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# Eco-fascism: an oxymoron? Far-right nationalism, history, and the climate emergency

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Can we conceive of a continuity in the way right-wing nationalisms address environmental issues from the origins of fascism to the currently ongoing global “polycrisis”? This article explores the use of the term “eco-fascism” in connection with the climate crisis and considers the political relationship between ecologism and the contemporary far right through a historical perspective, seeking to determine persisting patterns in the relationship between the far right and the environment. Section 1 travels back to the historical origins of this relationship between nationalism, fascism and the environment, arguing that the conceptions of nature adopted and nourished by fascism had scarcely anything to do with ecology in its contemporary meaning. Section 2 explores the most well-known and consolidated studies on the relationship between the far right and climate change denialism, identifying a broad consensus that unites scholars from various disciplines on the density, intensity and persistence of this political relationship in the current millennium. The article concludes by underlining the irreality, falsifiability and internal contradictions of the notion of “eco-fascism” at a time when right-wing regimes have seized power in many countries through the use of vocabularies and sentiments in defense of the territory and its resources, but with a substantial refusal to tackle global environmental problems.

## KEYWORDS

climate change, nationalism, far-right, eco-fascism, denial, denialism, science

## Introduction

We are witnessing a crescendo of tragic news about the eruption of extreme events (storms, fires, floods, droughts, water bombs, mass migrations, etc.), which have in common as a cause the rapid shift in the state of the Earth toward an increasingly chaotic and unstable, if not inexorable, destruction of existing balances and the possible annihilation of entire societies. For several years, scientists have warned about the urgent need to reduce our fossil fuel consumption (Ripple et al., 2020), but the world has gone in the opposite direction. If climate change is left to run its course, a total collapse of the social order is not simply likely, but certain.

Is the *mounting insecurity* brought about by these cumulative changes likely to inspire a new nationalist authoritarianism centered on the nation-state? Are we able to identify an emerging form of far-right nationalism? Should we call it “eco-fascism”? Emerging from the ashes of World War I (WWI), fascism has historically proven to be able to exploit these calamities by embracing nationalism, denial and a totalitarian vision of the future. According to Griffin (2007), the fascist core idea is of a *palingenetic ultranationalism* based on the promise of a brighter future and the rebirth of society after a long stage of decay. A “palingenetic myth”

serves to attract popular support among social sectors disenchanted with the political status quo.<sup>1</sup>

Is the advent of totalitarian far-right regimes likely to materialize in the near future? Many authors who have studied the relationship between climate change and nationalism seem to argue along these lines (Conversi, 2020; Ghosh, 2021; Malm, 2021; Levene, 2022; Moore and Roberts, 2022). The British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983, 1990) lucidly observed how nostalgic tendencies for an unredeemable lost past tend to emerge during times of rapid social and cultural change.

As increasingly recognized, the crisis will deepen as long as fossil fuel production and consumption policies are not drastically curbed. At the same time, it is becoming clear that continuing to consume fossil fuels at the current rate is only one aspect of broader overconsumption patterns, the latter term embracing many other forms of pollution (Syvitski et al., 2020). What does mass consumerism mean in these circumstances? Various scientists have elaborated on the consequences of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, as a result of mass energy consumption, upon the fragile balance between life and death – in and beyond human societies: by assembling large amounts of quantitative data, a group of Earth sciences researchers has recently shown how the “extraordinary” levels of human energy consumption began accelerating and altering the Earth’s surface after 1950 (Syvitski et al., 2020). The continuous growth of consumer society has in fact rapidly degraded the environment, even besides and beyond the unprecedented increase in GHG emissions, by threatening and infringing upon eight other *planetary boundaries* (Rockström et al., 2009, 2023). McNeill and Engelke (2016), have used the notion of *Great Acceleration* to historically denote these changes, while Thomas Hylland Eriksen has identified an “*acceleration of the acceleration*” coinciding with the unremitting triumph of neoliberal globalization since about 1990 (Eriksen, 2016, 2018, 2021).

In turn, these changes are rapidly steering humanity away from the Holocene geological epoch to a new terrifying epoch that has been named the *Anthropocene* – the age when the impact of human action permanently alters the geophysical balance of the Earth (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2017). All the indications point to the fact that these global disruption processes brought about by post-war capitalism via the continuous expansion of markets of seemingly innocuous *conspicuous consumption* (Veblen, 1998) may become a major cause of mortality for humans and other species as the century unfolds.

Mark Levene and others have comparatively expanded the term “*omnicide*” to denote this downward spiral of global destruction (Levene and Conversi, 2014). Some go as far as arguing that the Earth risks becoming uninhabitable through a slow agonizing death (Wallace-Wells, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

In the next section, we shall see how this developmental trend is deeply rooted in modern history and can, in turn, be related to state centralization, ultra-modernism and the fascist drive to grandeur and grand achievement. We shall thus analyze how “eco” fascism was since its beginning and whether “eco-fascism” can really mean something empirically testable in the long term.

