researchers and activists have noted that uneven urbanization has produced the unequal distribution of goods and services, spatial segregation, and urban precarity (cf. Davis 2006). However, to counterinsurgency theorists those very same outcomes of uneven urbanization are sources of threats to the urban order, and its capacity to mediate the production of space and the processes of accumulation.

Therefore, when counterinsurgency is deployed as a governance project to secure the urban order, its goal is to eliminate the capacities for self-defense by those who suffer the negative consequences of uneven urbanization. Counterinsurgency strategists have recognized such a need in the urban turn: it is not enough to wage war in cities, rather military operations will need to "shape" the battlespace (NATO 2003). This emphasis on shaping the battlefield has taken a literal form in Iraq. During "Operation Gold Wall" in Sadr City, Baghdad, allied forces erected a series of concrete barriers and turned the city into a patchwork of "gated communities," checkpoints, and protective barriers. In effect, the military built the terrain around the city and its population i.e. it became an urbanizing force. By reshaping urban space and boxing the population into manageable hamlets of concrete, the military was also reshaping social relations by intensifying ethnic tensions, reinforcing patriarchal norms, and entrenching class inequalities (Gregory 2008). As Frantz Fanon (2013) once observed, the colonial manipulation of space is designed to prevent the dominated from rebelling against their masters. In fact, violence becomes concentrated in the segregated spaces of the subjugated where it turns into "fraternal" conflicts. By displacing violence through spatial governance, counterinsurgency can thus sap the will for self-defense.

As uneven urbanization has created massive disenfranchisement across the planet, the poor have developed a set of practices to defend themselves against expendability. These are practices that can be referred to as "urbanity," a term that encompasses

the experiential and relational aspect of urban living. As Abdoumalik Simone (2016: 9) has argued, even though cities are designed and governed at the expense of the majority, the latter must find ways to make the urban fabric work for them. Such practices necessarily resist institutionalization as urban residents must keep relations loosely organized so that they do not miss out on opportunities and schemes that urban life brings. Heterogeneity is thus at the heart of urbanity, for it is the precondition which allows urban users to encounter a variety of opportunities and experiment within city spaces that do not always bend to the norms of policing. Urbanity thus allows residents to maintain a “faith in the urban” to address the vicissitudes of daily living and becomes at the same time a “sensitivity” that is “part of the struggle against being made expendable” (Simone 2016: 9).

If to residents, urbanity reinforces their capacity to defend themselves, to counterinsurgency it represents a threat to its ordering ability. Urbanity has a fugitive quality that resists control and capture, and thus rests beyond the apparatus of policing (see Simone 2019). Because of that, the security apparatuses of various states have become concerned with “ungoverned territories,” “no-go areas,” and “lawless zones” that provide safe havens to terrorists and criminals. For example, the Pentagon’s “Ungoverned Areas Project” finds that increasing urbanization and “tight-knit immigrant communities” allow “illicit actors” to “blend in and hide out within established social networks” in cities around the world (Lamb 2008: 25). The source of threat is not defined by a lack of visibility, but rather by the denial of cartographic power i.e., the ability to map out a totality of social networks due to the urban heterogeneity.

Urbanity and heterogeneity are threats because they disturb the smooth functioning of relations of counterinsurgency. By limiting how inhabitants use the city, counterinsurgency reveals itself as a mode of governance whose goal is to distribute vulnerability. Counterinsurgency, in effect, goes beyond its characterization as pacification (which assumes an already restive population). Its goal is to create what the philosopher Elsa Dorlin (2017) calls “disarmed bodies.” As opposed to Michel Foucault’s (1995) notion of a disciplinary apparatus that creates “docile” and obedient subjects who, without the threat of overwhelming violence, will fit into the designs of social and political order, to disarm is to create subjects whose capacity for self-defense is rendered illegitimate and illegible. As Dorlin argues, modernity is intimately linked to a social and juridical distinction between those who can claim a legitimate right to self-defense and those are rendered defenseless. To be made defenseless, in this case, does not mean to be deprived of agency. Rather, it hinges on a mode of power that constitutes a subject whose very agency is interpreted as violent and aggressive, thus prompting one’s exclusion from the realm of humanity. A defenseless subject – one deprived of the *right* of self-defense by processes that delegitimizes (and criminalizes) its *capacity* for self-defense – is one that can be exposed to all kinds of deprivations, especially their cleansing and disappearance.

Relations of counterinsurgency, therefore, speak to the creation of defenseless populations through a mode of governance that limit the use of the urban fabric. Far right politics, as a historical force, is a contingent possibility that arises from this mode of governance because it allows right wing actors to constitute an agency and subjectivity in relation to the so called threat of (uneven) urbanization.

## The agency of eco-fascism

Recent far right actors have justified their violence through a range of theories, from “white replacement,” “white genocide,” and “eco-fascism.” The shooters in Christchurch (New Zealand), El Paso and Buffalo (U.S.) have all claimed the label “eco-fascist” to justify mass atrocities. Typically, critics who attempt to counter “eco-fascism” seek to identify its ideological content, which they then proceed to connect to far right parties’ theory of society, nationalist programs, and racial politics (Forchtner 2020; Forchtner & Kølvrå 2015; Hamilton 2002; Lubarda 2020; Staudenmaier 1995). Their aim is to show how eco-fascism’s ideological content reinforces ideas of autochthony, belonging, racial purity, and sovereignty (Forchtner & Kølvrå 2015). Such approaches are useful in pinpointing how far right parties draw upon a range of ecological ideas, tropes, and rhetoric to position themselves on the terrain of social struggles in an era of heightened climate politics.

In this section, rather than asking what eco-fascism is, I am interested in what it does for the far right. By taking eco-fascism as a practical orientation, I advance an understanding of far right actors’ claim to an agency and subjectivity whose conditions of possibility lies in relations of counterinsurgency and whose political orientation is towards the discourse of climate change (in affirmation or denial). Through this approach I understand race, nationality, ethnicity, or ‘society’ as a set of emergent political conceptualizations that far right actors employ strategically within a set of relations produced by a dominant mode of governance. As I argued above, relations of counterinsurgency are key determinants in producing the (urban) space through which political strategies and social dispositions are constituted. In my argument, counterinsurgency and the far right share a target: urbanization and an idea of planetary “urbanity.” Hence, as I discuss below, it becomes possible to bring under the same analytical frame far right actors who affirm a climate emergency and thus claim the label “eco-fascist” and those who dispute the reality of climate change, such as Anders Breivik for whom environmentalism is a neo-communist plot. In what follows, I read from the manifestos of far right actors to draw the connection to counterinsurgency.

A manifesto posted by Brenton Tarrant before he killed 51 people in Christchurch, “The Great Replacement,” contains many themes associated with far-right extremists. It includes the following tropes: white people are being replaced by migrants, the Islamization of Western societies, the social and cultural decadence of the latter, as well as the political corruption of the elites. The self-referential manifesto also includes a Q&A, where he asks himself about his “views” and he declares that “I am an Ethno-nationalist Eco-fascist. Ethnic autonomy for all peoples with a focus on the preservation of nature, and the natural order.” Some analysts have found his claims that he is an eco-fascist “shallow [...] little more than a simplistic repackaging of immigration as an environmental issue vis-à-vis overpopulation” (Macklin 2019). That his views are shallow and repackaged is a truism, but so are the other tropes mentioned above. After all, much of the underpinning notions of Western decadence and white replacement can be found in white supremacist tracks of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Lothrop Stoddard’s (1920) *The Rising Tide of Color*.

Rather than dismissing his “scant engagement with the ecological philosophies of the contemporary or historical extreme right” (Macklin 2019), what if we treat Tarrant’s self-identification as an eco-fascist on his own terms? Namely, as a character in a plot that takes place in a grey zone between virtual and physical worlds. This is a plot that Tarrant created through his online interactions, his travels throughout Australia and

Europe, direct and indirect networking with other far right figures, and consumption of far right literature. Tarrant's role as an eco-fascist constitutes his agency in the plot: he is a man of action striving to save Western civilization from insurgent threats. In this plot, he has become part of a loose network of counterinsurgents (hence, also explaining his need to livestream the shooting) tasked with disarming the enemies of the West.

But, what is the context of the plot? Here, Tarrant's narrative meets those of other contemporary far-right extremists: they are actors in an urbanized context. Tarrant declares that the event that pushed him over the edge – he found his “emotions swinging between fuming rage and suffocating despair” – was “witnessing the state of French cities and towns,” where “the invasion of France by non-whites” was complete. Therefore, he states bleakly: “Its the cities where the struggle lies, its the cities where the invaders have massed, its the cities where the marxists have poisoned the institutions, its the cities where the traitorous media and corporations lie and its the cities where the anti-white politicians and the NGOs make their homes.” The focus on the urban, the obsession in repeating “its the cities” speaks to a form of unease over the status of urbanization. Eco-fascism thus allows him to take aim at his real target: “rampant urbanization” (and “ever expanding cities and shrinking forests”) that has destroyed the natural order. Tarrant cares very little for either trees or forests. What animates him is the manner in which non-whites and the invaders are able to use the cities to make a life. What animates him, beyond even race, is the social order created by urbanization.

The most recent atrocity in the U.S., shows a similar pattern of far right extremists' concern with urbanization. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of May, 2022, 18-year old Payton Gendron (also claiming the identification “eco-fascist”) drove over three hours from his hometown to Buffalo, NY, and murdered 10 people, all African Americans, at a supermarket. His Discord chat log revealed that he had intensively scouted several urban areas in upstate New York before settling on Buffalo (Weill 2022). His aim was to kill as many Black people as possible because they were “invaders.” His manifesto, a ‘cypasta’ job, reveals that he was directly influenced by Tarrant (Amarasingam, Argentino & Macklin 2022). The choice of supermarkets in heavily urbanized areas, as was the case with the El Paso shooter, is not simply due to the fact that they are soft targets – i.e., less heavily protected than say government buildings – but because those highly commercialized spaces (together with malls) now represent the processes of urbanization more than anything else. Due to privatization, commercial spaces have replaced the public square as the locus of social life in urban areas. Across the U.S., it is those hybrid public-private spaces that thread the extended urban fabric.

To Gendron, as in all classic acts of dehumanization, the “invaders” have no agency and they flow in with the urban fabric. This explains his extensive scouting of urban targets to determine where the flow of invaders is at its highest concentration. (According to Gendron's Discord log, he decided against striking too close to home because there were too many whites). The urban, in Gendron's cobbled narrative, has become the real and monstrous agency that he must strike against. Paralleling Tarrant, Gendron claims the term eco-fascism irrespective of its content, because it allows him to constitute his agency in the face of the urban Moloch. To attack “rampant urbanization,” is to strike a counterinsurgent blow at the processes that mobilize the invaders and before they can constitute their self-defense.

The specter of the urban also haunts Anders Breivik, the Norwegian extremist for whom ecological concerns are a cover for a communist takeover (“green is the new red”). Although critics have pointed out how Islamophobia organized Breivik's worldview (Bangstad 2021), the urban dimension has largely been ignored. Breivik, in

fact, labels “islamisation” as a “secondary infection” and cites cultural decadence as the primary force that leads to national degeneration. According to Breivik, this cultural disorder results from the “destructive forces of the diversity/ethnic industries” and its symptoms can be identified in the “hip-hop mentality.” As someone who participated in hip-hop culture while living in relatively well-off and less diverse Western Oslo – compared to the immigrant and working class areas in the eastern parts of the city (see Eriksen 2018) – Breivik understands hip-hop as an urban phenomenon that he associates with decadence. He links hip-hop to a youth culture geared towards hedonism, cultural mixing, and urban practices of self-expression such as graffiti. It is such hybridization that Breivik wants to destroy. Finally, he fantasizes that in a culturally pure future, heterogeneity will be limited to “liberal cosmopolitan zones” that would act as ghettos and dumping grounds for all that is impure.

