

CONSILIENCE

THE JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Eco-Nationalism: A Historical Evaluation of Nationalist Praxes in Environmentalist and Ecologist Movements

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Abstract

As human civilization prepares to rise up to the increasingly serious challenges presented by climate change, environmentalist rhetoric has been incorporated into other movements for political change. The historic convergence of environmentalist and ecologist movements with civic and ethnic nationalist political movements has revealed a seemingly natural affinity between the two. From anti-nuclear environmentalist mobilization in post-Soviet Russia to the ecologist sentiments underpinning the rise of the Nazis, I plan to investigate the efficacy of eco-nationalist praxis in local and national political mobilization. Drawing on theories of social mobilization, I argue that the nationalist leaders often commodify environmental mobilization resources, and only serve to limit the prolonged effectiveness of the environmentalist movement. Not only do I argue that nationalism erodes environmentalist resources, but also that the core values of nationalism are fundamentally inconsistent with environmentalism and ecologism. As the international community struggles to find solutions to global environmental threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss, it is essential to understand the historical role played by eco-nationalist groups in advancing and hindering the goals of environmentalist and ecologist groups.

Keywords

Eco-nationalism, nationalism, civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, environmentalism, ecologism, environmental history, climate change, eco-facism, far-right ecologism

I. INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2019, a white supremacist shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas left twenty-one people dead. Preceding the attack, a post on the shooter's social media featured racist and anti-immigrant ramblings, expressing his concerns about eventual "cultural and ethnic replacement" (Beinart, 2019). Diverging from traditional white supremacist rhetoric, the shooter vehemently expressed his concerns about the destruction of the environment. The environmental problems of the 21st century, the shooter asserted, had been the result of a so-called "invasion" by non-White ethnic groups in America and the overpopulation of non-Europeans. While this right-wing environmentalist sentiment seems uncharacteristic of modern nationalist dialogues, such a convergence of environmentalism and nationalism is nothing new. The ideological principle that has emerged from these two political movements has been referenced as eco-nationalism.

The 21st century re-emergence of nationalism has occurred alongside urgent and transnational environmental concerns. As the global community seeks to address the problem of anthropogenic climate change, nationally- and globally-coordinated responses are necessary to reconcile the atmospheric damage caused by excessive greenhouse gas emissions. From ethnic eco-nationalist movements in Germany to civic eco-nationalist movements in post-soviet Russia, the frequency by which nationalism is supplemented by environmentalism begs the question of why? What are the underlying elements of ethnic and civic nationalism that make environmentalist sentiments so appealing? To what extent have nationalist and environmentalist

movements throughout history successfully wielded eco-nationalism to accomplish their respective goals? What can we learn from past eco-nationalist movements as the global community orients its response to the recent climate crisis?

Before I attempt to answer these questions, it is necessary to precisely define a few important terms. Nationalism is a political principle predicated on a discrepancy between the state and a given national unit. The state is a distinctly political unit that is made up of a “set of institutions specifically concerned with the enforcement of order” (Gellner & Breuilly, 2013, p. 4). Order is enforced through a monopoly on violence as well as the provision of collective goods for those residing within “a bounded territory” (Hechter, 2010, p. 27). A nationalist movement takes the legitimacy of the state to be normative, believing that “the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner & Breuilly, 2013, p. 1). The existence of such a nation is historically and culturally constructed, relying on a system of ideas and signs that dictate association, behavior, and communication between two individuals bonded through recognition of mutual “rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership” (Gellner & Breuilly, 2013, p. 7).

In this paper, I will use the term eco-nationalism to refer to the tendency of the goals of nationalist movements to coincide with the goals of ecologist and environmentalist movements. Ecologism and environmentalism, however, are two distinct strands of green political thought. Ecologism advocates for a sustainable existence through “radical changes in our relationship with the non-human world, and in our mode of social and political life” (Dobson, 2010, p. 2). Environmentalism, however, advocates for a managerial approach to environmental problems “without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption” (Dobson, 2010, p. 2).