## Fascism and the environment

Fascism is most often interpreted as an extreme manifestation of nationalism and, simultaneously, as a prominently modernist project (Rainey and Gentile, 1994; Griffin, 2007; Gentile, 2008; Turda, 2010). As with nationalism more generally, its vision of the world is articulated around the concept of nationhood (Smith, 1996, 1998, 2004; Malešević, 2019). The nation-state is also fascism’s pre-eminent and central institution and its capture by Benito Mussolini in 1922 was the decisive moment in its rise and consolidation. Furthermore, competition, rather than collaboration, between nations is at the core of fascism – as well as of nationalism in general. Fascism takes this perception of the unrestrained, selfish competition between humans to extreme consequences, imbuing it wherever possible with racism, colonialism and imperialism. Various definitions of fascism exist, but few play down its ultra-nationalist core. By the early twentieth century, and following the French Revolution, the nation had already become an object of supreme loyalty (Smith, 1996, 1998). World War I only magnified this trend (Kramer, 2010). Furthermore, nationalism remained the core ideology across domestic politics and international relations throughout the twentieth century and beyond (Smith, 1996, 1998; Malešević, 2019).

Considering the *primacy* of Italian Fascism, it is worth paying particular attention to how Mussolini’s relationship with the environment unfolded in Italy. The proclaimed “love affair” of historical fascism with nature has recently been scrutinized in depth in *Mussolini’s Nature* (Armiero et al., 2022), which can be considered the pinnacle of a prolific trend in environmental history and, from 2022, the main source for the study of “eco-fascism” (a term which, as we shall understand, does not need to appear in the volume). The entire book is dedicated to exploring the contradictory and instrumental ideas of nature prevalent within the fascist *Weltanschauung* – a war-hardened legacy borrowed from the battlefields of WWI. In the fascist imaginary, environmental protection was perceived essentially as human control over the wild forces of nature. This domination over nature was at the root of gargantuan projects such as the great land reclamation (*bonifica*) of the Pontine Marshes, a manifestation of what Scott (1998) calls “high modernism.” Reclamation became “the key word within Fascist environmental discourse and practices” (Armiero, 2014). Dam-building often accompanied and concealed vaguer pro-environmental bombast, highlighted by “the peculiar mix of planting trees and building dams” (Armiero et al., 2022). Rarely, if ever, were regional ecosystems respected: planting trees often meant introducing non-native alien species. The foremost Italian environmental journalist Antonio Cederna described how the fascist “creative destruction” of landscape and environment, including vernacular architecture, was part of a continuous process of landscape modification visible since Italian unification (Cederna, 1979).<sup>3</sup> The establishment of the Alpine national parks (von Hardenberg, 2014) was often heralded as fascism’s most significant contribution to environmental protection. Yet, it was mostly based on pre-existing projects such as the hunting reserve of the House of Savoy, which in 1922 became the Gran Paradiso National Park (von Hardenberg, 2014, 2021).

1 For the notion of palingenesis, see the important work by Griffin (2007) and its adaptation to the current situation by Malm (2021).

2 That is what seems to be happening in various regions of the world. A fitting example is Yemen, a country that has been vandalized by those very local and global powers that have most contributed to the global climate catastrophe (Poornima and Ramesh, 2023).

3 Caprotti (2007) uses the notion of “destructive creation.”

Fascism also exposed a ruralist rhetoric, but, as in Nazi Germany (Voigtländer and Voth, 2014), this essentially consisted in improving communication networks between cities and the countryside through roads, railways and other infrastructure. For instance, by moving large numbers of peasants from Veneto to Latium, the regime's "ruralism" led to the establishment of "a network of new rural towns, ... such as Littoria (1932), Pontinia (1933), and Sabaudia (1937)" (Armiero et al., 2022). These were an integral part of the idea of *ruralizzare l'Italia* (ruralize Italy), often mistaken for a "return" to the land. While some authors may still misrepresent all these apparently pro-ruralist rhetorics and actions as forms of "eco-fascism," a more perceptive approach has been to consider Mussolini's project as a form of "internal colonialism" (Caprotti, 2014). This was integral to the anti-environmental modification of the Italian landscape discussed and explored by Cederna, which also gravely affected the capital city, Rome (Cederna, 1979). The regime's "political ecology" was thus couched as a form of "regeneration of the country and its people [which] concerned both the body and the soul; the land and the spirit of the nation. ... By changing the land, the regime aimed at regenerating the Italians. ... The regime's discourse of human reclamation implied the need to improve not just 'external' nature but also internal nature, people as well as places" (Armiero, 2014: 241).

