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The Anthropocene as framed by the far right

Dan Bailey and Joe Turner

'Homeland', borders, and business-as-usual

FRAMING THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

It has long been accepted amongst various communities of academics that both political ideas and discourses matter in framing political issues, rendering actors and phenomena visible or invisible, and shaping political outcomes.¹ A pertinent example of this is the phrase ‘Anthropocene’ – used to denote a new geological era in which human activity has significant impacts on planetary ecosystems – but which is itself contestable for the phenomena it captures and elides. Some have put forward the alternative term of ‘capitalocene’ to reflect the understanding that the primary driving force of ecological change in this era is not human activity *per se*, but the capitalist systems which continue to drive resource extraction, greenhouse gas emissions, and rising inequalities.²

“The far right discourse on the ecological crisis has historically been to deny its existence”

The ecological crisis is subject to a series of political discourses which each imperfectly capture the complex myriad of social, economic, and technological dynamics that are degrading planetary ecosystems. These discourses shape the public understanding of the environmental crisis and the appropriate strategies for its resolution, with each discourse purveyed by distinctive but evolving political factions and social forces.^{3,4}

The far right discourse on the ecological crisis has historically been to deny its existence.^{5,6} This denial has taken many forms, but most commonly the science of ecological degradation has been disavowed and this has been matched by the refusal to accept any national responsibility for addressing the unfolding global ecological catastrophe. Customarily, the scientific evidence has been pronounced as a conspiracy designed to benefit ‘globalist elites’ or a plot to undermine national sovereignty through the ratification of multilateral agreements. This has served to bolster resistance to effective environmental policies.

However, this environmental discourse is no longer as central to the far right movement as it was in the 2000s and 2010s. Increasingly, climate science is tacitly accepted, but the finger of blame is being disingenuously pointed towards the far right’s traditional enemies.

- 1 Carstensen M B and Schmidt V A (2016) ‘Power through, over and in ideas: Conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23(3): 318–337
- 2 Moore J W (2016) *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism*, PM Press
- 3 McCright A M, Dunlap R E and Marquart-Pyatt S T (2016) ‘Political ideology and views about climate change in the European Union’, *Environmental Politics*, 25(2): 338–358
- 4 Kulin J, Johansson Sevä I and Dunlap R E (2021) ‘Nationalist ideology, right wing populism, and public views about climate change in Europe’, *Environmental Politics*, 30(7): 1111–1134
- 5 Lockwood, M (2018) ‘Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: Exploring the linkages’, *Environmental Politics*, 27(4): 712–732
- 6 Schaller S and Carius A (2019) *Convenient Truths: Mapping climate agendas of right-wing populist parties in Europe*, Adelphi

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THE SHIFTING ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES OF THE EUROPEAN FAR RIGHT

As environmental issues have risen up the political agenda (becoming salient to younger voters in particular), far right parties have seemingly shifted away from denialism of the science. This shift has not led to a recognition of the need for a just economic transformation or, indeed, any political action commensurate to the scale and character of the environmental crisis. Instead, the increasing (albeit belated) recognition of environmental issues (primarily those which exist within national borders) has been fused with an anti-immigration agenda to create a new invidious framing of environmental politics. The emerging discourse, which we have conceptualised as ‘ecobordering’ elsewhere,⁷ is characterised by climate nationalism and seeks to depict immigration (of which migration from the Global South is made hyper-visible) as a threat to local and national environments.

This discourse takes two primary forms. First, it aims to politicise the environmental impacts of ‘mass immigration’ from the Global South, while depoliticising the impacts of ‘natives’. This includes linking ‘mass immigration’ with rising demand for natural resources and local environmental problems such as the pollution resulting from greater traffic and consumption. Immigration, it is suggested, is to blame for such problems, which were not issues of concern for local areas prior to multiculturalism.

At the same time, this narrative stokes fears that mass immigration will lead to population growth amongst non-white communities which will exacerbate these local environmental issues further and deplete finite natural resources, in what could be termed ‘racialised Malthusianism’. This was particularly exhibited by the British National Party (BNP),⁸ the National Rally,⁹ the Swiss People’s Party,¹⁰ Vlaams Belang,¹¹ and Alternative for Deutschland.¹² The Swiss People’s Party repeatedly claimed that it is the bulwark against “the greatest environmental killer, overpopulation... by urging people to limit immigration”,¹³ while the British National Party adopted the same Malthusian logic that it “is the ONLY party to recognise that overpopulation – whose primary driver is immigration, as revealed by the government’s own figures – is the cause of the destruction of our environment”.¹⁴

“The depiction of Global South migrants is juxtaposed with the depiction of ‘natives’ as responsible stewards of their ‘homeland’”