To far right activists, urbanization represents a menace. Although the urban condition is a marker of civilization to the far right i.e., the achievement of the cultural/racial genius of the nation, it is a double-edged sword. Cities tend to ostentatiously display the brute facticity of heterogeneity that reminds far right activists and other cultural conservatives that the nation’s supposed homogeneity is nothing but a mirage. Furthermore, the processes of uneven urbanization have pressed several layers of heterogeneity into the fabric of social life because inequality requires constant improvisation on the part of migrants, the poor, and those who are displaced. When far right activists make the case for nationalism, it is often made explicitly against the idea of urban multiplicities. They parallel the logic of counterinsurgency by interpreting the heterogeneous character of urban life as a general crisis of governance. They parallel counterinsurgency by seeking to reproduce defenselessness. They parallel the logic of counterinsurgency by interpreting urbanity as a threat to social order. Finally, they might even go beyond counterinsurgency by conjuring processes and categories of people that supposedly escapes counterinsurgency’s cartographic power.

Against the background of climate emergency, relations of counterinsurgency sets up the possibility for far right actors to constitute their agency. Ecological crisis will most likely increase the need for dependencies. It will likely require that the social is constituted through relations of vulnerability that allow people to withstand the regularity and interconnectedness of catastrophic events. Given the reality of planetary urbanization, climate crisis will demand an active engagement with urbanity in the short and medium term. Yet, counterinsurgency governance has created a mode of thinking and acting that actively militates against the possibility of a new planetary ecological reality. Relations of counterinsurgency have set the conditions for far right actors to constitute a definitive political agency that is in the process of making them an historical force. To both the far right and counterinsurgency, urbanity and heterogeneity are weaknesses of the new urban order that must be eradicated.

## Conclusion: Dystopia Now?

As I’ve argued above, counterinsurgency as a mode of urban global governance is the key condition that shapes the possibility for far right politics to become a response to ecological crisis. Rodrigo Duterte’s presidency in the Philippines illustrates that such a configuration is not only speculative. Politics and society in the Philippines are indelibly marked by counterinsurgency relations. From the U.S. colonial wars of the late 19<sup>th</sup>



and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the present day, counterinsurgency campaigns have violently shaped the lives of ordinary Filipinos (McCoy 2009). An ongoing counterinsurgency campaign (backed by the U.S. military) against Islamist and Maoist insurgents has blended into the policing of urban spaces (Warburg & Jensen 2020). In addition, the Philippines lies on the frontlines of ecological crisis: despite being exposed to extreme weather for generations, climate change is increasing the severity of such events, resulting in death, displacement, water insecurity, severe droughts, and flooding. As a result, climate politics is always on the agenda since it affects everyday life (and death) and has generated a unique bureaucracy tasked with risk management and post-crisis relief. Politics and society in Filipino are thus profoundly shaped by those interwoven modes of governing the weather and counterinsurgency (Smith 2022).

In this context of climate change and counterinsurgency, enter Rodrigo Duterte, the far right president of the Philippines from 2016 to 2022. The postcolonial theorist, Vicente Rafael (2019: 146) has characterized Duterte's approach to politics as bearing the hallmarks of a "counter-insurgent style of governing." As mayor of the city of Davao, he ripped up the boundary between governance and counterinsurgency; to govern the urban is to engage in counterinsurgency. For instance, in the 1990s, Duterte initiated a violent war on drugs: the Davao Death Squad (DDS), which allegedly was under his control (and which, characteristically he never denied), executed 1424 people in the city between 1998 and 2015. The DDS engaged in operations of social cleansing, killing drug users, street children, and other criminal elements (see McCoy 2017; Rafael 2019).

The DDS and the Davao style of government were not just local products. Duterte adapted pre-existing counterinsurgency strategies that had been employed against Islamist and communist 'threats' to produce urban order. Subsequently, Duterte brought this same violent form of counterinsurgent urban governance to his presidency, appointing his chief of police from Davao to the Philippine National Police to oversee the war on drugs, now expanded to major urban areas. As the anthropologists, Anna Warburg and Steffen Jensen (2020) note, counterinsurgency produced urban space by creating a climate of fear and suspicion among urban inhabitants, delimiting their social interactions with each other, and effectively isolating some districts (because they had been marked as areas of disorder and drugs) from the city at large.

If urban counterinsurgency consisted of one key ingredient in Duterte's formula to power, the other was climate policy. Typhoon Yolanda, which killed 6300 people and caused extensive damage to the Philippines, brought Duterte to national prominence. He used the then government's slow response to elbow his way into the spotlight and proposed a form of climate populism. He promised to close mining operations, made climate change mitigation a central plank of his political platform, and adopted a pugnacious approach to multilateral climate action. Despite the populist rhetoric, during his presidency, Duterte responded to ecological challenges through counterinsurgency governance. During the drought that caused water shortages in Manila, he revived a dam project and progressively militarized it to provide water. This massive infrastructure project was typically accompanied by threats against environmentalists and indigenous groups. Consequently, those who sought to imagine a different political ecology were subjected to extrajudicial assassinations in a style that mirrored the war on drugs (Smith 2022).

The presidency of Rodrigo Duterte indicates that the dystopian ecological future, as imagined by Parenti and others above, is here and now. Although state formation in the Philippines has a specific history of counterinsurgency warfare, Duterte's rise to



power should not be seen as exceptional. Counterinsurgency is now the 'normal' mode of governance across the urbanizing planet. It is also how the uneven urban condition itself is experienced for a vast multitude of people across the planet (an indication being the number of anti-police protests across the globe). As the impact of extreme weather events is increasingly urbanized (cf. Goh 2021), from catastrophic flooding of cities to the devastation of infrastructures that sustain an urban planet, we can expect politics to be conditioned by relations of counterinsurgency. As such, it is those social relations established by projects of counterinsurgency governance that are shaping and will shape the form and content of far right politics.

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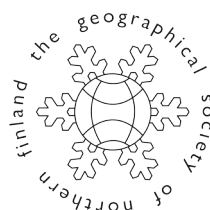
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## Discussions and interventions

# Far-right localism as an environmental strategy in France

Lise Benoist<sup>a</sup>

## 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 ecologism, 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 ecologism. 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 ecologism (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; Tomaneý 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 for example in the UK ‘Local Matters’, a splinter group from Generation Identity; in Belgium, ‘Résistance Verte’, an identitarian ecologist group.

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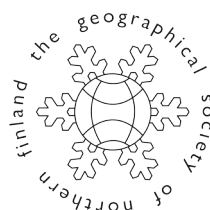
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## Discussions and interventions

# The nightless nights of the ‘Nazi camp’: The Finnish far-right’s anti-climate politics in urban space

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## Abstract

The globally growing climate justice movement has drawn attention to the accelerating climate change and the structural changes that climate mitigation would require. At the same time, there has been a surge and normalization of radical and extreme right-wing groups and parties. Their central element is not only ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism but also anti-climate politics, as they seek to obstruct climate politics, mobilize anti-scientific fictions and discredit scientists and activists. The far right’s intimidation of climate justice activists has been studied by examining its textual and visual discourses in online spaces, but less attention has been paid to far-right anti-climate practices in urban spaces. Drawing on social movement geographies, I aim to contribute to the discussions on far-right anti-climate politics by analysing the spatial strategies of the Finnish far-right’s counterprotests (the so-called ‘Nazi camp’) during Extinction Rebellion Finland’s ‘Summer Rebellion’ in June 2021 in Helsinki. By doing so, I show that far-right anti-climate politics (in the form of climate scepticism and intimidation of climate activists) are not limited to online spaces but emerge through different strategies in urban spaces by which the far-right competes for control over space and visibility and shapes public narratives of climate change and politics.

**Keywords:** *social movement geography, public space, demonstrations, Extinction Rebellion, political violence, authoritarianism*

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## Introduction

In June 2021 Extinction Rebellion Finland (XR Finland) organized 'Summer Rebellion', a one-week protest in the heart of Helsinki to draw public attention to climate science and planetary boundaries (Aaltonen 2021). These climate activists were not the only ones occupying the streets of Helsinki: far-right activists and politicians were there too, establishing a 'Nazi camp'<sup>1</sup> (Huuhtanen 2021) as they themselves called it. The Nazi camp, whose size was 15 to 20 people, tried to fight for visibility and control over public space, for example by threatening, pushing, and kicking the XR climate activists. One of the intimidators was Sebastian Tynkkynen, a member of parliament (Finns Party) who in a live stream told viewers he had woken up at 2 a.m. and went to Mannerheimintie street (the main thoroughfare of Helsinki) with a big boombox so he could wake up the "law-breaking climate panic activists" with 'facts' about climate politics (Tynkkynen 2021).

The research on the entanglements of the far right and climate change has noted that the surge of the far right in an era of worsening climate crisis is not a coincidence (e.g. Daggett 2018; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021). The far right is driven by the motivation to secure a fossil-fuelled economy and a white hetero-patriarchal nation, for instance, by centralizing power and re-establishing societal hierarchies. It is also a countermovement to socially just climate politics. Whilst climate scientists and movements seek to bring about change by drawing attention to climate science and societal structures, the far right, in collaboration with different fossil fuel companies and climate denialist thinktanks, obstructs climate policies (McCarthy 2019; Lees *et al.* 2020; Barla & Bjork-James 2021; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021; Bosworth 2022; Ekberg *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, the far right obfuscates the discussion by blaming migrants and racialized people for ecological problems (Forchtner 2019; Turner & Bailey 2021; Pietiläinen, forthcoming).

The far right's (anti-)climate ideologies and politics have been analysed at the regional and institutional scales, for example by studying how the far right mobilizes anti-scientific fictions and discredits or harasses scientists and activists in their political programmes, magazines, as well as social media platforms (Boren & Kahaya 2019; Agius *et al.* 2020; Vowles & Hultman 2021; White 2021; Forchtner 2023). However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the far right's anti-climate practice at the urban scale. This is surprising because urban spaces are central sites for political mobilization (Nicholls 2007; Salmenkari 2009; Vasudevan 2015) and (anti-)fascist struggles (Ince 2011; Ince 2019; Santamarina 2021; Luger 2022). Capturing public spaces (e.g. streets) is a central practice of fascist ideology (Fekete 2014) and far-right groups and activists have a long history in counter-protesting, targeting and threatening spaces of those considered political opponents and minorities (e.g. LGBTQ spaces) (Lagerman 2023). The social and spatial dimensions of life are mutually constitutive (Soja 1989; Martin & Miller 2003). Studying the far-right's anti-climate practice at the urban scale is important because it can shed light on their spatial strategies to struggle in and over public space and the geographical manifestations of authoritarian forms of socio-spatial control and power (e.g. Ince, 2019; Lagerman, 2023). In the present commentary, by turning to social movement geographies (e.g. Martin & Miller 2003; Salmenkari 2009; Featherstone 2011), I attempt to understand how far-right authoritarian anti-climate politics emerges and plays out as a spatial practice by analysing the different strategies that the Finnish far right undertook during XR Finland's Summer Rebellion in June 2021. I aim to contribute to ongoing discussions about the far right's anti-climate politics as well as the spatial politics of the far right by illuminating that far-right climate scepticism and

intimidation of climate activists is not limited to online spaces but instead that they employ different, sometimes violent, strategies in urban spaces in their attempts to convey anti-climate messages (e.g. Weinberg & Assoudeh 2018).