Moreover, rather than protecting popular non-bourgeois traditions in the broader sense, fascism was essentially an ideology imbued with an extreme modernist ethos, whose idea of nation-building was also permeated by projects of cultural homogenization (Conversi, 2008, 2010). Its modernist *élan* gained the admiration of the Futurists, whose political creed also hailed ultranationalism, patriarchalism, colonialism, warmongering, xenophobia, misogyny and violence, to which they added a dose of disdain for tradition and hatred for everything connected with the past (Conversi, 2009). Many Futurist artists, entrepreneurs and writers, including its founder FT Marinetti, became members of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF, fascist party) after its foundation in 1921 (Bowler, 1991). For Cinzia Sartini Blum, Futurism anticipated the subsequent fascist "rhetoric of power and virility" (Blum, 2023). But fascism also succeeded in incorporating the language of the historical left, imbuing it with socialist principles and slogans and, particularly in its futurist guise, anarchism (Berghaus, 1996). Another ultramodernist, ultranationalist warmonger was the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio who "hailed modernity, modern technology, and the potential that the machine age offered to create a new society out of war, ruled by a technocratic aristocracy" (Kramer, 2010: 11). On 13 May 1915, he announced his credo in Rome: "If inciting citizens to violence is a crime, I will boast of this crime, assuming sole responsibility for it" [D'Annunzio, cited in Kramer (2010: 12)].

Fascism's vision of the nation was organic, homogenizing and in continuous search for congruence between state, culture, and nation (Conversi, 2007, 2008; Mandelbaum, 2014, 2015, 2020). This standardizing and conformist conception of the nation was founded on the defense and pre-eminence of the national territory. It was essentially a territorially bound ideology in which boundaries and borders played a decisive role. The notion of "blood and soil" exposed by significant fringes of historical fascism, particularly in Germany, was connected to a highly territorialized vision of the environment identified as one with the sacred soil of the national *Heimat* (Homeland). In short, the "political ecology" of fascism was completely distinct from both classical and contemporary ecological thought – such as that expounded by the social philosopher Morin (1980, 1987) and Morin and Hulot (2007).

Fascism was a *militarist* ideology born directly out of the experience of fighting in the trenches of WWI: it would be unthinkable without the previous global conflagration and the enormous human dislocation that war brought. In this context, nature became an instrument to be plied for the regime's grand aspirations of conquest and, if unbent or considered hostile, it turned into the enemy to be conquered, defeated and enslaved – the very opposite of an ecologist's dream. The environmental policy of fascism was thus founded on the objectification and othering of nature (Armiero, 2014; Armiero et al., 2022). To speak of "eco-fascism" in this historical context would be patently unrealistic, even absurd.<sup>4</sup>

Armiero and colleagues had previously highlighted the contradictions in the "political ecology" of fascism: "Nature conservation showed itself in a plurality of forms, seldom respectful of ecological relationships within the natural world, but always structured as an attempt to bring a 'civilised' nature nearer to the people" (Armiero and Von Hardenberg, 2013). This partly reflected a pre-existing thread in Italian *Risorgimento* nationalism with its stress on unification, national prowess and colonial expansion (Giannatiempo, 2022). The idea of "reclaiming nature" was already widespread among European nationalizing states such as Germany (Blackbourn, 2007) and replicated elsewhere as forms of "taming the wilderness" (Plummers, 2011).

To return to the origins of fascism and its solid link with modernism (Griffin, 2007; Turda, 2010) and Futurism (Gentile, 2003), it can be asserted that the influence of these intellectual tendencies was preponderant in the early stages of fascism. On my reading, from its early interventionist stances, Mussolini's fascism can be re-interpreted as a major episode of "denial" in the fullest sense of the word, because the key message was based on hiding the immense suffering of ordinary peoples caused by war. Dying for the Fatherland was considered to be a supreme sacrifice and a possible pathway to a patriotic, secular heaven in the form of posthumous glory iconographically celebrated with medals for valor, monuments to the fallen, decorations for bravery and other military honors and awards. Denial was thus at the very roots of fascist warmongering with its glorification of combat, conquest, subjugation and colonial expansion.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, Enzo Traverso has underlined how fascism is better understood as a prolongation of the state of war, a bracketed interval within a single "civil war" that tore Europe apart from WWI to WWII (Traverso, 2007). In other words, fascism constituted the absolute, preponderant and primary link between the two world conflicts via a totalitarian control of war-related narratives (Ventrone, 2003). The continuation of the "state of war" under the fascist regime essentially meant the continuity of the propaganda of lies typical of every wartime state. The massive and widespread censorship that operated at the

4 The term can be used with caution, as by Sam Moore and Alex Roberts in the book that probably remains the best and most articulated work on the emerging political ecologies of the far right, a terminological choice adopted after carefully exploring the great limitations of the notion of "eco-fascism" (Moore and Roberts, 2022).