The second form this discourse takes is the depiction of Global South migrants as environmental hazards, with no personal aptitude for managing natural resources due to a lack of belonging to, or lack of financial or emotion investment in, local areas. This has been most strongly exhibited by far right parties such as Golden Dawn,¹⁵ the National Rally,¹⁶ the BNP,¹⁷ the Swiss People’s Party,¹⁸ and Vox.¹⁹ This has included the disparagement and scapegoating of migrants in numerous ways,

7 Turner, J and Bailey, D. (2022) ‘Ecobordering’: casting immigration control as environmental protection, *Environmental Politics*, 31(1): 110–131

8 See: https://bnp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/bnp_london_manifesto_2016.pdf

9 See: <https://www.adelphi.de/en/system/files/mediathek/bilder/Convenient%20Truths%20-%20Mapping%20climate%20agendas%20of%20right-wing%20populist%20parties%20in%20Europe%20-%20adelphi.pdf>

10 See: <https://klimateufel.ch/>

11 See: <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/programma2019.pdf>

12 See: https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2019/03/AfD_Europawahlprogramm_A5-hoch_web_150319.pdf

13 Swiss People’s Party (2019) *Der Missbrauch des Klimawandels und seine Profiteure*. <https://klimateufel.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Referat-Roger-K%C3%B6ppel.pdf>

14 BNP (2019) ‘Demographic Jihad’, webpage. <https://bnp.org.uk/demographic-jihad/>

15 See: <https://www.adelphi.de/en/system/files/mediathek/bilder/Convenient%20Truths%20-%20Mapping%20climate%20agendas%20of%20right-wing%20populist%20parties%20in%20Europe%20-%20adelphi.pdf>

16 See: <https://www.france24.com/en/20190420-le-pen-national-rally-front-environment-european-elections-france>

17 See: <https://bnp.org.uk/policies/environment/>

18 See: <https://klimateufel.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Referat-Roger-K%C3%B6ppel.pdf>

19 See: <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/rosety-nuestro-sector-primario-esta-desprotegido-por-la-entrada-masiva-de-productos-sin-control-de-fuera-de-europa-20210125>

such as littering, causing forest fires, the inhumane treatment of animals, and the destruction of ‘indigenous wildlife’ amongst other environmental offences.

“The purported threat posed by immigration and migrants... seeks to vindicate the notion that border policies are key forms of statecraft for the protection of the environment”

The lack of belonging is key to understanding this portrayal; as Le Pen explicitly put it: “environmentalism [is] the natural child of patriotism, because it’s the natural child of rootedness... if you’re a nomad, you’re not an environmentalist... Those who are nomadic... do not care about the environment; they have no homeland”.²⁰ The depiction of Global South migrants is juxtaposed with the depiction of ‘natives’ as responsible stewards of their ‘homeland’ and adept stewards of their ‘little platoons’ (to invoke the eco-fascist and Burkean logics which this framing draws upon). This typically entails glorifying the historic stewardship of pastoral national citizens (such as farmers²¹ or foresters²²) and the proclaiming the sound management of domestic natural resources by ‘natives’²³ over the ‘homeland’.^{24,25} The National Front and Golden Dawn have even established wings of their movements called ‘New Ecology’²⁶ and ‘Green Wing’²⁷ designed to protect “family, nature and race”²⁸ and “the cradle of our race”²⁹ respectively.

Both of these discursive traits have since been identified more recently in Marine Le Pen’s recent presidential campaign in which she obtained 41.5 per cent of the vote. Dubbed ‘patriotic ecology’ by her followers, the fallacious depictions of culprits and saviours in the environmental crisis have become normalised in French politics to the extent that they are echoed by rival conservative politicians.

The purported threat posed by immigration and migrants to previously ‘pure’ and ‘sustainable’ spaces of European nature seeks to vindicate the notion that border policies are key forms of statecraft for the protection of the environment. As a senior figure in Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, Jordan Bardella, declared in 2019: “borders are the environment’s greatest ally... it is through them that we will save the planet”.³⁰

A SHIFT AWAY FROM CLIMATE DENIALISM, BUT AT WHAT COST?

The potential electoral potency of fusing border securitisation and climate issues – however fallaciously – underlines the importance of recognising and challenging these discourses. Should the ascendant far right in Europe gain any further power, or have further influence on traditionally conservative political parties, this discourse could more forcefully shape public understandings of the environmental crisis and the strategies for its resolution in the future.