## The far right in Finland

During the last decades, we have witnessed intensified racial border politics and a surge of far-right ideologies, parties, and movements across the globe (Rydgren 2018; Paasi *et al.* 2022). I use 'far right' as an umbrella term for radical and extreme right parties and groups whose politics are centred around ethnonationalism and authoritarianism (e.g. Pirro 2022). An umbrella term is useful because far-right groups and actors are linked through overlapping memberships and complex webs of intersection that occur through formal and informal channels (Gattinara & Pirro 2018; Pirro & Gattinara 2018). Furthermore, mutual events (e.g. demonstrations) and online spaces (e.g. social media) are focal sites for networking and information sharing (Gattinara & Pirro 2019). The rise of parliamentary radical right groups and the attention they have received has led to the mainstreaming of white nationalist and misogynist ideas, which has in part contributed to an increase in hate speech and violence towards minorities and those considered political opponents (e.g. Gökariksel & Smith 2016; Reid Ross 2017). Importantly, political violence and different violent tactics against those whom the far right considers as a threat to the white patriarchal nation (e.g. migrants, sexual minorities, or 'leftists') is not a new phenomenon (Koopmans 1996; Karamanidou 2016; Ravndal & Jupskås 2020) but a long-embraced strategy for conveying their message and advancing social control (Weinberg & Assoudeh 2018; Ravndal & Jupskås 2020).

In recent decades, the Finnish far-right environment has transformed in many ways, following the ideas of the globally surging radical right and due to the growing influence of the Finns Party (*perussuomalaiset*), formerly known as the True Finns Party, which broke through in the national parliamentary elections of 2011 and since then has been among the three biggest parties in national elections (e.g. Hatakka 2021). The banning of the Finnish chapter of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) in 2020, due to its members' long history of violent attacks, has led to the degradation of organizational activities (Kotonen 2021) and overall to the fragmentation of the Finnish far-right environment. New groups and collectives have emerged since then, such as the youth neo-fascist group Uudenmaan Akseli and the Finnish chapter of Active Club. Among the newcomers is also the Blue-and-Black Movement, a new fascist party project established by former Finns Party members. Politically the Blue-and-Black Movement resembles NRM as its membership consists of many former NRM members and its political programmes are very similar to those of NRM (Kotonen 2021; Varisverkosto 2022).

The Finns Party has tried to distance itself from fascist groups through various internal 'cleaning' projects, for instance kicking out members or cutting ties with its youth organization (Lizotte & Kallio 2023). This internal cleaning has brought conservative appeal, contributing to the further normalization of the Finns Party's politics, and also enabling access to positions of governmental power. Yet, one-third of Finns Party members of parliament have spread fascist material, participated in fascist events, or have overlapping memberships with fascist groups (for example, six sitting MPs have a background in Suomen Sisu) (Björkqvist 2023). Furthermore, the rise of the Finns



Party has increased tolerance for white nationalist ideas among the mainstream, which has opened new spaces for fascist mobilization. As an example, three far-right terrorist investigations have been ongoing in Finland within a year (2022–2023), in which a total of ten men are being investigated for terrorism crimes (Varisverkosto 2023). In all these three cases, the actors did not operate or radicalize in a vacuum but instead were tightly connected to other far-right actors or platforms like the Finns Party and the Blue-and-Black Movement (Ruonakoski 2023; Varisverkosto 2023).

As in other countries such as Sweden (Vowles & Hultman 2021), also in Finland the far right hardly took any position on climate change before 2017 and 2018 when the climate movement started to gain attention due to global marches that mobilized millions of people. During recent years, the far right has increasingly participated in debates about climate change, offering solutions such as border walls and 'climate abortions', drawing their inspiration from right-wing ecologies and misanthropic thinkers such as Pentti Linkola (Macklin 2022; Pietiläinen, forthcoming). The far right's (anti)-climate agenda is largely constructed in opposition to the climate justice movement, which is discredited and stigmatized by the far right for instance by mobilizing different conspiracy theories and harmful speeches and arguing that the protestors are enemies of decent taxpayers, 'the people' (Macklin 2022; Kosonen & Löf 2023). Within the Finnish far right, the climate justice movement is argued to be 'political' (and thus not the right kind of environmental protection), a Trojan Horse for communism and funded by Putin. For instance, in their campaign videos for the 2023 parliamentary elections the Finns Party portrayed environmental activists as irrational and hinted that demonic possession is the cause of their 'fanaticism' (Suomen Uutiset 2023a; 2023b; 2023c).

## The Finnish far right's anti-climate politics in urban space

### XR Finland

During the last few years, the growing climate movement has reconfigured geographies through different, beyond-places-stretching forms of resistance, demanding climate justice and rapid action to slow human-induced climate change (e.g. Della Porta & Parks 2014). Climate justice groups such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion see climate change as a structural problem of global capitalism and push for the message of climate science by applying different strategies and tactics, including demonstrations, civil disobedience, and direct action (e.g. Piispa *et al.* 2022). The climate justice movement has grown significantly during the last decade in Finland (e.g. Piispa *et al.* 2021) – even though the climate movement is much smaller in Finland than, for instance, in Central Europe. Extinction Rebellion Finland, an autonomous Finnish local chapter of Extinction Rebellion (see, for instance, Gardner, Carvalho & Valenstain 2022), is one of the most visible climate justice groups in Finland. Its politics are based on impacting local government, advocating for stronger climate policy, and resisting business-as-usual by peacefully disrupting everyday urban activities (Axon 2019). In Finland, the movement grew enormously, especially during the years 2019–2021, which led to increased public attention and opposition. The opposition should be understood in light of broader global developments in which climate justice movements are globally subjected to tightening police repression and criminalization due to their alleged 'extremism' or 'eco-terrorism' (see, for instance, Brock 2022; Brock *et al.* 2018).

## Summer Rebellion and the Nazi camp<sup>2</sup>

In June 2021 XR Finland staged a 'Summer Rebellion' in which the movement protested in three central areas in Helsinki (e.g. Aaltonen 2021; Koskinen *et al.* 2023). During the protest, Elokapina established a Rebellion Centre for a week (16–24 June 2021) in Senaatintori, a central square, where the group organized different programs such as speeches, music performances and workshops on topics like anti-racism and civil disobedience. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, the protest expanded to Mannerheimintie street, where the movement blocked a four-lane street in front of the Finnish parliament. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, after police negotiations, the Summer Rebellion moved to the quieter Unioninkatu street, but a small group returned to Mannerheimintie, which led to the arrest of 139 people (Aaltonen 2021). The protest week aimed to push the government to announce a climate emergency, carbon neutrality by 2025 and a citizens' assembly to support a just ecological future.

XR Finland occupied places of symbolic and strategic significance: the Senaatintori square is in the historic part of town whilst Mannerheimintie, named after nationalist hero Carl Mannerheim, is a main street located in front of the parliament. Whilst urban citizens are accustomed to seeing different events in the square (from demonstrations to commercial markets), Mannerheimintie is a main thoroughfare in the centre of Helsinki. During its occupation, cars and public transportation had to take a detour. By bringing together climate activists to three different sites and reconfiguring urban geography, for instance through blockades (Mitchell 2003), climate activists drew a significant amount of public attention to climate justice and the movement. By occupying Mannerheimintie, XR Finland also challenged the hegemony of private automobiles, disrupting the business-as-usual of a neoliberal city (Davies 2013) and transforming a busy transportation street into a space of flowers, campers, dance, poetry and singing, thus, shaping and re-imagining the landscape.

The protest occurred in a time frame in which far-right harassment towards climate activists was particularly prominent, as XR Finland had recently organized mass actions in which streets and urban spaces were occupied for many days (Riku Löf, private communication, 2023). The protest week brought a great deal of media attention to the movement and sparked anger among its opponents (Aaltonen 2021), especially among the far right, which has a habit of discrediting climate activists. Already on the second day of the Summer Rebellion, at Senaatintori a loose group of different far-right activists organized a counterdemonstration that they self-proclaimed as the 'Nazi camp'. The camp followed Elokapina to all three protest locations. The counterdemonstration was not organized by a specific group but instead was mobilized online and through informal networks, attracting random individuals as well as those associated with networks/groups like the Soldiers of Odin, Suomen Sisä, Uudenmaan Akseli and Blue-and-Black Movement as well as politicians from the Finns Party.

The Nazi camp employed different spatial strategies in their attempts to influence the discussion about climate change and in re-negotiating power dynamics in urban space. First, the far righters attempted to gain visibility and publicity for their ideologies and politics by occupying key spaces near XR Finland's protest sites. Whilst in Senaatintori the Nazi camp stayed 20–30 meters away from the square at the stairways of the main building of the University of Helsinki, at Mannerheimintie the Nazi camp occupied the busy intersection of Arkadianmäki and Mannerheimintie. The number of far righters was small, maximum 15–20 people (Tuominen *et al.* 2021), but the camp attempted to give an impression of being numerous and united (see also, Tilly 2005), for instance



Figure 1. XR Finland occupying Mannerheimintie (60°10'21.4"N 24°56'05.0"E) (17 June 2021).



Figure 2. XR Finland occupying Mannerheimintie (60°10'21.4"N 24°56'05.0"E) (17 June 2021).

by being as visible and loud as possible. The campers were shouting into megaphones around the clock, loudly playing nationalist music (e.g. Nazi marching song “Erika”) and waving enormous Finnish flags. By occupying the street, the Nazi camp attempted to influence the discussion about climate politics by drawing the attention of the media and policy makers. Whilst not directly commenting on the Summer Rebellion’s demands, in their 10-meter-long banner the counterprotestors spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and the ‘world government’ and called for the resignation of Social Democratic prime minister Sanna Marin due to treason (Viltsu 32 2021). The Nazi camp framed themselves as the protectors of the socio-spatial order of the city and of society at large: according to them, they were “bringing order back” as now, due to machinations of Interior minister Maria Ohisalo, (from the Green Party, who takes her orders “from abroad”), the unlawful “anarchists” were allowed to disturb the “societal peace” and “bring chaos and bad influence” to public space (Pohjolan neito 2021a, 2021b).

Although some of the far-right protestors (such as Panu Huuhtanen) are publicly against the ‘overly moderate’ Finns Party, the counterdemonstrators found new alliances with the Finns Party politicians. For instance, several members of parliament, such as Mauri Peltokangas, came to visit the Nazi camp, showing their support on-site and on social media channels (Kasvismafioso 2021; Peltokangas 2021), which brought institutional legitimacy to the far-right counterprotest. On social media, Peltokangas took credit for negotiating with police to stop the XR demonstration, writing that “the spread of this green glop in our society should be stopped” (Peltokangas 2021). Although neither Peltokangas nor other parliament members referred to the counterprotesters using the words “Nazi camp”, many Finns Party members (and other right-wing politicians) supported the counterdemonstrators’ actions publicly. For instance, Jussi Halla-aho, former leader of the Finns Party, praised the Nazi camp online, arguing that one of its loudest activists (Panu Huuhtanen) should be thanked by the police for his work countering XR Finland (Halla-aho 2021).

The second spatial strategy employed by the Nazi camp focused on intimidating individual activists by streaming and filming them at the demonstration and sharing the clips and the activists’ personal information online. Filming and targeting so-called political opponents are common strategies among the far right, and, in the context of the Summer Rebellion, it was justified in terms of “national security” (Pohjolan neito 2021a). For instance, Sebastian Tynkkynen visited the Summer Rebellion several times, filming the activists from a close distance without permission. Tynkkynen also came to Mannerheimintie to wake up the Summer Rebellion’s activists during the night, shouting insults with his megaphone (see, Tynkkynen 2021). His streams and videos got shared and distributed online and he also encouraged his followers to cut and distribute “humiliating clips of individual activists” (Kosonen & Löf 2023). Such streaming and targeting, according to Löf (2023, private communication), stresses many activists, who are afraid of getting targeted or becoming victims of online harassment. For instance, *Partisaani*, a neo-Nazi magazine that is run by some former NRM members, shared Tynkkynen’s videos but also some of the XR Finland’s activists’ phone numbers and residential addresses. This exemplifies the fluidities of the relationship between the parliamentary radical right and fascist street activists and between online and offline politics, which are inherently integrated (see also, Saresma, Karkulehto & Varis 2020).