5 The description of fascism as based on denial derives from my interpretation in the light of the existing research highlighted above, even though this rarely, if ever, describes fascist practices, narratives and policies as "denial" and, most certainly, does not use the term "denialism." I think most scholars of fascism would agree with an interpretation along these lines, given the long-established consensus that fascism was based on the manipulation of collective memories, one aspect of which was censorship.

front and on the combat field, where even soldiers' letters were carefully examined and systematically destroyed if judged too negative or nostalgic of peacetime (Bellosi et al., 2002; Magnifici, 2008), could be fully adopted in peacetime as a method of governmentality on a national scale. Finally, following the policy of *Risorgimento* nationalism, fascism deepened and expanded Italy's colonial program, with a destructive legacy for the environment (Caprotti, 2007, 2014; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2008).

Following Roger Griffin (2007), Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective (henceforth, simply Malm) rejuvenate the watershed idea of fascism as *palingenetic ultranationalism* — in chapter 7 (Toward Fossil Fascism?) and chapter 8 (Mythical Energies of the Far Right) of *White Skin, Black Fuel*: “whenever and wherever fascism appears, it will posit the sequence of past grandeur to present crisis to coming rebirth of an exalted and exclusive nation” (Malm, 2021: 228). Malm retrieves Griffin's definition in the following way: “Fascism is a politics of palingenetic ultranationalism that comes to the fore in a conjuncture of deep crisis, and if leading sections of the dominant class throw their weight behind it and hand it power, there ensues an exceptional regime of systematic violence against those identified as enemies of the nation” (Malm, 2021: 235, italicized in the original).

The fascist–colonial–developmental–anti-environmental connection is fully corroborated by historical research on both fascism and Nazism. Malm also suggests that the imperial aspect of fascism is deeply linked to fossil fuels and other mineral extractions (Malm, 2021). The struggle for control of colonial territory was central to the fascist politics of imperial expansion in Abyssinia/Ethiopia (Caprotti, 2014) and Libya (Labanca, 2002; Del Boca, 2007).

The “green” or nature-oriented ingredients of the German *Völkische Bewegung* also emerged in an age of rapid state centralization and economic industrialization (1872–1914) (Mauch, 2004; Blackburn, 2007). Yet, we should not ignore that National-Socialist mass culture was also based on a pronounced mass consumerism (Baranowski, 2007). This was on an entirely different scale to the discreet and elitist consumerism of the “Roaring Twenties” (1920s), including in Germany, though neither can be quantitatively comparable to the mass consumerism of recent decades.

As Uekötter (2014) illustrates, the superficial patina of “green” must not be taken literally to assert that the historical far right, particularly Nazi-fascism, has been concerned with ecology – with the consequence of overlooking the parallel militarization of the territory. According to many scholars, such assertions could lead to a huge historical distortion (Lekan and Zeller, 2005; Uekötter, 2006; Zeller, 2007). Theoretically, the roots and implications of the extreme nationalist policies carried out on the wings of modernization have been famously explored by Zygmunt Bauman in his work on modernity and the Holocaust (Bauman, 1989).

Having said that, it is still possible to see “green” elements in National Socialism, fascism and the extreme right in general, as is probably the case in almost all ideologies (Uekötter, 2006). But this is quite distinct from – indeed, it lies at the opposite end of – contemporary “environmental awareness” (*Umweltbewußtsein*) imbued with civic values, which subsequently guided the rise and spread of the post-war ecological movement in Germany (Mauch, 2004).

In this regard, studies linking Nazi ideology to the living myth of Henry Ford are indicative of the recombination of ferocious anti-Semitism and the practice of controlling the masses, not only through

state control, propaganda and repression, but also through consumption and new technologies (Baranowski, 2007). Adolf Hitler's personal preference and admiration for Ford was sufficiently conspicuous to determine an entire model of state centralization and economic development (Silverstein, 2002; Baldwin, 2001).

The next sections takes this historical knowledge in new directions, toward a better understanding of the contemporary predicament in which the very presence or absence of an ecological dimension within nationalism, specifically far-right nationalism, can determine the fate of nations and the planet. It does so through the lens of climate change denial and its role in the shaping of current far-right nationalism.