II. ORIGINS OF ECO-NATIONALISM

The origins of eco-nationalism can be found within the very process by which nations were historically constructed. The potential processes by which these socio-political groups formed are of much academic speculation. While not the only elements, the roles of land, territory, and ecology were necessary in the development of different national cultures. Nationality

has become intertwined with the values of ecologism through cultural and spiritual means, whereas nationality has converged with environmentalism through territory-based economic niches.

Nationalism and ecologism are mutually reinforcing entities, both deriving their legitimacy from the cultural and spiritual essence of land for human populations. Ethnic association with a specific territory constitutes the very existence of many ethnic groups. Such a territory was foundational to the creation of an ethnicity-wide cultural consciousness formed through “myths, memories, values, and symbols” derived from the land (A. Smith, 1988, p. 28). Through the association between people and territory, the symbol of a homeland constructs and reinforces ethnic identity. The notion of common descent implied by the word “homeland” is given meaning through *mythomoteurs*, which define the collective essence of an ethnic community (A. Smith, 1988, p. 24). The land, frequently the subject of these myths and stories, becomes the focus for pilgrimage, religious lore, and interpersonal commonality (A. Smith, 1988, p. 29). The most obvious example is that of ethnic Jews whose homeland lies in Jerusalem. This historic homeland provides globally dispersed Jewish populations with a symbolic land to coalesce, serving to solidify ethnic identity and solidarity.

While land and ecology helped to construct ethnic identity, they also played a role in forming nations and nationalist movements. Whereas the idea of a territorial attachment is sufficient to form an ethnic group, the distinct category of a “nation” emerges when the ethnic group is territorially concentrated within the given homeland (Hechter, 2010, p. 14). These nations regard their existence within the territory to be natural, conceiving of their relationship with the land as symbiotic. This notion of symbiosis between territory and community gave rise to a rhetoric that draws ethnicity- and location-based distinctions that establish ideas of national autonomy. Nationalist policies are constructed upon the idea that other cultures and people are “incompetent for protecting the environment” and must be securitized against to preserve such a symbiotic relationship (Lubarda, 2019, p. 7). For example, pollution in the Hungarian portion of the Tisza River has catalyzed nationalist resentment from members of the Hungarian nationalist party *Mi Hazánk* (translated to mean “Our Homeland”), who accused their Ukrainian and Romanian

neighbors of poisoning the Hungarian people (Lubarda, 2019b). Here, eco-nationalism rose as an ecologist movement that emphasized an ethical relationship between community and environment within the framework of ethnic identity.

While the spiritual and cultural components of nationalism intertwine eco-nationalism with ecologist demands, the economic features that construct the nation commodify environmental resources and give way to environmentalist sentiments. Unique ecological territories both catalyze group formation and construct common, nationally-held values. Thomas Hobbes, whose writings in *The Leviathan* provide the foundation for modern international relations theory, understands the initial process of national group formation to have occurred as individuals faced physical insecurity posed by external factors. A major threat that motivated group formation was food and water insecurity. Groups grappling with resource scarcity formed national identities that were contingent on the territorial ecological limitations that created the conditions in the first place. For example, the nation of the !Kung San formed in the Kalahari Desert when families cooperated to secure and distribute water within their water scarce biome (Hechter, 2010, p. 21).

As ecological distinctiveness and resource scarcity drove group formation, such limitations contributed to a nation's unique consumption and production habits, two elements foundational to the cultivation of a nationally distinct value system. Comparative advantages for production resulting from ecological qualities control the direction of economic specialization, contributing to a nation's "production values" (Hechter, 2010, p. 118). Thus, a common system of valuation forms among those dependent on the national economy. Michael Hechter argues that values of consumption, a primary element of a nation's culture, flow from this economic distinctiveness (Hechter, 2010, p. 120). Therefore, the makeup of a nation's economic and cultural values is intrinsically tied to their unique ecology.