The third spatial strategy of the far-right demonstrators revolved around different forms of violence. The Nazi camp exploited specific narratives of space and place in generating their authoritarian positions (see also, Santamarina 2021), for instance





Figure 3. The Nazi camp occupying the intersection of Mannerheimintie, Postikatu and Arkadiankatu (60°10'15.3"N 24°56'12.9"E) (18 June 2021).

by arguing that since the protestors used 'unlawful' methods by disturbing the orders of public space, they had to "suffer" (Pohjolan neito 2021a). The far righters justified their violent acts also by drawing on specific nationalist imaginaries of the sites. They, for instance, argued that the "illegally behaving" activists were disgracing "the most gorgeous, historically meaningful" and "iconic site" (Pohjolan neito 2021; 2:34–3:25), which reflects how struggles over public spaces are "often justified by different ways for valuing place" (Nicholls 2007: 616). Several verbal and physical encounters occurred at all three sites. The far righters discredited the activists by shouting insults into megaphones, for instance calling the protestors a "criminal trash group" (Pohjolan neito 2021a, 2021b) and by threatening them with violence, such as "a kick in the head" (Pohjolan neito 2021; Viltsu32 2021). The threats were not only verbal, and the far righters repeatedly behaved violently towards the activists, for instance by pushing and kicking XR Finland protestors (Löf 2023, private communication; Reponen 2023, private communication; Unknown 2021a, 2021c). One of the kickers (Unknown 2021a) was the above-mentioned Panu Huuhtanen who was praised by Jussi Halla-aho. Far righters practiced violence also towards those who supported XR Finland demonstrators: for instance, Soldiers of Odin activists pushed a person who was protecting the activists (Reponen 2023, private communication). The camp itself was also targeted; objects, such as fish, were thrown at the camp.

Although this text's main focus is on the spatial strategies of the far-right, the geography of protest was not only shaped by the XR Finland protestors, the Nazi camp and the Finns Party members, but also by other elements such as state power that tries to control and prevent different uses of the city (see also, Salmenkari 2009). Indeed, as reminded by Julia Lagerman (forthcoming: 4), "the struggle in and over public space is

plural”. The far righters did not operate in a vacuum but the police played a significant role in defining the dynamics of the protest sites, for instance by enabling the loud and disruptive Nazi camp to stay close to the XR Finland site and leaving drunk and aggressively behaving far-right campers unattended during the night. In principle, police have an obligation to secure the right to demonstrate and to intervene in case of potential external threats, which in the Summer Rebellion did not happen. According to Tuulia Reponen and Riku Löf, the far right’s threatening behaviour, such as insults and very loud and disturbing noise, frustrated and scared the climate activists. Importantly, climate activists of the Summer Rebellion were active agents and developed different strategies for how to cope with the far righters’ pursuit to repress and silence. XR Finland, for instance, asked for help from local anti-fascists to identify the far righters and to evaluate the security threat. Mutual support was also offered for dealing with emotions. Yet, XR Finland’s action politics are based on strict non-violent methods, which also impacts the ways the movement can defend against violently behaving far righters.

## Concluding remarks: authoritarianism in the heating world

As I show in this commentary, the far right applied different spatial strategies in conveying their authoritarian and anti-climate message. In doing so, delimiting, and asserting control over public space was a crucial method. As also shown in this commentary, the far right’s political violence towards Summer Rebellion climate activists and supporters was not limited to online spaces nor were they isolated events conducted by “lone wolves”. Online violence is an important form of (political) violence, but it is only one part of ‘the chain of violence’ that spans from intimate violence to violent societal structures (Saresma, Karkulehto & Varis 2020). Whilst the far right did not pay much attention to the content of the protest, by discrediting, delegitimizing and violently harassing the activists the far right tried to expel them and their climate messaging from the public space, simultaneously attempting to influence climate narratives by drawing on conspiracy theories and climate denialism. The right to public space is not self-evident but instead “struggled over and earned” (Lee 2009: 33). Although XR Finland and its supporters were not passive bystanders, their non-violent tactics limited their abilities to fight in and for public space and to self-defend the demonstration.

Despite the far right’s internal disagreements and different political orientations, the opposition to XR Finland brought Finnish far righters together and tightened their informal networks. Whilst far-right politicians are “legally bound” to reject the use of violence (e.g. Weinberg & Assoudeh 2018: 415), different strategies were applied in supporting and thus legitimizing the Nazi camp. As the examples above show, the parliamentary politicians took an active role in discrediting climate activists, as well as in agitating for further harassment and violence. Finns Party MPs legitimated the Nazi camp not only through their presence and online media support, but they themselves also took an active part in activist harassment by employing various harmful strategies (e.g. streaming) and by encouraging their supporters to carry out harmful behaviour.

Academia has an important role in countering the radical right’s misinformation and denialism about climate change and biodiversity (Lees *et al.* 2020). This also includes critical engagement with the socio-spatial (counter)politics of the far right (Ince



2019; Luger 2022), especially when it comes to climate issues. Across time and place, environmental defenders and forefront communities have been harassed, repressed, and murdered by extractive corporations, states, and authoritarian leaders (e.g. Brock 2020). The presented examples show only a limited glimpse of one climate movement (one that is rather white and middle-class) in a country where, the far-right environment is relatively small and fragmented and the level of freedom of speech and press freedom is still relatively high. Yet, the increased state-sanctioned repression of environmental activists (e.g. Brock *et al.* 2018; Brock 2020; Dodd & Grierson 2020; Hover 2023) as well as the rise and normalization of authoritarian nationalism pose several challenges to democracy, critical social research and activism, which demands a critical examination of the varieties (thus, spatialities) of authoritarian anti-climate politics as well as developing counterstrategies to them.

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## Endnotes

1. In Finnish the term camp (*leiri*) means alternatively a place or a group of people associated with an idea.
2. The analysis is based on observations from textual and visual material online (e.g., Youtube videos and newspaper articles) and field notes that I, as an external observer, collected during the Summer Rebellion. Furthermore, during November 2023 I conducted two email interviews with two Finnish scholar-activists, Tuulia Reponen and Riku Löf, who participated in XR Finland's actions.

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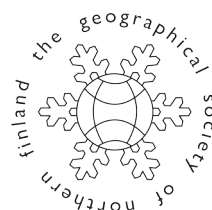
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## Research Article (Outside Theme)

# **Imagining Finland: negotiating the sense of self through return imaginaries**

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### Abstract

When embarking on a migration journey, migrants cultivate personal ideas of themselves 'here' and 'there'. This includes one's reflections about a possible return – the return imaginaries. They emerge from the time-, place- and person-specific ideas, attitudes, feelings and possibilities before, and after, relocation. Through a digital ethnographic study, this paper seeks to expand the research done on how the so-called 'middling' migrants negotiate the sense of self through return imaginaries. I discuss one such group, Finns, in the UK and ask 'what is the role of return imaginaries in negotiating the sense of self in Finns' translocal place-making in the UK?'. The results show that Finns' return imaginaries function as a framework for positioning and reaffirming the self in relation to the UK and Finland during one's migration trajectory. In relation to their idea of return, Finns negotiate the questions 'who am I?' and 'who do I want to be?'. Through reflecting on the everydayness in the UK and Finland, and their ideas about return visits, Finns produce a 'translocal sense of self'.

**Keywords:** return imaginary, UK, Finland, translocal, place-making

### Introduction

*I am proud of my Finnishness; it is valued here [in the UK]. I still want to visit Finland every year, the Finnish winter and summer are important to me. I sometimes daydream about returning to Finland, but I think I have changed so much that I would not fit in there anymore, my life is here.*

In the above quote Milla, who had moved to the UK from Finland twenty years ago, reflects on Finland's role in her life. Milla does not foresee returning to Finland but explains that her plans are not set in stone. Milla's excerpt shows how a migration trajectory is wrapped around an idea of 'projected, imagined, alternative futures' – the imaginaries of the self 'here' and 'there' (Brickell & Datta 2011; Salazar 2011). It also

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shows that imagining one's return is an important part of migration imaginaries and 'describes the multiply-located senses of self' (Conradson & McKay 2007). The ideas about return change over time and may not have anything to do with the actual return, but are important in positioning the self in relation to several places (Carling *et al.* 2015). This does not mean, however, that a translocal self would identify *either* with one's place of residence *or* that from where they have moved away. Instead, imagining one's potential return forms an overarching, ongoing reflection of the self in relation to multiple meaningful places.

Focusing on imagined return as a thought process, continuously participated in during one's migration trajectory (Bolognani 2016), this study discusses the idea of returning as a 'return imaginary'. Through a digital ethnographic study including 41 Finns, a middling migrant<sup>1</sup> group in the UK, this paper asks *'what is the role of return imaginaries in negotiating the sense of self in Finns' translocal place-making in the UK?'* Migrants' ideas of return in the context of the actual return taking place have been discussed extensively, but addressing return as a thought process in negotiating the sense of self has not been discussed as widely. Hence, this article seeks to expand the research done on the function of return imaginaries in migrants' sense of self negotiation as a form of translocal place-making.

My study is situated within the framing concept of 'translocal', which in the context of my research means imagined and physical activities stretched between several 'locals' (translocal: 'transcends beyond regional or national boundaries; not confined to a particular place' (Lexico 2022)). While 'translocal' can be understood as including different locals within national boundaries, my research focuses on the everyday life that is lived as (dis)connected to locals in different countries (the UK and Finland). In translocal context, my conceptual framework is built on the 'self', '(spatial) imaginaries' and 'translocal place-making'. I discuss three groups with differing ideas about returning to Finland: those who did not see returning likely (the 'objectors'), those who kept their options open (the 'dwellers'), and those who fostered the idea of one day returning to Finland (the 'home-goers').

I discuss 'self' as an overarching awareness containing different identities. Self is a 'reservoir of beliefs, understandings, and sentiments of oneself' that are the result of internalised practises and memory (Vainikka 2020). Hence, I do not, exclusively, discuss 'identities', as they interlap during different situations and phases in one's migration journey, and are of different importance depending on one's assumed positionality 'here' and 'there'. The self is a 'subject with an agency' but needs to establish a balance between its multiple, unequally related sides to enable coherence (Vainikka 2020). I focus on the personal and social sides of the self that both contribute to its construction (Antonsich 2020), and are negotiated and reflected through return imaginaries. Return imaginaries are reflections of the balancing act of the two sides of the self in my respondents' migration trajectories. The return imaginaries are not fixed, but similarly to the self, fluid and mutable over time.

I consider return imaginaries as a form of spatial imaginaries. Spatial imaginaries are, according to Edward Said (1979), collective social narratives and ways of talking about places and spaces. In human geography, the ontology of spatial imaginaries has been approached from several different viewpoints. They have been discussed as semiotic orders, worldviews and representational discourses, and increasingly as being performative discourses where social relations are reproduced and changed, embodied by people in combining both linguistic and material characteristics (Watkins 2015). Often,

spatial imaginaries are engaged in on different levels. ‘Place imaginaries’ represent a fixed spatial area, such as ‘Finland’ (Davis 2011). Chang (2010) discusses ‘idealised space imaginaries’ that signify certain qualities such as Finland as an ‘innovative country’, and ‘spatial transformations’ refer to occurrences taking place over spatialities, such as ‘gentrification’ (Watkins 2015). These definitions of spatial imaginaries focus mostly on the social referents, therefore partly omitting the personal – which is specifically important in studying translocality, and a crucial part in investigating the construction of the sense of self (Antonsich 2010). Return imaginaries are influenced by both social and personal referents: social referents being the attachments to symbolic familiarity, collective cultural awareness of ‘home’ as ‘homeland’; and personal referents meaning personal experiences, memories, and ‘home’ as a domestic space (Antonsich 2010). I bring in both sides in discussing the self and the return imaginaries as an intertwined, malleable construction.