## The contemporary far right and its fantasy world: lies, disinformation, and denial

The relationship between climate change denial and sections of the political right has been studied extensively for decades. It is a relatively stable and persistent line of research that confirms the increasingly anti-scientific vocation of both the neoconservative right and the far right: the two, as we know, meet, intersect and interchange vocabularies, notions, concepts, ideas, practices and policies (Levenstein et al., 2017b; Brown, 2019; Callison and Manfredi, 2020; Panayotakis, 2020; Cox and Skidmore-Hess, 2022; Conversi et al., 2023; Saidel, 2023).

Thus, much of the existing literature has long described in detail how neoconservatives (McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Dunlap and Jacques, 2013; Krange et al., 2019; Crawley, 2023) and the far right (Byrne, 2020; Barla and Bjork-James, 2021; Vowles and Hultman, 2021a,b; Painter et al., 2023) have been fundamentally opposed to all action to mitigate climate change, using a vehement anti-ecological and sometimes anti-environmentalist language (Hoggan and Littlemore, 2009). The latter trend is pronounced among billionaires such as the Koch brothers, who have both opposed the implementation of environmental laws and financed ultra-right groups (Mayer, 2016; Hägel, 2020; Vowles and Hultman, 2021b).

For many mega-capitalist billionaires, “eco-fascist” views were always bubbling below the surface in the form of opposition to any form of state intervention and regulation, including taxation and environmental protection (Hoggan and Littlemore, 2009; Hägel, 2020). This goal was also pursued by the think tanks and lobbies created alongside the promotion of far-right groups and ideologies (Mayer, 2016; Grasso, 2019). Most crucial to consider is how both the neoconservative right and the far right have generally been proponents and supporters of a discourse based on the denial of anthropogenic climate change (Hoggan and Littlemore, 2009; Grasso, 2019, 2020, 2022a; Grasso and Vladimirova, 2020). Furthermore, this discourse has been simultaneously accompanied by situationally tailored anti-environmental action and a mannered, regimented environmentalism, diluted and emptied of meaning and reduced to the strictly local–national and territorial dimension. Both moved within a limited territorial-bound perspective that can hardly be defined as “ecologist,” if the term is meant to include action encompassing the global alongside the local (“think globally and act locally”). Ecologism can be more easily connected with the Greek roots of the term *ecology*, composed of the term *oikos* (“house”) and

*logos* (“the study of”). Ecologism can be contrasted with nationalism and fascism that do not intrinsically acknowledge the need to take care of our common “home” beyond the national space. With its competing and contradictory meanings, the term “eco-fascism” thus remains undefined.

As this section will explore, there is an extensive literature on the relationship between the political right and denialism, to which one should also add an expanding literature on the industries that have financed massive campaigns of denial, especially the fossil fuel mega-corporations (Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Washington and Cook, 2011; Frumhoff and Oreskes, 2015; Lewandowsky et al., 2015; Grasso, 2019, 2024). But a growing number of scholars have now also studied the linkages between climate denial and the far right (Hultman et al., 2019; Byrne, 2020; Vowles and Hultman, 2021b; Vowles, 2023).

Hereafter, a brief, but by no means exhaustive, literature review provides a general framework with which to address the debate on the relationship between far-right ideology and the environment. To begin with, we highlight the far-right’s promotion of climate denial as part of a broader political agenda, taking into consideration the funding and support of far-right networks operating through the systematic spread of disinformation (Antonio and Brulle, 2011; Dunlap and Brulle, 2016; Dunlap and McCright, 2016). Some far-right groups have twisted, warped and deformed science into an ideology, changing its core foundations and transforming it into a matter of personal opinion or belief. They thus fomented a new kind of divisive politics based on the denial of scientific knowledge (Nisbet, 2011, 2014; Nisbet et al., 2018; Conversi et al., 2023).<sup>6</sup>

Studies on US political and scientific opinions have highlighted how people with a conservative political mindset are more inclined to downplay climate change (Gauchat, 2012, 2015, 2018; Gauchat et al., 2017). Climate change denial by both neoconservative and far-right groups has substantially slowed down and delayed mitigation policies, often completely blocking them (Dunlap and Jacques, 2013; Jacques and Knox, 2016). From the perspective of *science communication*, denialist speeches are often associated with far-right political ideologies, which can, in turn, influence public opinion in a decisive way (Jaspal et al., 2013; Kotevko et al., 2013; Nerlich and Jaspal, 2014; Jaspal and Nerlich, 2014a,b). Some far-right networks, think tanks and news outlets have succeeded in hindering climate mitigation policies by dramatically numbing, stupefying and desensitizing public perceptions of climate change (Humphrey, 2007; Hornsey et al., 2022), thus gravely hampering mitigation efforts (McCright et al., 2016). Far-right media in the US and elsewhere have negatively influenced and distorted public perception of the urgency of climate change, contributing to a general misunderstanding of the problem (Grasso, 2019, 2022a,b, 2024; Tàbara et al., 2019; Grasso and Vladimirova, 2020). Moving to the terrain of European right-wing populism, data from several European countries show a correlation between support for right-wing parties and apathetic, unambitious climate goals and policies (Lockwood, 2018; Kulin et al., 2021).