Nationalist demands for economic protectionism and even self-determination are intimately linked to these values derived from the local ecological makeup. For example, the 19th century agro-economy of the Confederate South, a group that claimed to be culturally distinct from the Yankee North, developed due to the distinct ecological qualities of the southern plains and

grasslands, such as soil fertility and water supply (Helms, 2000, p. 728). The economic values of the North and South, embedded in ecological difference, motivated differing political convictions, which translated to the southern nationalist movement for sovereignty and self-rule. From this perspective, nationalist demands predicated on economic preferences are tied to a system of values derived from the resources afforded by a distinct, preserved, and functioning ecosystem. The role of ecology in constructing national values furthers a model of eco-nationalism based in a more managerialist and environmentalist framework.

III. ECO-NATIONALISM AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

The seemingly natural and historically-constituted coincidence of nationalism and green thought has been observed through various social movements in the last century. It is helpful to classify these movements as either a manifestation of ethnic or civic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism refers to an ethnocentric conception of the nation as a community defined by common culture, language, and ethnicity (Tamir, 2019, 425). Civic nationalism, however, conceives of the nation as being defined by equal rights, a shared set of political values, and common citizenship regardless of ethnicity. While ethnic and civic nationalist movements have embraced environmentalism and ecologism as praxis to actualize their goals, it is necessary to investigate whether such instances of eco-nationalism actually served to further the objectives of such environmentalist and ecologist movements.

A. Ethnic Eco-Nationalism

As explained above, the origins of ethnicity and nationalism were contingent on the biological limitations of a territory and the mythology derived from such natural features. Such a genealogy of the nation considers the present relationship between nature and nation to be one defined by equilibrium and harmony. The assumed spiritual, organic, and naturalistic connection between community and nature has been continuously evoked in ethnic nationalist movements through history. The Nazi phrase *Blut und Boden* (translated as Blood and Soil), coined by Walther Darré, the Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture, encapsulates the use of ethnic eco-nationalism as praxis. The meaning of the phrase is best captured in Darré's writing, as he argues that "the

German soul with its warmth is rooted in its agriculture and in a real sense always grew out of it” (Lovin, 1967, p. 282). For Darré, the Nordic identity was inexplicably linked to the agrarian economy in which the German farmer became rooted through a history of symbiosis between the land and the community. Facing external threats to such a conception of agriculture, German ethnic nationalists called for the sacrifice of blood (*blut*) to protect the soil (*boden*) (Hamilton, 2002, p. 32). Darré’s writings were part and parcel of the Nazis’ broader ethic of conservation within the *Volkisch* movement, which advocated for a return to the land in the face of industrial capitalism and environmental alienation (K. Smith, 2019). Such an emergence of ethnic eco-nationalism in Germany led to the implementation of widespread renewable energy infrastructure and sustainable land use planning techniques (Darwall, 2019).

While the policy strategies for ecological sustainability implemented by the Nazi party represent the success of environmentalism in Germany, the racist overtones within Nazi ideology and praxis represent the failures of ethnic eco-nationalism. The *Volkisch* movement to return to the land was inherently anti-Semitic in that Jews were used as a stand-in to represent the forces leading such environmental degradation such as rationalism, cosmopolitanism, and urban civilization (Staudenmaier, 2012, p. 3). Ethnic eco-nationalist movements such as the *Volkisch* movement, thus, rely on a racialized narrative of environmental degradation to mobilize supporters. Nazi anti-Semitism was supplemented with the ecological discourse of Charles Darwin, which asserted Nordic racial superiority as scientific fact. Drawing on the notion that a species must compete for dominance within a world of finite natural resources, the Nazis sought to optimize German access to nourishment (K. Smith, 2019). To achieve this, the national party pursued a policy of *Lebensraum* that sought to secure expanded living space for a unified Nordic ethnic group (K. Smith, 2019). Everything the Nazis did, from invading Poland, creating nature preserves, exterminating Jews, and implementing sustainable farming programs, was done in pursuit of *Lebensraum*. In this case, ethnic eco-nationalism produced ecological programs that were pursued as a means of displacing and exterminating millions of human beings.