Due to the stretched nature of translocal communities, translocal migrants need to ‘develop possibilities of connected lives’ (Shubin 2015) and find ways to manage their simultaneous situatedness and connectedness to several places (Brickell & Datta 2011). In the core of making sense of self and the multiple places within one’s migration trajectory – making places translocally – lies the constant need to balance between re-enacting one’s culture of origin and creating place-specific, meaningful behaviours in the place of residency. Translocal place-making is about managing several co-presences between localities, gaining and creating, iteratively, several sets of place-specific understanding(s) and cultural and social capitals and negotiating place-specific everyday positionalities, such as status, rights, citizenship, identity, home and belonging (Brickell & Datta 2011; Longhurst *et al.* 2009; Thompson 2017). Imaginaries provide a way to generate, and regulate, connectedness to several meaningful places.

As imagination and the ability to produce imaginaries are, for example for Lennon (2015), the prerequisite for experiencing anything, it can be argued that imaginaries are a necessary part of place-making as places are considered lived experiences (Bolognani 2014; Mueller 2015; Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020). The connections to one’s country – and perhaps more importantly, to one’s localities and communities – of origin, and one’s engagement with the equivalents in the destination country, make ‘emplaced communities extended’ (Appadurai 1996). Through the lens of imaginaries, translocal approach introduces a nuanced view of these extended communities and the embodied, agency-oriented subjective contexts of migrant place-making (Brickell & Datta 2011). Research on translocal migration would benefit from a more adventurous discussion on the linkage between the sense of self, imaginaries, and place-making. Scholars across disciplines have argued that producing imaginaries plays a significant part in migrants’ trajectories (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020; Koikkalainen & Kyle 2016; Bolognani 2016; Mueller 2015; Bolognani 2014; Smith 2011).

I argue that as one needs to start building the relationship between the migrant self and the places in one’s migration trajectory, the subjective return imaginaries function as an important form of translocal place-making by producing a framework for positioning and reaffirming the self. My study participants had moved to the UK from Finland and discussed ‘return’ as a permanent, or a long-term, relocation to Finland. I discuss the participants’ return imaginaries as fluid ‘first-person subjectivities’ (Parameshwar Gaonkar 2002) that mirror one’s temporospatial understanding of the self – an emplaced form of translocal place-making that does not take a form of a fixed plan but rather functions as a framework in which it is possible to reflect and position the self.’

‘Middling migrants’ reasons for migration can be seen as ‘expressing the desire to construct a personal life course’ (Salazar 2014). Navigating the different positionalities within one’s translocal places and making sense of them requires constant meaning-making processes stretching from one site of identification to multiple sites of identification (Oakes & Schein 2006). Migration is a disruptive process for the self (Bolognani 2016), visible in my findings for example as my participants reflect on the culturally perceived moral obligations, they need to negotiate between one’s preferred practises and their families’ expectations, being potentially forced to face personal referents that one does not identify with. Imaginaries help position the self, shaping identities and constructing peoples, times and places – the ‘directions in which we wish, can and will go’ (Cantó-Milà & Seebach 2015: 198). They also produce types of otherness to identify oneself with or against (Salazar 2011). Appadurai’s (1996) observation that imagination is a tool for people to make sense of their daily lives builds a strong basis for arguing that the power of imaginaries is substantial, as ‘people worldwide rely on such imaginaries, from the most spectacular fantasies to the most mundane reveries, to shape identities of themselves and others’ (Salazar 2011). Bolognani (2016) has even argued that the ‘transitional space’ that imaginaries produce is a necessary element in the construction of the sense of self about one’s migrant trajectory.

I will first join the interdisciplinary discussion about migrants’ imagined return and the sense of self, and then discuss the methodology and findings that substantiate the argument of return imaginaries being a conceptual tool that enables a deeper understanding of the making sense of the translocal self.

## Return imaginaries and the sense of self in translocal place-making

Translocal migrants constantly balance their relationships to the ‘heres’ and ‘theres’ in their trajectories. Central to this balancing act is the identifying of the self – reflecting on questions about ‘*who am I?*’ and ‘*Who do I want to be?*’ in relation to multiple translocal sites (Walsh 2011; Saar 2018). By engaging in imaginaries about returning to one’s sending country, migrants can evaluate their relationships with multiple places, and establish their preferred idea of (dis)connecting to these places. Imagination is part of one’s identity-building (Sime *et al.* 2020) and enables identity choices by enabling one to produce the hierarchies between localities in a way that correlates with their preferred sense of self (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020).

Arguably, when thinking about migrants’ ideas of return, the physical return itself is not so important. Instead, the developing projections about the self and one’s lived experiences in specific places become a symbolic, emplaced form of trans-local placemaking (Brickell & Datta 2011). In this paper, I focus on the function of the imagined return as a framework in which one can position and reaffirm the self in relation to several places. I will first explore the idea of ‘return’ and ‘return imaginary’ in scholarly discussion, and then focus on how the negotiation of the sense of self can be seen as a process interlinked to the idea of return.

In the rich body of interdisciplinary research about migrants’ ideas about returning to one’s ‘homeland’, return as a cognitive process has been discussed for example as ‘return considerations’ and how different temporalities of migration impact ideas of return (Erdal & Ezzati 2015). Carling and Pettersen (2014) have discussed ‘return

intentions' that are shaped by migrants' levels of engagement with their sending and receiving countries. 'Projected future lives' after return have been discussed by Hatfield (2011), in her work about British returnees. Return visits as the source of forming an idea of returning has been sided by for example Bolognani (2014), Müller (2015) and Wojtyńska and Skaptadóttir (2020). Finns' return migration has been studied for example related to returnees' reasons for returning and adjusting back to Finland (Saarela & Finnäs 2009; Koikkalainen *et al.* 2016).

Return as something 'at the back of one's mind', where the idea is to return but is – sometimes indefinitely – postponed, has been discussed as the 'return myth' (Brickell & Datta 2011), often in the context of diasporic communities. Recently, migrants' ideas of return have been sided in discussions related to political occurrences in one's host country (Bolognani & Erdal 2017; Sime *et al.* 2020; Fauser 2020; Riikonen 2020). Finns' ideas about returning have been researched for example by Heikkilä (2011), discussing factors influencing Finnish emigrants' willingness to return to Finland, and Saarela and Scott (2020), discussing return migration and naturalisation as 'two elements in the decision process of immigrants' in the context of Finns in Sweden.

Bolognani (2016), in discussing British Pakistanis, has discussed the thought process related to return as 'return fantasy' and Bolognani and Erdal (2017) in discussing Pakistani migrants in the UK and Norway have used the exact term 'return imaginary', referring to it as a 'discursive possibility of return'. In these discussions, the imaginary itself is important in shaping migrants' identities. Bolognani (2016) argues that by imagining one's return as a form of weighting potential futures, one can make sense of the present and this can help one to 'normalise one's migration experience'. Appadurai (1996) has called imaginaries 'social practises that can connect different places'. The sense of self is, then, essentially 'emerging out of range of connections' (Conradson & McKay 2007).

It is this (dis)connectivity between places that is at the core of translocal placemaking and making sense of self in relation to the multiple places. Antonsich (2010) points out that the self is the 'way people relate to place', and that the self is constructed through the meanings the place conveys. In a translocal context, the meanings one processes are stemming from a set of sites. As Brickell & Datta (2011) point out, migrants' local, grounded lives are influenced by various interconnecting translocal imaginaries. Hence, the migrant self is 'scripted through imaginaries of belonging' (King & Christou 2011) 'here' and 'there'.

'Sense of self' and 'return' are subjective constructions that stem from the migrant condition – the social position and lifestyle that Bourdieu (1984) discusses as being assumed through material and physical circumstances and lifestyle. These influence one's attitudes and worldviews and enable one to shape a sense of self (Lister 2009; Lundström & Teitelbaum 2017). Migrants have been accustomed to participating in socially shared imaginaries – the 'socioculturally constructed [...] unspoken representational assemblages' (Salazar 2011) and have created culture- and place-specific subjectivities around the idea of migration – including the idea of return. While returning may be the planned-for outcome at the end of one's migration cycle for some (Lulle & Krisjane 2019) it may be a distant, unrealistic dream for others who, for example, due to not being able to travel, rely on ideas of imagined communities – the mindset of the communities where one migrated from (Anderson 2006; Chatterjee & Desai 2020). Returning can also be perceived as an undesirable outcome of one's migration trajectory (Saar 2018; Fauser 2020). The imbalance between the (in)abilities to access embodied return and having to rely on imagined return naturally affects the

meanings attached to ‘return’ in one’s migration trajectory and influences the way one perceives the self.

Imaginaries form a connective web between migrants, places, meanings and the perceptions of the self. But rather than producing a fixed source of meanings one could tap onto, imaginaries facilitate the process of negotiating the sense of self in relation to different places in different phases in their life course and are mutable. The way migrants reflect on the self against their return to specific locations stems from one’s experiences in places in different contexts that have generated specific space-reading skills for them (Vainikka 2020). The main questions, ‘*who am I?*’ and ‘*who do I want to be?*’ in relation to multiple places are revisited and reflected on by the translocal self. McAdams (1997) refers to the process of negotiating the sense of self as ‘selfing’, meaning that one ‘locates the subjective experiences of oneself’. This generates feelings of agency and enables the recognition of the sense of otherness – a condition for the self (Vainikka 2020). I draw from this view of the self being a mutable awareness that is constantly negotiated, rather than a fixed construction.

Hatfield (2011) points out that migrants may consider ‘return’ differently depending on *where* they think of returning to. They can be thinking of returning to the nation they left, but also to the locally experienced, cultural and personal social dynamics, emotions, sensations and expectations they relate to places. Hence, the ways the self is negotiated in relation to places can be seen as forming on different levels: societal, social and personal. Materiality, history, landscapes and language form societal and social referents to places and personal relations, memories, past experiences, sensory environments and everyday mundanities create personal referents (Antonsich 2010; Conradson & McKay 2007).

Social referents, such as landscapes and language, generate a collective sense of belonging that forms especially in relation to experiences of places in meaningful times in people’s lives (Vainikka 2016). Social environments in specific places become part of ‘social memory’ and are entangled with personal moments in these places (Antonsich 2010). Both social and personal referents are important when narrating the place as ‘home’ – home can mean the actual domestic setting where everyday is lived or the symbolic spatiality that one links with the feeling of familiarity (Antonsich 2010). When approaching it from the opposite perspective, the perception of ‘societal alienation’ is the lack of identification with the societal atmosphere in one’s sending country, and ‘material alienation’ is the motivation behind moving to gain a better economic situation (Robins 2019). Robins (2019) points out that when one moves because of societal alienation, the motivation is often expressed through ‘quality of life’ that is not necessarily defined through materiality but is often cultural and psychological. The value of this ‘quality of life’ comes through especially in the reflections on return, where it is often described through societal qualities (such as atmosphere, bureaucracy and image) in both sending and destination countries.