Other authors have explored the links between climate change denial and right-leaning religious faiths in the US (Bader et al., 2020). Here, denial has been appropriated by a few religious groups, such as US Evangelical, Pentecostal and various Protestant fundamentalist sects, most often associated with the far right. In the US, even Catholic bishops have distinguished themselves from other Catholics worldwide by adopting a “skeptical” attitude to climate change (Danielsen et al., 2021). A more general opposition to environmental regulation is often accompanied by chastising environmentalism as a “liberal hoax,” while standing “against democracy, equal rights, and religious freedom” (Hardisty and Berlet, 2019).

The most important connection, however, is with capital, as particularly emblemized by the actions of some of the richest people in the world. The strict interrelation between capitalism and nationalism is widely known even though it has only recently been systematically addressed in nationalism studies (Hadžidedić, 2022; Conversi, 2023). But the triadic relationship between contemporary capitalism, climate change denial and far-right nationalism is a rather new field of research: By using far-right think tanks and other institutions, some US billionaires have funneled money and support for right-wing populist political leaders with their promises to derail climate action worldwide (Mayer, 2016; Hägel, 2020). These include Trump and his Brazilian emulator Bolsanaro, nicknamed the “tropical Trump” (Weizenmann, 2019). Under the Trump presidency, environmental deregulation went together with the spread of white nationalism and “spectacular racism” (Pulido et al., 2019). The denial campaign publicly described climate change as a “hoax” in order to justify inaction and continuous support from, and to, the fossil fuels industry (De Pryck and Gemenne, 2017; Sparke and Bessner, 2019). Perhaps more controversially, a growing number of scholars have identified Trumpism as a new type of “fascism,” redefining it as *neoliberal fascism* (Micocci and Di Mario, 2017; Levenstein et al., 2017a; Giroux, 2018; Pine, 2019).

Indeed, Trump’s neoliberal authoritarianism finely combines with the creed of those ethnonationalist terrorists who defined themselves as “eco-fascists” by embracing extreme racial nationalism and adding a superficial ecological justification to their actions (Christchurch and El Paso, both in 2019). The US has also been the greatest historical contributor to climate change and still ranks among the top polluting nation-states in the world, only recently surpassed by China (Posocco and McNeill, 2023). Yet, here was located the cradle of denial, lies and disinformation resulting in the obfuscation of climate change. Climate change denial was born in the US and spread across the world on the wings of political and cultural Americanization (Dunlap and McCright, 2011; Bonneuil et al., 2021; Franta, 2021). It was slowly exported to other Western countries, such as Australia, the UK and Canada, under neoliberal regimes opposed to environmental regulation (Dunlap and McCright, 2011; Dunlap and Jacques, 2013). The links between climate denialism and the far-right then spread from their original US base to other European countries, such as Sweden (Pulé and Hultman, 2021). “Encouraged by a concerted PR effort funded by the fossil fuel industry’s ‘denial machine,’ climate denial has become firmly lodged in the minds of many people” (Dunlap and McCright, 2011: 2).

“Old boys’ networks” and personal connections have played an important part in the mutual entente between the far right and fossil fuel companies. Their love affair has been grafted onto a nationalist

<sup>6</sup> Bridging advanced climate research and science communication, Michael E. Mann and Tom Toles have hinted at this linkage by noting the far-right’s role in denying climate change and its nefarious consequences (Mann and Toles, 2016).

world vision, in which a *us v. them* narrative became a crucial instrument to distract potential voters from the billionaires' obsession with avoiding environmental regulation while promoting unrestrained mass consumption. Nationalism became the preferred vehicle for such billionaires and mega-corporations tied to the fossil fuels industry, as it provided a shared matrix that could be replicated and imitated across the world. Some billionaires used resource nationalism to prolong and continue fossil fuel extractivism (Lockwood, 2018; Malm, 2021), while busily denying "the ecological catastrophes this would cause" (Millward-Hopkins, 2022: 3).

I conclude this literature review by mentioning again one of the most influential books studying the relationship between climate denial/obstruction and the far right: Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective's (2021) *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*. The book offers possibly the most acute perspective and engaging in-depth study of the far-right's role in the climate crisis, arguing that this goes well beyond denial and identifying the emerging political constellations linking vested economic and political interests. With a historical regard to the *longue durée*, Malm also considers how fossil-fueled technologies traveled in tandem with colonialism and were steeped in racism.