20 Milman O (2021) ‘Climate denial is waning on the right. What’s replacing it might be just as scary’, *Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/21/climate-denial-far-right-immigration>

21 See: <https://www.ukip.org/burgers-and-the-amazon>

22 See: <https://klimateufel.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Referat-Roger-K%C3%B6ppl.pdf>

23 See: <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/rosery-nuestro-sector-primario-esta-desprotegido-por-la-entrada-masiva-de-productos-sin-control-de-fuera-de-europa-20210125>

24 See: https://www.voxespana.es/grupo_parlamentario/actividad-parlamentaria/comisiones/conservacionismo-patrimonio-medioambiental-20210225

25 Forchtner B (2019) ‘Far-right articulations of the natural environments: An introduction’, in Forchtner B (ed), *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication*, Routledge

26 See: <https://www.collectifnouveleecologie.fr/>

27 See: <https://www.adelphi.de/en/system/files/mediathek/bilder/Convenient%20Truths%20-%20Mapping%20climate%20agendas%20of%20right-wing%20populist%20parties%20in%20Europe%20-%20adelphi.pdf>

28 See: <https://www.adelphi.de/en/system/files/mediathek/bilder/Convenient%20Truths%20-%20Mapping%20climate%20agendas%20of%20right-wing%20populist%20parties%20in%20Europe%20-%20adelphi.pdf>

29 See: <https://www.adelphi.de/en/system/files/mediathek/bilder/Convenient%20Truths%20-%20Mapping%20climate%20agendas%20of%20right-wing%20populist%20parties%20in%20Europe%20-%20adelphi.pdf>

30 France24 (2019) ‘Le Pen’s National Rally goes green in bid for European election votes’, news article. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190420-le-pen-national-rally-front-environment-european-elections-france>

“To ignore the root causes of the ecological crisis at this juncture would be catastrophic for the natural world”

This would be catastrophic on two fronts. On the one hand, the discourse prescribes a form of statecraft centred on border security rather than systemic economic transformation, which represents an apocryphal programme of environmental protection. It does so by focusing narrowly on ‘national’ nature (peripheralising global issues) and obscuring the material economic drivers of ecological degradation (such as the heavily polluting energy and aviation industries, for which Global North populations are primarily culpable). To ignore the root causes of the ecological crisis at this juncture would be catastrophic for the natural world, but that is precisely what this political framing inculcates.

Just as importantly, ecobordering seeks to inflict further structural violence on those who are exploited at the peripheries of the global economy. The nationalistic framing emerges at a time when immigration is rising *because* of climate change, and the discourse thus seeks to diagnose the symptoms of ecological degradation as the causes of it. There is already evidence that the rise of the far right strengthens political resistance to climate migration,³¹ and this framing serves to justify this resistance from an environmental perspective. At a global scale, these framings threaten to rationalise a *de facto* climate apartheid; with Global North populations and elites in the Global South enjoying the spoils of an environmentally deleterious global economy, while poorer Global South populations become confined to increasingly uninhabitable areas facing escalating risks of climate shocks and deteriorating health conditions.

The meaning and practical implications of climate justice will become an increasingly hot topic in the Anthropocene. Challenging the depictions of culprits and saviours purveyed by far right figures is only an initial step to preventing injustices mounting further.³² Recognising the historical constitution of the global economy and the inequalities and vulnerabilities resulting from it underlines the injustices of far right framings and the need for progressive actors to advance more transformative approaches.³³ Progressive responses to the rise of the far right in the Anthropocene requires formulating and advancing notions of a just transition which accounts for the movement of people affected by climate change as well as other less privileged groupings in society.³⁴ This will require far more progressive forms of statecraft which are a world away from those advocated in the framings of the far right.

Dan Bailey is a senior lecturer in international political economy at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is interested in the evolving and complex interactions between the global economy, climate change, the objectives and strategies of political institutions, and the ideas and discourses that shape public understandings of the ecological crisis and sustainability transitions. He has authored a series of academic publications and policy reports on topics relating to these interactions.

Joe Turner is a lecturer in international politics at the University of York. His interdisciplinary examines how border regimes in post-imperial states like Britain are structured by imperial and colonial histories and hierarchies of human value. He recently published the book *Migration Studies and Colonialism* with Lucy Mayblin.

31 Kulin J, Johansson Sevä I and Dunlap R E (2021) Nationalist ideology, rightwing populism, and public views about climate change in Europe, *Environmental Politics*, 30(7): 1111–1134

32 Sultana F (2022) ‘The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality’, *Political Geography*, 99(102638)

33 Newell P, Srivastava S, Naess L O, Torres Contreras G A, and Price R (2021) ‘Toward transformative climate justice: An emerging research agenda’, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 12(6)

34 The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants [JCWI] (2023) ‘Climate Justice = Migrant Justice’, webpage. <https://www.jcwi.org.uk/pages/category/climate-justice-migrant-justice>