The example of Nazi Germany reveals the problems inherent to ethnic eco-nationalism as praxis. Core underlying elements such as spirituality and rootedness become complicated and dangerous when combined with racialized narratives of environmental degradation. When the belief in a symbiotic relationship between nation and land is supplemented with the identification of an ethnic group as a distinct environmental hazard, ethnic eco-nationalism can result in dramatic forms of violence.

B. Civic Eco-Nationalism

While an ethnic eco-nationalist praxis may lead to a violent and ill-informed implementation of ecological ideas, a civic eco-nationalist praxis might be a reasonable alternative in that it avoids the complicating element of ethnicity. In *Eco-Nationalism, Anti-nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine*, Jane Dawson analyzes civic eco-nationalism within the demands for self-determination and national sovereignty in the late Soviet era that rose alongside anti-nuclear environmentalist movements (Dawson, 1996). The convergence of these two social movements, Dawson explains, was not a natural occurrence that can be explained through genealogy; rather, the nationalist embrace of environmental advocacy was a superficial one that used anti-nuclear demands as a surrogate to mobilize civic nationalist resistance. To explain this instance of eco-nationalism, Dawson draws on social mobilization theory, the notion that social movements are rational actors that mobilize only with sufficient access to resources, organization and opportunity (Dawson, 1996, p. 11).

The political environment of the late Soviet Union was controlled by the state as they determined the dissemination of mobilizational resources through the distribution of resources such as money, meeting space, and communication technology. Groups “deemed unthreatening to the party’s status and goals” were given such resources, while those seen as dangerous were suppressed by the Soviet government (Dawson, 1996, p. 18). This gave rise to a phenomenon referred to as “movement surrogacy,” in which more radical political intentions were masked behind a nonthreatening cause as a means of mobilizing support (Dawson, 1996, p. 18). While *Perestroika*-era civic nationalist movements for local sovereignty were suppressed because of their threat to the national political system, anti-nuclear

environmental activists gained “privileged access to mobilizational resources” because local officials viewed them as apolitical and merely a sign of a growing environmental consciousness (Dawson, 1996, p. 26).

In many of the post-Soviet states, ethnic and political elites capitalized on anti-nuclear mobilization resources to catalyze movements for achieving nationalist goals of self-determination. In the case of 1988 Lithuania, scientists and political elites collaborated to manufacture a civic eco-nationalist movement. The dominant rhetoric within the anti-nuclear movement—mostly constructed by political elites—suddenly shifted from a genuine concern about nuclear technology to images of colonial control and local ethno-genocide, phrasing their concerns in terms of nation and territory. This fabricated and top-down combination of environmentalism and civic nationalism gave way to mass mobilization against the Russian-built Ignalina nuclear power station. Mobilized by the rhetoric of anti-imperialism, anti-nuclear environmentalist groups rallied with song and dance to resist the existential threat of nuclear radiation and territorial degradation imposed by Moscow, dubbing their resistance the “rebirth of the Lithuanian nation” (Dawson, 1996, p. 52). When construction was halted at the Ignalina power plant, nationalist organizers capitalized on the energy of local victory, shifting their advocacy toward overtly political issues “of much greater relevance to the question of republic sovereignty and independence,” which were eventually actualized in 1990 (Dawson, 1996, p. 58).

While some may argue that the anti-nuclear and nationalist movement arose together because of a shared opponent, the weakly contested decision to expand a Lithuanian nuclear power station after independence proves otherwise (Dawson, 1996, p. 60). As the new Lithuanian government initiated nuclear construction, the anti-nuclear movement was left defenseless and disorganized. The eventual decline of anti-nuclear movements displays the result of such a civic eco-nationalist strategy of mobilization. The use of anti-nuclearism as a surrogate to voice frustration with a colonial Moscow left such environmental movements “extremely weak once opportunities for genuine political activism emerged” (Dawson, 1996, p. 59). While the civic nationalist commodification of the environmentalist movement led to mass mobilization, the combination was nonetheless parasitic for environmentalists who became

demobilized, under-resourced, and weakened as soon as the genuine political goals of the nationalists came to fruition.