In the meantime, while the barrage of cataclysmic events multiplies accompanied by an increasing output across all scientific fields, awareness that climate change is rapidly spinning out of control is increasing. As a consequence, most, though not all, far-right parties have begun to concede, erratically, that denial is no longer strategically and politically tenable. Incapable of performing any constructive action, they have nevertheless decided to move along two opposite paths: *obstruction* (Ekberg et al., 2022; Herranen, 2023) and *delay* (Shue, 2023). At the same time, they have consistently used mass *disinformation* (Conversi et al., 2023), leading to policy *ossification* (Depledge, 2006). While obstruction is more the preserve of pressure groups and lobbies working within governments and parties (Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Washington and Cook, 2011; Frumhoff and Oreskes, 2015; Ekberg et al., 2022; Letourneau et al., 2022; Herranen, 2023; Holder et al., 2023), delay is a tactic used more prominently by formal political actors belonging to far-right parties, as well as right-wing governments in power (Ekberg et al., 2022; Painter et al., 2023; Shue, 2023). As Shue concisely puts it: "some of the most powerful and wealthy political institutions and economic organizations on the planet are firmly committed to delaying effective action on climate change as long as possible so that they can retain and enhance their current wealth and power resting on fossil fuel assets" (Shue, 2023).

Besides obstruction and delay, a third strategy that ubiquitously accompanies these must be added. In marketing and business studies, the notion of "greenwashing" is used to identify how corporations describe their products and services as "sustainable" when, actually, they are not (Markham et al., 2014). This strategy is perfectly visible in the marketing of an increasing number of products destined for mass consumption or, indeed, overconsumption (Stuart et al., 2020). The same principle can be applied to politics: here, a tenuous shade of green can be painted over the black core of far-right ideologies, which some superficial observers mistakenly interpret as a substantial commitment to pro-environmental or ecological policies – this, in turn, may encourage some to use the term "eco-fascism." The strategy is manifested in greenwashing campaigns in which right-wing governments and parties appear to be "green" as they adopt shallow measures of "greening" and "sustainability" while persistently pursuing "business as usual" (BAU) policies (Connolly et al., 2020; Conversi, 2022).

The anti-ecologist and anti-environmentalist linkages of the right and the far right have increasingly been studied across Europe, as well as in specific countries such as Spain (Moreno and Thornton, 2022). This perverse relationship has been brought to the extremes under the auspices of the fossil fuel, agribusiness and related industries (Mendes Motta and Hauber, 2023), and has become particularly prominent among fossil fuels producing countries in the form of *resource nationalism* (Koch and Perreault, 2019; Conversi, 2020). Perhaps the main characteristic of the contemporary populist right regarding "ecological" issues has not so much been indifference, but open hostility toward science and scientists – generally judged as being part of "the elite" (Conversi et al., 2023; Hameleers et al., 2023).

To recapitulate, this section has illustrated widespread agreement among social scientists about the persisting deep hostility toward climate action that has characterized decades of right and far-right propaganda and policies; this goes well beyond rhetoric. While this was initially limited to US neoconservatives gravitating around the Republican Party, it has since spread around the globe in tandem with the growth of far-right parties and their seizure of government. Although a few authors still assert incorrectly that anti-climate ideology remains confined to the US (Wallace-Wells, 2019), the trend has reached far and wide on the waves of cultural Americanization as imperial puppet-on-a-string regimes emulate and mimic their US masters with a variety of national adaptations: far-right parties throughout Europe, Latin America, India and elsewhere have been adopting and adapting to their constituencies the American doctrine of unlimited greed (De Vogli, 2013). As the far right turns global, it is important that scholars not only explore the parties, lobbies and many groups acting in the "West," but also deeply consider those emerging in the "Global South" (Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia, 2023).

Finally, all of this should be read within the broader framework of nationalism studies, as the competitive modernist component of nationalism entails various degrees of environmental destruction in the name of national "progress." My earlier work on modernism and nationalism (Conversi, 2012, 2014) addressed the incipient relationship between nationalist modernism and climate change, placing nationalism as part of a much broader theory of politically related climate meltdown. Nationalism is also associated with the *cornucopian* myth of unlimited progress adopted by most political elites, at least from the seventeenth century (Jonsson, 2014) until the myth was demolished by a new line of scientific research encapsulated by the Club of Rome's "Limits to growth" report (Meadows and Club of Rome, 1972). Concepts of perpetual growth were hence slowly replaced by the idea of "sustainable growth" or sustainability (Conversi, 2022). *Cornucopianism* promotes the untenable myth that unceasing economic growth can be granted by the continuous availability of energy resources to provide for a growing mass of population via an almost unrestrained development (Ayres, 1993). In *The Seneca Effect: Why Growth Is Slow but Collapse Is Rapid*, Ugo Bardi (2017) also considers climate denial as the consequence of a broad cornucopian ideology shared by many political forces that have promoted unlimited economic growth while refusing to address climate change.