In addition, return imaginaries acknowledge both social and personal relevance of places for the self. It can be argued that a return imaginary consists of two frames: the outer layer, including societal and social referents, and an inner layer, including personal referents. The layers function together, but are of different importance, depending on the way the self identifies with them and evaluates their importance. The return imaginary can, hence, be that of a static, romanticized, idealized, frozen timespace that represents specific qualities in one’s past, or that of a dynamic, forward-moving social space that one wants to (re)join. ‘Return’ can also be an idea of a spatial representation of qualities that are not correlating with one’s sense of self and something that one



does not wish to be a part of. As a result, the idea of return differs between individuals and migrant groups on the levels of *possibilities* and *preferences* that are available.

## Who am I?

Return imaginaries consider different types of place attachments, often appearing to first highlight the self as an embodied ‘display’ of a particular place (Antonsich 2010). This is seen through the reflections of ‘there’ that appear to narrate an emphasised national identity for example through reflecting on societal discourses (such as ‘a safe country’). These discourses position the self within the familiar frames of continuity and stability (Diener & Hagen 2022) in one’s ‘place of origin’. In this way, people narrate their positionality as members of a particular group.

Return imaginaries are often narrated around social referents such as the climate, cultural ways of interacting, and collectively shared know-how related to specific places and in this way, produce static, ‘idealised space imaginaries’ (Watkins 2015; Chang 2010). They reflect a general spatial quality of the country, or region, of origin as a whole. These imaginaries convey attachment to place as a permanent construct of identification that represents the emotionally charged allegory of ‘roots’ (Diener & Hagen 2022).

While these imaginaries include also personal referents, such as memories of specific times and people in one’s life, they appear subsidiary to social referents. In these imaginaries, the self is reflecting its positionality through having become accustomed to social referents that offer a sense of continuity and that can be used to form a feeling of connectedness to ‘past locals’ (Laviolette 2012; Vainikka 2016; Laviolette 2003). This type of return imaginary reflects the negotiation of the question ‘*who am I?*’ that acknowledges being a member of a spatially and statically defined ‘us’ (Laviolette 2003) ‘there’, but is perhaps more invested in the personal referents and local meanings ‘here’ when positioning the self.

Translocal migrants also produce return imaginaries related to their country of origin that include more subjective, emotion-laden, narrowed-down snapshots of idealised spaces that are stemming from socio-cultural discourses in a particular place and are connected to specific personal experiences and meaningful social relations. These types of return imaginaries appear as dynamic and forward-going entanglements of social and personal referents, and the self invests in negotiating its positionality through projecting its situatedness in the everyday mundanities ‘there’. The self often appears to identify more with specific locals rather than with the wider frame of nation. These imaginaries appear to negotiate the ‘*who am I?*’ in relation to perceiving place as ‘personal’ (Relph 1976) and as an affiliation: familiarity that resonates with the ‘real self’ (Antonsich 2010, paraphrasing Cuba and Hummon 1993).

## Who do I want to be?

One’s evolving relationships with places force the re-negotiation of the self and the past solutions to the question ‘*who am I?*’. Return imaginaries carry with them the past cultural and social ties and the pressure of balancing between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ situatedness. In making sense of the ‘new’ migrant self in relation to multiple places, one has to negotiate the level on which the self prefers to connect to and develop, the place-specific sociocultural knowledge. Saar (2018), in discussing UK-based Estonians,



argues that comparisons between sociocultural dynamics, temporal and intra-subjective (comparing different parts of one's identity in decision-making) aspects influence the ideas of return. According to Saar (2018), the types of comparisons related to one's idea of returning enable migrants to relate to the question '*who do I want to be?*'.

Through subjective, lived experiences, places maintain, and produce, different types of knowledge for individuals. On a personal level, the 'sense of autobiographical insiderness' (Antonsich 2010) contains knowledge accumulated through life events in specific places. On societal and sociocultural levels, place-specific understanding of how people, places and societal discourses are interlinked can be understood as 'mutually possessed knowing' (Candea 2010). Both sets of knowledge are subjected to friction as new experiences and encounters influence migrants' place-specific understandings. Actively nurturing a place-specific understanding correlates with the aspiration for continued social reproduction; and in turn with the willingness to belong to a specific group (Bourdieu 1984; Ryan & Mulholland 2015). Hence, the idea of one's return offers a frame in which to evaluate one's belonging by choosing (not) to keep accumulating place-specific knowledge.

Spatial imaginaries contain 'otherings', taking the view that people and places are different and unequal (Sharp 2009). Evaluating 'otherness' within return imaginaries is important in seeking the answer to '*who do I want to be?*'. The process of othering enables the self to define itself (Vainikka 2020). An example of othering within return imaginaries can be seen as forming through the idea of return visits. Carling *et al.* (2015: 26) argue that return visits 'enable investment in social capital'. This can, in some cases, influence the decision to actually return. Carling *et al.* (2015) also claim the opposite, and I agree with them that coming face to face with the sociocultural knowledge that one has chosen to detach the self from may cause migrants not to want to invest in accumulating it. This in turn influences their ideas of staying in their destination countries. While return visits are central to the migrant experience (King & Raghuram 2013), it is important to consider how the mere *idea* of return visits plays a part in the formation of return imaginaries.

Through visits, one reproduces the local and maintains, re-establishes – or abandons – connections to close relationships, culture and roots (Müller 2015; Tan & Yeoh 2011; Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020). During visits, one revisits past social and personal referents and evaluates them against the self. These evaluations generate 'imagined spacetimes' that are returned to when reflecting on return visits. Imagined spacetimes contain nostalgic idealisations of particular spaces that are 'frozen in time', but also undesired imaginings of self 'here' and 'there'. As people tend to shape memories in a way that serves one's definition of self in particular phases in one's narrative, the confrontation with the memory and actual reality can lead to a shifting sense of self (Marschall 2017). As a result, the 'interaction between the present and the past' (Pearce 2012) results in the identification of place attachments and place detachments. They enable one to experience different ways of feeling (dis)connected (Sime *et al.* 2020).

It could be argued that 'othering' generates imaginaries of 'spatial transformation' (Watkins 2015; Massey 2005) where one hopes that certain aspects of spaces would turn into something 'better'. When looked at from the return imaginaries' point of view, it is observable that while negotiating the positionalities of the self between places, translocal migrants engage in both 'idealised spaces' and 'spatial transformation' imaginaries not only on the national and global levels but also on their personal, subjective, local-local levels. Through reflecting on the questions '*who am I?*' and '*who do I want to be?*', migrants make decisions related to their trajectories (Carling *et al.* 2015).

The decisions reflect one’s responses to ‘the power of images and narratives through the operation of memory and desire’ (Conradson & McKay 2007).

The sifting place attachments and detachments produce ‘axes of perspective’ (Diener & Hagen 2022) that allow migrants, through distance, to reflect on their relationships with places from different angles. In return imaginaries, this is seen in the inner layer of the imaginary where people begin to narrate more social referents and generate othering against referents they no longer consider as corresponding to their sense of self. This creates ‘situated and situational place attachments’ that allow them to identify, simultaneously, with a heightened sense of national identity and with a personalised, temporal, and situational self that applies individual agency to one’s trajectory. This lets them, if necessary, dismiss the national identity in favour of individual identity, and vice versa in situations where the self needs to narrate itself ‘to a particular audience’ (Diener & Hagen 2022).

Context, data and methods

Approximately 16 000–23 000 Finns live in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2021), most in the Greater London area (Embassy of Finland, London 2022). Finns’ translocality in the UK from a place-making point of view is not extensive in scholarly discussion, despite the UK’s popularity as a destination country (Table 1). Gawlewicz & Sotkasiira (2020) have called Finns an under-researched, ‘hidden population’ in the UK. Finns’ settlement experiences are, hence, important to bring into the discussion about European middling migrants’ trajectories.

The sociocultural atmosphere where one grows up influences the way one perceives what a person can do and forms a background for one’s available choices and actions (Ahmed 2007). The idea of a ‘Nordic Utopia’ or the ‘Nordic Welfare State’ has shaped Finns’ perception of the self. The conceptualising of equality, independence, social welfare and the ability to question social circumstances (Lister 2009) have embedded the idea of the Nordic societies being “the best of all possible thinkable worlds” (Kangas & Palme 2005) into the socio-cultural imaginaries about the self for many Finland-born Finns. This has generated an idea of individual control – a feature that is characteristic for Finns’ migration trajectories in the UK, as also seen in the context of Brexit (Riikonen 2020).

Table 1. Top three destination countries (people of Finnish heritage moving from Finland) (Statistics Finland 2022).

2000		2005		2010		2015		2016	
Sweden	3524	Sweden	2929	Sweden	2341	Sweden	2582	Sweden	2826
Norway	1215	UK	1069	UK	790	UK	931	UK	1044
UK	731	Spain	570	Spain	493	Germany	646	Germany	723
2017		2018		2019		2020			
Sweden	2560	Sweden	2342	Sweden	1999	Sweden	1579		
UK	1005	UK	1029	UK	891	UK	715		
Germany	653	Germany	677	Spain	606	Germany	511		

As part of the Nordic background discourse, Finns in the UK produce so-called ‘quality discourses’, being narrated as types of ‘idealised space’ imaginaries. This means perceiving ‘the Finnish way of doing things’ (for example the material culture, access to health care, education) equalling to ‘the best’; and something one can base one’s expectations on when making sense of similar things elsewhere. The quality discourses function in two ways: respondents often mentioned that on one hand, the ‘Finnish education system is the best in the world’, and on the other hand ‘Finland is a narrow-minded country’. Quality discourses became an important factor in Finns’ return imaginaries.

Especially during the pre-Brexit era of free movement – a point in time when the majority of the participants had relocated to the UK – settling down in the UK has meant a major personal commitment to the country, stemming from the self-actualisation needs that many interviewees state as their reason for moving abroad (Riikonen 2020). The ability to seek fulfilment for the sense of adventure and study and work opportunities have been aided by the ability to ‘reverse one’s decisions to migrate and return’ (Carling *et al.* 2015). This has been the setting shaping Finns’ migration to the UK, especially in pre-Brexit times. Brexit was, however, not excessively mentioned when contemplating returning, but was acknowledged. This indicated that after the initial shock, respondents had been, gradually, regaining control of their preferred migration trajectory where they were again able to embark on a life of a translocal migrant by ‘building one’s identity through mobility and lifestyle choices’ (Salazar 2014).

As part of a wider research project exploring Finns’ translocal place-making in the UK, this paper discusses digital ethnographic data from 41 semi-structured interviews with Finns in the UK. The respondents were recruited through a Facebook discussion group, aimed at Finns living in the UK. The group is one of the most active groups for Finns in the UK (over 3500 members in 2022). As I had lived in the UK, I was a member of the Facebook group where the interviewees were recruited but did not know any of the study participants personally. In using social media in ethnographic research, it is important to gain an understanding of the platform from both technical and cultural viewpoints, as knowledge of the setting is mandatory (Giglietto *et al.* 2012). Hence, it was justified for me to be part of the social media community I was studying. My researcher’s positionality was active and transparent: before the interviews, I introduced the study, my background and the way the data would be used, and obtained informed consent from all participants.

The interview themes focused on the participants’ translocal everyday, the ways they kept in touch with Finland, and return visit practises. The main theme was not the idea of ‘return’. However, two questions brought out the significance of respondents’ ideas of return: ‘How do you see Finland’s role in your life now?’ and ‘Have you planned to return to Finland permanently?’. In addition, respondents often brought up the ‘projected futures’ if they were to return while reflecting on their translocal everyday in general. Three different groups emerged from the data: ‘objectors’, who refused the idea of return; dwellers, who were indecisive about returning; and ‘home-goers’, who wanted to return. Based on the participants’ ideas about return, I sorted them into these groups. I then identified patterns in the data, related to participants’ takes on their translocal everydayness and return visits, and a thematic analysis was performed with Atlas.ti software.

