

Ecofascism: Deep Ecology and Right-Wing Co-optation by Kev Smith, Greenpepper

Alongside the rise of environmental activism in the last few decades, nationalist and even fascist ideas are gaining an increasingly high profile in Europe. With social tensions exacerbated, neo-fascist groups of various kinds are winning electoral representation and committing acts of violence against foreigners.

To a casual observer, there would seem to be a vast gulf in ideology and outlook between the new right and environmental activism. But these movements are invoking ecological themes to update their ideology and now speak the new language of ecology. In ways that are similar to the beliefs of progressive-minded ecologists, fascist groups emphasize the supremacy of the Earth over people and evoke "feelings" and intuition at the expense of reason.

This is an extremely sensitive issue among activists. To accuse an individual or a philosophy of racist tendencies is always going to cause offense. Much-needed debate has been poisoned by wild mud-slinging and sensationalist accusations of eco-fascism. In this article, I don't want to point the condemnatory finger at groups or individuals and ignite a McCarthyist witch-hunt. Rather, I want to illustrate how the nature and content of certain belief structures within the environmental movement make it easier for new-right groups to reach a wider audience. I will discuss this in the context of Deep Ecology as it has been one of the most widely debated and has parallels with 1930s Germany.

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Deep Ecology is difficult to define. It encourages subjective intuition as a means of understanding its principles. The basic idea is the belief that nature does not exist to serve humans. According to Deep Ecology, all species have a right to exist for their own sake, regardless of their usefulness to humans. Biodiversity is a value in itself and is essential for the flourishing of both human and non-human life. Deep Ecology locates the origin of the ecological crisis in human belief systems, be they religious or philosophical. Deep ecologists identify

ancient Near Eastern religions, Christianity, and the scientific worldview as fostering a mindset that seeks to dominate nature. It is by “asking deeper questions” that these origins of the ecological crisis are identified and social causes are dismissed as a “shallow” analysis.

Deep Ecology gained both publicity and controversy in the 1980s when it was adopted as a philosophy by the Earth First! wilderness movement that had begun to take dramatic direct action against the logging of old-growth forests. Its most controversial figure was founder David Foreman, who welcomed famine as a means of limiting the population. This is something that Deep Ecologists believed to be necessary to restore ecological balance on the planet. Similar statements about the AIDS epidemic were issued by a fellow Earth First!er. The implications are that if human beings are no better intrinsically than animals, then their premature death is morally acceptable. Population control goes beyond contraception to calculated neglect, fostering a “permissible” degree of famine.

In the Sudan, famine was caused by extreme mismanagement. Pressure by the World Bank for increased cotton production in the late 1970s, rising oil prices for highly mechanized agricultural practices, and a considerable decline in home-grown food reserves were at fault. Portraying this as a “natural” response of the Earth in order to counteract over-population is to deflect blame away from the real culprits: British colonialism, American agribusiness and the World Bank. This was the original example of Deep Ecology theorists’ ignoring socio-political factors when dealing with ecological and demographic issues. It is disturbing that such extreme, misanthropic and misguided statements went initially uncriticized from within the Earth First! movement, first being challenged by Social Ecologists such as Murray Bookchin.

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However, it is unfair to smear all Deep Ecology supporters. David Orton repudiates the right-wing accusations of the population issue, saying, “Deep ecology supporters, contrary to some social ecology slanders, seek population reduction, or perhaps controls on immigration from a maintenance of biodiversity perspective, and this has nothing to do with fascists who seek controls on immigration or want to deport ‘foreigners’ in the name of maintaining some so-called ethnic/cultural or racial purity or national identity.”

There are two reasons why I find such a statement from a “moderate” Deep Ecologist worrying. The first is that it misses the point that you do not necessarily have to “be” a fascist in order to propagate right-wing ideology. Secondly, it still places the issue of population control ahead of the issue of how resources are unevenly distributed among the global population. It is astonishing how many environmental groups (and not just Deep Ecologists; the mainstream Dutch environmental group Milieu Defensie is a depressing recent example) still rate population growth over the systematic over-consumption of the industrialized world. This misinforms the person on the street, reinforcing fears that their stably populated Western country may be overrun by the teeming dark-skinned multitudes of the Third World. Such scare-mongering plays directly into the hands of the new right and lends inadvertent support to calls for stricter border controls.

We would do well to examine the example of the Wandervögel, a youth movement that arose in Germany during the first three decades of the 20th Century. Peter Staudenmaier, co-author of the paper “Ecofascism: Lessons From The German Experience,” characterizes this movement as “a hodge-podge of counter-cultural elements, blending neo-Romanticism, Eastern philosophies, nature mysticism, hostility to reason, and a ... search for authentic, non-alienated social relations. Their back-to-the-land emphasis spurred a passionate sensitivity to the natural world and the damage it suffered. Although some sectors of the movement gravitated towards various forms of emancipatory politics, most of the Wandervögel were eventually absorbed by the Nazis.”

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It is striking how many traits the Wandervögel have in common with the Deep Ecology movement. In particular, their self-conception that they were a “non-political” response to a deep cultural crisis, favoring direct emotional experience over social critique and action. In the same paper, Janet Biehl states, “When respect for nature comes to mean reverence, it can mutate ecological politics into a religion that ‘Green Adolfs’ can effectively use for authoritarian ends.” In Britain, a wing of the National Front issues the cry, “Racial preservation is Green!” while in the United States, white supremacist Monique Wolfing remarks that animals and the environment, “are in the same position as we are. Why would we want something created for ourselves and yet watch nature be destroyed? We work hand in hand with nature and we should save nature along with trying to save our race.”

The key question is whether supporters of Deep Ecology are vulnerable to absorption by far-right groups in the same way that the Wandervögel were. The main fear for this happening lies in Deep Ecology's demonization of reason. Deep Ecology sees reason as endemic to human-centered worldviews that have produced the ecological crisis. Alternatively, Deep Ecology promotes intuition as equal or even superior to reason. As a result Deep Ecology is subject to the dangers represented by earlier anti-rational and intuitionist worldviews that, once carried over into the political realm, have produced anti-human and even genocidal movements. Peter Staudenmaier fears that this is "perhaps, the unavoidable trajectory of any movement which acknowledges and opposes social and ecological problems but does not recognize their systemic roots or actively resist the political and economic structures which generate them."

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Deep Ecology, as a philosophy, seems to be both systematically and morally problematic. Where Deep Ecology theories have gone wrong is in the extreme reaction to perceived centuries of human exploitation of nature and the dominance of rationalist thought. The primacy of intuitive thought means that it lacks the self-analysis that normally acts as a safety check to prevent straying onto moral thin ice. These factors then serve to prevent an accurate picture of the ecological crisis from emerging. The role of personal consciousness-raising on both rational and intuitive levels should be complementary rather than competitive. In the manner of the classic circularity of extreme left and right thought, Deep Ecology has the potential to find itself back at the totalitarian starting point it intended to usurp.

Sources

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Greenpepper can be reached at: <http://squat.net/cia/gp/>

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