## Conclusion

Holocaust historian Christopher R. Browning has warned: "we should rightly be suspicious of facile comparisons, especially the casual use of 'fascism' as an imprecise epithet" (Browning, 2023). As

I argue in this article, few terms have appeared in both the blogosphere and academia to which this statement applies better than “eco-fascism.” While many nationalism scholars may mistake the occasional green façade of fascist narratives as something tangible and substantial, others have considered its role in the destruction of the environment. In fact, I argue that claims highlighting the special relationship between the nation and its environment have been part of the nationalist narrative for many centuries. There is nevertheless an overwhelming consensus among scholars that organic *Völkisch* nationalism goes hand-in-hand with racism, war, expansion and aggression. But very few have noted, for instance, the shared etymology between *Völkisch* and Volkswagen, Hitler’s “car of the people” as an emulation of Henry Ford’s model T, a quintessential example of the continuous power grabs, corruption and scandals involving the car industry (Ewing, 2017).

At the same time, it appears that the term “eco-fascism” is partly being depleted of meaning as a simplification to describe the much more complex scenario that we might encounter as the reckoning approaches after decades of disinformation converging around climate denial, obfuscation, obstruction and delay. While considering the limits of the term, Naomi Klein recognizes that “unless something significant changes in how our societies rise to the ecological crisis, we are going to see this kind of white power ecofascism emerge with much greater frequency, as a ferocious rationalization for refusing to live up to our collective climate responsibilities” (Klein, 2020: 45). But what precisely could eco-fascism mean in this context?

Since, at least, the recent publication of the watershed *Mussolini’s Nature* by Marco Armiero et al. (2022), the very notion of “eco-fascism” needs to be thoroughly questioned. This article has turned it upside down, largely identifying it as an oxymoron. Historically, the environmental credentials of fascism are at best flimsy, and at worst a fruit of the very political propaganda that fascist regimes emphatically engaged with.

I have concluded that the term “eco-fascism” is contradictory for several reasons: first, fascism’s practices of biotic and cultural homogenization are inconsistent with an ecological approach in which diversity is central. Second, the themes of domination and “taming” of nature highlighted in this article are entirely opposite to an ecological approach, where the symbiosis and mutual interrelationships between humans and nature lie at the core – indeed humans cannot be separated from “nature” (Latour, 2018). Third, fascism is deeply interconnected with racism by way of imperialism and colonialism, both linked with the Earth’s exploitation and resource extraction, which are equally far removed from any possibility of affixing an “eco-” label to them. Fourth, the often downplayed and unexplored mass consumerism aspects of fascism sit opposite to ecological concerns.

I have, however, argued that the term “fascism” should not be wholly discarded and that several connections exist between the ideology of the contemporary far right and fascism’s exploitative relations with nature. Yet, rather than indicating something occurring now or clearly visible in any of the current far-right movements, parties and governments, it is better conceived as a process *in fieri*, something which is slowly taking shape as the climate crisis deepens by hinting at social collapse accompanied by denial. Once a “tipping point” is reached in any part of the world, the simultaneous collapse

of existing ecosystems and the social order may likely be accompanied by new forms of palingenetic ultranationalism emerging from the ashes of neoliberal globalization.

I have argued that the historical relationship between fascism and the environment/nature (section 1) still shapes, to a certain extent, current approaches to climate change by the far right, while the rapidly expanding literature on denial (section 2) can clarify how the current far-right’s view on climate change should be placed within a broader historical continuum of authoritarian and totalitarian “nation-statism” (Mann, 2004) that encompasses fascism’s view of nature and the “natural.” Further historical and political research on how far-right nationalism relates to the evolution of climate policy and politics is surely needed. But some aspects related to this relationship remains hypothetical.

In fact, the risk of societal meltdown resulting from runaway climate change may be accompanied by the search for a new palingenesis as the predictable form of organizing human hope at a moment of boundless despair. A similar search for palingenesis was sought after the unprecedented devastation brought about by WW1, but this will probably be on a much greater scale. Both historical fascism and fossil fascism have been preceded by gargantuan campaigns of denial, lies, disinformation, censorship, obscuration and truth removal promoted by those very economic and political elites that caused the greater sufferings in the first place. Talk of “eco-fascism” can only dissipate the remaining clarity, deteriorate interdisciplinary communication and ultimately contribute to the possibility of actual fossil fascism taking hold — unless democrats wake up and succeed in halting climate change before it turns into total destruction.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

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