Whereas civic eco-nationalism demobilized environmentalist movements in post-Soviet Russia, civic eco-nationalism as praxis actually serves to further entrench systems of consumption, exploitation, and pollution. A modern example by which civic eco-nationalist praxis is applied reveals the disingenuous commodification of environmentalism that lies at the core of civic eco-nationalism. The Scottish National Party (SNP), the leader of civic nationalist demands for Scottish independence within the European Union (EU), has sought to position itself alongside environmental activists within Scotland. While the SNP does not make emotive appeals to Scottish ethnicity, Scottish civic nationalism relies on the romantic narratives of nature to construct an image of the UK as a “negligent landlord” that deposits waste and pollution into a relatively under-polluted Scottish territory (Hamilton, 2002, p. 36). The SNP embraces the demands of environmental activists as they fight alongside other green organizations against external environmental disruptions, such as the building of a site to import American waste and the EU initiative to privatize the water supply (Hamilton, 2002, p. 37).

A primary point of contention between the SNP and Britain, however, has been the use and storage of nuclear energy on Scottish territory. The SNP has continuously fought to shut down the nuclear waste site at Dounreay, leading the charge against the expansion of nuclear energy throughout the EU (Hamilton, 2002, p. 37). The corollary of SNP’s civic nationalist narrative of a negligent landlord is the assumption that local government could more efficiently deliver material prosperity to the Scottish people. The core promises made by the SNP—such as more jobs, lower taxes, and decreased regulation via localized control—ensure the continuation of a growth-oriented society. This vision of localized and independent economic growth can occur, the SNP submits, through the accumulation of revenue via oil extraction in the North Sea oil field (Hamilton, 2002, p. 40). Increased oil extraction could not only raise revenue to expand a Scottish welfare state, but also establish Scotland as energy independent and, as a result, economically independent from the rest of the EU. Such a strategy of independence would create an oil-dependent state of Scotland whose existence relies on the

exploitation of marine ecosystems and increased pollution via the burning of fossil fuels.

This case accurately and precisely represents the shortcomings of civic eco-nationalism. Such an environmentalist critique of British energy management, combined with civic nationalist goals for local prosperity, only serves to commodify environmentalist narratives while obviating and neglecting genuine ecologist concerns regarding a sustainable relationship to the land. Whereas Lithuanian eco-nationalist praxis ultimately served to demobilize environmental groups, the SNP's anti-nuclearism commodified environmentalist mobilization resources in order to expand and establish a system of further environmental exploitation through oil dependence.

IV. THE IMPLICATIONS OF ECO-NATIONALISM FOR INTERNATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO CLIMATE CHANGE

As humanity is confronted with climate change—its largest environmental catastrophe yet—the goals of the environmentalist and ecologist movements are more important than ever. While nations scramble to develop strategies to draw down carbon emissions and protect vital ecosystems, it is necessary to keep in mind the problems within historic ethnic and civic eco-nationalist movements. While ethnic eco-nationalist movements successfully realized the goals of ecologism, the typical problems of ethnic nationalism prevailed when ecological narratives were interwoven with genocidal violence. Civic eco-nationalism, while lacking problems associated with ethnic violence, proved ineffective in achieving ecologist and environmentalist goals, even resulting in the decline of a national environmental consciousness. These failures help contextualize the threat nationalism poses to the prolonged success of the environmental movement in resisting climate change. In *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, Avner de-Shalit identifies several contradictions that render nationalism a threat that must be overcome in the fight against climate change (De-Shalit, 2006). Only by first understanding the limitations posed by eco-nationalism can states construct a new and ecologically sound framework for national sovereignty.

First, nationalism confines a movement to act locally, whereas climate change necessitates a consideration of the global issue. The popular phrase “act locally, think globally” is the bedrock for environmental

praxis as it urges individuals to consider the global impacts of environmental degradation while taking local. Thinking globally is necessary for determining the direction of such activism; for example, local demands to halt carbon emissions are only valid when considering the global impacts of climate change. Whereas nationalism may be conducive to local and national action, global thought becomes subordinated by “national interest” (De-Shalit, 2006, p. 82). Nationalist sentiments such as these evoke the realist image of a nation-state preserving its interests within an anarchic system where its interests are always at risk. Therefore, international cooperation between states is limited in cases where the nation perceives cooperation as a threat to its national interests.