Respondents had settled in various areas in the UK (Figure 1.) and moved from several areas in Finland. Most were from the capital region (Helsinki and surrounding areas),

but several were from Eastern, Western, and Northern Finland. The majority of the participants were female (38 females, 3 males); a common occurrence in qualitative data about Finns in the UK (Koikkalainen 2013; Gawlewicz & Sotkasiira 2020). Statistically, migration to the UK from Finland is dominated by women. Between 1990 and 2020, 63% of Finnish citizens emigrating to the UK were women (Statistics Finland 2022). If statistics on Finnish nationals’ emigration from Finland to the UK and vice versa during 1990–2020 are compared, relationally more men moved to Finland from the UK than women. Many female participants in my study mention having stayed in the UK due to settling down with a British partner, despite originally having made plans for a temporary stay. While it would require a more thorough discussion than what is possible in the scope of this paper, it can be suggested that this partly contributes to the gender bias in many studies about Finns in the UK. Furthermore, Koikkalainen (2013) notes that Finnish women in the UK are more willing to participate in studies. Similarly, Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira (2020) note this in their study where they tried to recruit Finnish males for their dataset.



Figure 1. Study participants’ areas of residence in the UK

Most respondents were in the age group of 31–40 years and held a degree in higher education. The main reasons for moving to the UK were studying, a sense of adventure and career possibilities, echoing the findings of Koikkalainen (2019), and being characteristics of ‘middling migrants’ (Conradson & Latham 2005). Their connections to other Finns in the UK varied from active participation in Finnish networks to having hardly any interest in them. One respondent mentioned that they did not stay in touch with other Finns as they were ‘no longer depending on one another’ after becoming more settled, highlighting the independent nature of Finns’ migration experiences.

Due to the geographical distance and Covid-19, the interviews were conducted via Facebook’s chat feature, instant messaging (IM) – a method seen as one of the ‘innovations in ethnography’ (Seligmann & Estes 2020). It was selected due to both its efficiency and social media’s role as a natural everyday activity among the participants, an advantage noted by Barratt (2012) and Kähkö (2020). However, while data from social media platforms are easy to harvest, it poses questions about data protection and privacy as data is often stored online, potentially resulting in personal data being leaked to third parties. Both my data sets were anonymised, taken offline, and stored on two external hard drives.

Due to the lack of face-to-face dynamics, potentially resulting in more interpretative data, it was important to establish mutual trust (Barratt 2012). Participants indicated using social media as a means to maintain their social dynamics in the UK and Finland. Hence, respondents routinely integrated participation as a part of their normal everyday. Participation filled in mundane spacetimes and thus eradicated the feeling of ‘being interviewed’. This follows Snee *et al.*’s (2016) observation that the internet is ‘embedded, embodied and everyday’. As I introduced my background and casually chatted with participants at the beginning of the interviews, it was easier for them to relate to me and talk more freely. Links to similarities in our experiences were mentioned, making the atmosphere light. Furthermore, participants were able to choose the language (English or Finnish) they preferred to use, an important factor in having a sense of power in expressing themselves (James & Busher 2011).

Hitchings and Latham (2020) point out that ethnographic approach decreases the ‘personal distance typical of other techniques’. The ethnographic lens allowed making observations through my personal experiences. My subjectivity and my analysis’ validity need to be reflected. As several years had passed between my personal experiences in the UK and collecting and analysing my data, I had gained distance to the ways I negotiated my translocalities and how I felt about returning to Finland at the time. Furthermore, as my participants described very different life situations from what I had experienced, I was able to reflect on their stories more objectively.

## Staying, leaving and somewhere in between: three ways of imagining a returning Self

The three groups that emerged from my data narrated partially collective, but still substantially different, return imaginaries. They stemmed from entangled types of spatial imaginaries, reflecting the self on social and personal levels. Participants brought up associations with geographical locations as fixed spatial areas, such as ‘the north’, the numerous positive and negative qualities related to Finland, and the acknowledged societal occurrences such as ‘internationalisation’. These wider spatial imaginaries were

translated into more specific ‘quality discourses’ about Finland, such as ‘safe, clean, well-functioning but boring country’, and brought up social referents (Antonsich 2010) like the materialities, history, landscape, and language in Finland. The social self (Antonsich 2010) appeared to construct ‘an outer frame’ for the emerging return imaginaries. Reflecting one’s preferences in relation to the qualities in Finland enabled respondents to position themselves within their current life situations.

After narrating a seemingly collective idea of Finland, seeing it as a symbolic space of familiarity (Antonsich 2010), respondents started recounting personal referents like memories, social dynamics, personal preferences and past experiences (Antonsich 2010). These began to reveal differences in the way participants imagined return, and the personal self started to form an inner, more personalised frame, for the return imaginaries.

## Objectors

The majority of respondents in this category had lived in the UK for over 10 years, some over 30 or more, but some had arrived just a few years ago. Objectors articulated clearly that they did not see returning as a preferred choice. They expressed their imagined return through societal alienation (Robins 2019) and described feeling distanced from Finland. They identified against qualities like ‘cold climate’ and Finland’s social atmosphere; but also narrated an attachment to Finland through social referents (Antonsich 2010) such as ‘quiet, beautiful nature’ and ‘the snow in the winter and the sea in the summer’. Some also brought up the familiar sensoriums, telling me that ‘every scent and flavour is so familiar, [Finland] feels so much like ‘mine’’. Objectors’ emotional attachments to Finland, hence, were narrated mostly through social referents and not so much through personal ones. Objectors situated their personal referents more in the UK; and in this way, constructed their social everyday ‘around local meanings’ (Vainikka 2016), detached from those in Finland. Tuula, who moved 50 years ago, explains:

*I would absolutely not [move back to Finland]! This long-distance love suits me best because the way Finns communicate (I mean they don’t communicate) ... gets on my nerves. I would not get on there [Finland] anymore.*

Tuula’s mention of a ‘long-distance love’ is an interesting one and is brought up in many objectors’ narratives as a strong emotional link to the ‘idea’ of Finland. It highlights Finland’s permanence as the ‘place of one’s roots’.

## Dwellers

The dwellers were the largest group in the dataset. Most of them had lived in the UK for 2–10 years, but some had stayed over 20, or even 30 years. Their idea of return was constructed around the possibility to do so should one choose to. Many expressed returning being a distant possibility, even though not an impossible idea, as opposed to objectors. Dwellers reflected on the societal and social referents linked to Finland, especially the quality of everyday life. While dwellers also described attachments towards Finnish landscapes and nature as a spatial identification of ‘us’ (Vainikka 2016), their social referents were often expressed related to personal and professional possibilities,



such as work-life balance, Finland's reputation in the world, and the labour market. Dwellers stayed up to date with any requirements for maintaining free movement (in past-Brexit times) and reflected on the possibilities of 'fitting in' in Finland should they decide to return. For dwellers, social referents were linked to the societal discourses of how well the everyday would function should they choose to return to Finland. They wanted to maintain a realistic idea of their positionality, not idealising one place over another:

*I see Finland as a place where I visit family, and where I have good memories of. But I don't see Finland as anything else than my childhood home, not my own [current] home anymore. I still love Finland, especially the nature and winter feel so much more beautiful now than I thought when I was younger [and lived in Finland]. But when I read the news, my idea of Finland gets a bit tarnished, and it feels like things are not that much better there than what they are here. (Sari, 7 years in the UK)*

In dwellers' imaginaries, social and personal referents were entangled and appeared to represent their choice of leaving. Often, dwellers highlighted Finland as a place that 'used to' be their home, and that it was a great place to visit for holidays – but that it was also great to return to the UK.

## Home-goers

Most home-goers had lived in the UK for 3–7 years, but some had stayed over 10, and some almost 30 years. Home-goers collectively expressed a willingness to return, despite not necessarily acting on this wish. They reflected on the aspects of the Finnish society that they missed. In this way, home-goers' social referents were, similarly to dwellers', related to the societal qualities in Finland, and Finland was seen as a fluid, forward-moving social spatiality and something home-goers would like to 'jump on board' of.

At the same time, home-goers described social and personal referents related to everyday life in the UK that they were othering against those in Finland, especially related to the mundane everydayness. Hanna, who moved four years ago, explains:

*Frankly, I still feel that the Brits are a bit snobbish, compared to Finns. It is much harder to find friends here, even though I thought differently. People use small talk but don't make friends as easily... I feel the lack of space even more now. Narrow streets and the way houses are so close together make me feel anxious.*

In home-goers imaginaries, the perceptions about everyday life in Finland created discourses of trust and a sense of security (Vainikka 2016) – not only on the national level but scaled up: one respondent highlighted that they did not want to 'live outside the EU', reflecting an identification to a formerly perceived 'safe space' that had been disrupted by Brexit. Home-goers narrated a feeling of being comfortable in the way of living the everyday in Finland, and in their imaginaries, Finland was seen as an 'object of emotional identification' (Vainikka 2016) perhaps in a more mundane, concrete way than in objectors' and dwellers' imaginaries.

## Who am I? Positioning the self through (dis)connectedness to the everydayness in Finland

Following the everyday occurrences in Finland was of different importance for different groups, based on their idea of returning. The level on which the ‘original, timely’ sociocultural capital was maintained appeared to be functioning as a way to regulate the intensity of attachment and detachment to and from Finland. As Ryan & Mulholland (2015) point out, a desired membership in a particular group can be linked to the willingness to maintain and obtain specific socio-cultural capital.

Distancing oneself from the active, everyday life co-presences and place-specific knowledge in Finland appeared to be a prevalent theme in the objectors’ return imaginaries. Detaching themselves on a personal level (not staying ‘in the know’ of everyday routines) appeared as empowering, keeping them on their chosen path in their migration trajectory. This highlighted their decision of being independent, translocal migrants who were able to negotiate the spaces between ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ (Brickell & Datta 2011) and make preferred ‘identity choices’ (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020). In objectors’ narratives, ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ appeared entangled, reflecting their identification with Finland as a symbolic, familiar space (Antonsich 2010) rather than the arena for their actual, situated domesticity. Objectors appeared to construct an idea of the self ‘there’ based on the physical features and social atmosphere that they had gotten used to in their pre-migration times and nurtured past emotional ties to maintain ways of ‘seeing’ Finland in their lives (Vainikka 2016).

It is important to note that despite the seemingly detached idea about connecting to the everydayness in Finland, the social dynamics and knowledge transfer that were produced from below – from the very core of migrants’ subjective social dynamics, like the origin of family ties – was still important. Some expressed a deep sense of connectedness to their *past* social dynamics by explaining that despite Finland not having a role in their everyday lives in the UK, they had strong emotional ties towards it:

*Despite Finland not having a big role in my everyday life, it has a big role in my heart [...] I have had the chance to grow up in Finland, and I am who I am because of that. (Tuula)*

These personal referents linked to past experiences stemming from respondents’ reflections about Finland’s role in their lives revealed how objectors used the ‘cumulative archive of personal spatial experience’ (Paasi 2001) in negotiating their preferred positionality in relation to the UK and Finland.

Some objectors who had arrived more recently were in the process of starting to other the familiar social referents that they had previously identified with in Finland. Sami, who had lived in the UK for three years, described that he had no intentions of returning:

*I feel like I am growing apart from Finland. My everyday life is influenced by this other cultural environment [in the UK], and I don’t even speak Finnish that often anymore. I don’t have a direct link to the Finnish culture now, and I have not really even missed it. My social circles consist of mostly non-Finns. And in Finland, the winters are too dark and long, and the climate in general [is not nice].*

Sami’s excerpt shows how the process of othering begins to guide the self towards the identities it feels it belongs to (Vainikka 2020). Sami’s quote also demonstrates how

othering attributes different meanings to the social and personal referents in the process of reflecting the self in relation to multiple places (Antonsich 2010).

Many dwellers, on the other hand, identified feelings of connectedness that were generated by participating in the mundane everydayness during visits, like using the Finnish language and the ‘familiar’ behaviours, re-confirming to them that they were, in fact, still part of shared cultural knowledge, but at the same time highlighting the fact that one’s ‘real life’ was somewhere else. While keeping the option open for returning, they simultaneously wanted distance that appeared to help position their sense of self:

*[During visits] there is always the expectation, that you can live, for a moment, the Finnish life (which is very different here in the UK). There is always the certain holiday feeling because the ‘everyday stuff’ is not weighing one down.’ (Katariina, 6 years in the UK)*

Wanting distance positioned made dwellers highlight themselves as Finns who *had left* Finland. They talked about Finland being ‘boring’ and ‘too safe an option’, but at the same time, they expressed a strong feeling of distant belonging that enabled them to ‘top up’ the familiarity and evaluate their Finnish identity by participating, momentarily, in the familiar everydayness in Finland. Dwellers appeared to temporarily ‘encapsulate their identities’ (Vainikka 2016) through ‘replenishing’ their sense of self as members of a specific group, conveying a message that their personal selves were still attached to Finland. Veera, who has lived in the UK for 10 years, describes how she has built her life in the UK with ‘social networks, work, apartment and hobbies’, and that she momentarily reflects about returning, but doesn’t see it as a very realistic plan:

*It is always lovely to visit [Finland]. There is always the feeling of anticipation, and excitement about seeing family and friends and getting to live, momentarily, that Finnish life (that is so different here in the UK). And of course, a certain ‘holiday feeling’ is always attached to [visiting Finland], because there, the everyday stuff is not weighing one down.*

At the same time, they highlighted the need for separation to strengthen the novelty value of themselves as Finns in the UK:

*When I first moved to the UK, I thought that [Finland is] a really crappy country; its dark and cold. [...] Now I’m proud to say I’m Finnish because not everyone knows where it is, I speak a language [...] that they don’t understand and I love going to Starbucks and seeing all the different versions of how they write my name, it’s actually funny. (Leena, in the UK for 5 years)*

In this way, dwellers appeared to identify with Finland using it as a ‘display’ (Antonsich 2010): through communicating their Finnishness to ‘others’ in the UK, they were able to choose an ‘in-between-identity’ that portrayed them as ‘more than local’ in the UK, but as ‘representatives’ of a place elsewhere (Vainikka 2016).

For the home-goers, the imagined connections to the everyday flows in Finland were important. For some, the activities during visits included participating in the everyday of their family members (helping out). Being able to participate was felt as important, suggesting that ‘re-establishing relationships in concrete ways’ was important and helped sustain the relationships despite the distance (Tan & Yeoh 2011).

Return as something the participants dreamed about doing – the so-called ‘someday imaginaries’ (Bolognani 2016) were expressed through narratives where home-goers imagined themselves as living the everyday in Finland and were reflecting on how they

would fit into it once there. Several mentioned missing the Finnish work-life balance and the proximity to friends and family. At the same time, they reflected on the potential difficulties in ‘fitting in’ to the Finnish society after having been away. They did, nevertheless, express willingness to connect to the Finnish society despite the everyday not always being positive:

*Finland is scarier than before. I have started freaking out about the labour market and taxation. [...] This [taxation being high] is a major thing if, for example, you [family] return to Finland and your spouse won't find employment immediately. (Hanna)*

Home-goers projected the time when they would ‘have to come back as a tourist’ to alleviate the foreseen sorrow of leaving the UK for Finland. It appeared that the performed return imaginary was guiding the everyday life in the UK and started to prepare one’s shifting migrant identity towards that of a returnee, despite the actual relocating being unclear. While home-goers expressed a personal willingness to return, they often mentioned it stemming from the desires of for example their spouses who, instead of a return imaginary, were nurturing a pre-migration imaginary related to Finland as they were ‘big fans of the Finnish nature and culture’. This interesting intersection between a pre-migration imaginary and a return imaginary being performed simultaneously through family members, but through different place attachments (one returning to ‘home’ and one relocating to ‘new home’) created a power narrative that would need further investigation. Home-goers appeared to strongly identify as Finns, members of a particular group, in the UK – but their perception of this membership differed from that of the dwellers in that home-goers did not seek to highlight their departure, but the distinctiveness of being connected to Finland.

## Who do I want to be? Re-affirming the self through return visits

During return visits, my respondents appeared to have been reflecting on both their pre-migration times and the times that ‘would be’ in the case of returning. The accumulated perceptions related to visits ‘home’ were of great importance in the participants’ ideas of the sense of self.

Coming face to face with one’s past and present selves causes friction (Marschall 2017) and ‘reflects the connections between migrants and their environment’ (Shubin 2015). Visits provide a platform for reflecting on one’s preferred idea of the self by offering ‘conflicting experiences of difference and attachment’ (Carling & al. 2015).

Objectors expressed mixed feelings about such visits, ranging from enjoying connecting to their family and friends to feeling morally obligated to visit to satisfy family members’ expectations, a theme discussed by Mueller (2015) and Wojtyńska and Skaptadóttir (2020). Their own expectations about relaxation especially during the ‘Finnish summer’ that several interviewees in all groups highlighted as a big source of enjoyment were sometimes shadowed by having to participate in more social interactions than they felt comfortable with. Some described emotional reactions to the sensory environments in Finland during such visits, and feeling connected to the place that represented *past* familiarity:

*I start to well up because the homeland feels so 'own'. All the scents and flavours are familiar [...] (Sirpa, in the UK for 30 years)*

Dwellers expressed nostalgic ideas about visiting Finland. On one hand, they brought up the quality discourses about Finland that enabled them to identify against it ('there is a lot of hidden racism and people are rude'), but simultaneously, they brought up qualities that they valued as having in the socio-cultural fabric that made them members of a unique group ('The Finnish society functions well, there is a lot of space, it is genuine and close to nature'). In dwellers', and objectors', return imaginaries the nostalgic, as well as undesirous, spacetimes, appeared to function as a resource – an idea of Finland as a 'breathing space' to which one could but does not have to, return. Fauser (2020), in talking about German lifestyle migrants in Turkey, similarly points out that the option of returning to one's country of origin paradoxically enables staying in one's new host country. Carling *et al.* (2015: 18) also state that 'a secure status abroad creates opportunities for return'.

Most home-goers described feeling melancholic at the end of return visits. While many mention there being moral obligations to visit, the connections to the 'familiar sensory environments' and joining a particular sociocultural pace were important:

*There are certain things that I don't experience in London, one of them being the rustling of leaves in the forest... that you can't hear much here [in London]. [...] And I prefer spending holidays in Finland... Holidays in the UK are bothersome because everything is always so crowded. In Finland, the holidays are quieter. (Kirsi, in the UK for 10 years)*

Through reflecting on past and future spacetimes, all groups generated place-specific emotional support structures that they used to re-affirm their sense of an independent self that knew where they came from, and where they wanted to be in their present migration trajectory. This echoes the findings of Carling *et al.* (2015), stating that the ideas of return are shaped by multiple types of attachments. It is important to note that these attachments can also be negative 'detachments' that can 'dampen the appeal of return' (Carling *et al.* 2015). These conflicts are important in the re-affirming of the sense of self, as they generate positive and negative emotional anchors within return imaginaries. Through imagined returns, all groups were able to gain a personal understanding of the perceived validity of their senses of self, and construct a subjective, imagined support structure within the larger web of imaginaries within their migration trajectories.

The return imaginaries that my participants narrated were snapshots into their current translocal lives and reflected their sense of self as it was perceived in that particular phase in their trajectories. It is notable, of course, that the idea of return is being re-negotiated as one's migration narrative continues and one re-negotiates the sense of self. In all of the three groups, I had respondents who had lived in the UK for varying lengths of time. Some explained that they had, at times, been reflecting on returning as a likely possibility, but had abandoned the idea as they had accumulated more personal referents in the UK. Others, likewise, expressed that they had not planned to return, but had had to start thinking about it as a likely option either because they wanted to, or felt obliged to, re-join their families in Finland, or because they felt it would be better for their families in the UK. However, their shifting ideas of return were not directly dependent on the duration of time they had been away from Finland, but rather on their life situation, noted also by Erdal and Ezzati (2015). They highlight that the shifting feelings of belonging are perceived differently by everybody, and depend on the

life situation within which one has decided to become a translocal migrant. This shows how the translocal sense of self considers the situatedness and temporality of social and personal referents that it identifies with.

## Conclusions

This paper has discussed how translocal migrants' subjective return imaginaries enable the negotiation of the sense of self in translocal placemaking. Specifically, it has sought an answer to the question '*what is the role of return imaginaries in negotiating the sense of self if Finns' translocal place-making in the UK?*'. Two angles were discussed: positioning the self through (dis)connectedness to the everydayness in Finland, and reaffirming the self through reflecting on return visits.

For objectors, applying the preferred amount of distancing was important. This freed them to consider Finland as a resource that would be there for them should they need it, and placed them as independent migrants in their translocal trajectory. The objectors' ideas about returning reflected that of a 'rejection' or 'defensive' fantasy, discussed by Bolognani (2016) where the option to leave and return to one's country of origin 'if things go wrong' is central to one of her study participants.

Dwellers regulated their (dis)connectedness to 'replenish' their sense of self as members of a specific group in Finland and their novelty value as Finns in the UK and emphasised themselves as persons who had left Finland. For home-goers, the idea of the self as a Finn, a member of a particular group, was of great importance. They highlighted themselves as having strong connectedness to the everydayness in Finland. Their sense of self was shifting towards a returnee, fostering a mix of 'wished and intended returns' (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015).

This study contributes three important points to the interdisciplinary research on how 'middling' migrants negotiate the sense of self through return imaginaries. Firstly, by discussing a migrant group that is not very widely researched in the UK context, this study widens the understanding of Finns' migration trajectories and the way they relate to Finland in the UK. Secondly, while showing how translocal place-making considers several types of 'situated and situational' place attachments in relation to return, this research shows the simultaneous importance of the place detachments, often discussed in the shadows of place attachments. Processing detachments in Finns' migration trajectories is a central part of the negotiation of their sense of self. As Bolognani and Erdal (2017) point out, negative thinking processes do not mean less commitment to host or sending countries. Thinking about return 'points to the high intensity, reflective interaction between the personal and the external world' (Bolognani 2016).

Thirdly, the return imaginaries are formed on both social and societal, as well as personal levels. These are tangled together but enable one to negotiate the self in different ways. By offering a framework for negotiating the sense of self on societal and social levels, return imaginaries enable the identification with a collective, static familiarity that one can reflect on in terms of roots, national identity and embodied representation as a member of a particular, spatial 'us'. On a personal level, return imaginaries offer a way to evaluate one's connectedness to the mundane familiarities in several places, and reflect on one's return in relation to the places' ongoing everydayness.

Return imaginaries drive the sense of self negotiations, constantly bringing up friction in the self-place relationships. This results in the ongoing need to evaluate the



validity of one's ideas about returning. Return imaginaries can be seen as 'feedback mechanisms' (Bolognani & Erdal 2017) that keep the migrant narrative going. Despite drawing on the experiences of Finns with diverse lengths of stay in the UK, it would be intriguing to conduct a more in-depth analysis into the differences in UK-based Finns' return imaginaries over time, as well as focus more on the issues of gender bias among Finns in the UK. These are certainly topics for future research.

## Endnotes

1. 'Middling migrants', according to Conradson and Latham (2005), mean migrants who move for other than economic reasons, are relatively highly educated, and possess middle class status in both their sending and destination countries.

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