Two facts about climate change must be considered to understand the absolute necessity that global thought triumphs national interest. First, there is an unequal distribution of responsibility for climate change, which refers to the fact that developed nations such as the United States bear more responsibility because of their disproportionate level of carbon emissions (Fussel, 2009, p. 1). Second, there is an unequal distribution of impact; this refers to the notion that underdeveloped nations, less responsible for the crisis, will suffer disproportionately from the impacts of climate change (Fussel, 2009, p. 1). Given these facts, environmentalist praxis along the lines of global thought and international cooperation must be prioritized to ensure the most vulnerable individuals are not left behind.

The second eco-nationalist inconsistency is the distinction between political and ecological borders. While nationalism as a political principle necessitates the existence of a system that is organized into sovereign and territorially distinct states, ecological problems have nothing to do with such “political definitions of geographical units” (De-Shalit, 2006, p. 83). The core nationalist belief that the nation maintains the right to political autonomy is the basis for modern conceptions of sovereignty. The concept of sovereignty refers to the existence of a supreme authority whose powers cannot be restricted by other authorities. With reference to the legislature's sovereignty within its own borders, international bodies such as the United Nations are inherently threatening in their attempts to construct and enforce international agreements. For nationalists, to submit to an agreement is to sacrifice national

sovereignty because a modification of domestic policy would be imposed by an outside power. This notion of sovereignty within a politically-defined territory places nationalism in opposition to environmentalist and ecologist praxis.

De-Shalit argues that every policy for environmental protection is similar in its goal of protecting ecosystems. Whether this takes its form in the protection of humans from ecological instability or the protection of endangered species, environmental policy is dictated in terms of ecological boundaries (De-Shalit, 2006, p. 84). The inconsistency between arbitrarily drawn national borders and more natural, ecological borders means that environmental policies that seek to protect ecosystems must cross political boundaries. Only through the establishment of international agreements can such transnational action be coordinated to preserve vital ecosystems. Nationalism's fatalist attachment to notions of sovereignty and political autonomy has placed it in opposition to environmentalist efforts to mitigate threats to international ecosystems.

As nationalist values of sovereignty limit the enforcement of international agreements, De-Shalit urges nations to reconsider the importance of political autonomy as it relates to international environmental agreements and instead embrace policies of international intervention as a means of enforcement. As previously explained, the problem of greenhouse gas pollution necessitates global consideration, given that one country's emissions will ultimately impact the health and well-being of the global community. Because transnational environmental action is so urgent, compliance with, and enforcement of, international environmental agreements are essential. De-Shalit proposes enforcement via international intervention, promoting an alternative view of the value of national sovereignty given the conditions of social and economic globalization (De-Shalit, 2006, p. 85). Intervention, he explains, does not necessarily imply militarism, but rather intervention should be through economic means such as sanctions and boycotts.

However, many criticize the practice of international intervention due to its role in limiting sovereignty, as well as the amoral implications of transforming a state's political structure. First, the claim that intervention impedes domestic sovereignty is false. The action of intervention in the form of economic sanctions merely

operates on the international scale as a means of providing an incentive to adjust national policy. Intervention does not involve the attempt to impede domestic sovereignty by manipulating a state's formal structure, but rather it peacefully operates through moral persuasion or sanctions aimed at changing a particular policy. The inter-border impacts of non-compliance to international environmental agreements necessitate the subordination of nationality for higher considerations such as the health and wellbeing of the world's inhabitants.

V. CONCLUSION

The solution to the challenges presented by climate change involves a distinctly anti-nationalist praxis. In order to achieve ecological sustainability and preserve natural ecosystems, political responses must transcend the boundaries of national borders, and instead forge a system of international cooperation built on the collective enforcement of international environmental agreements. To achieve this, human society should disinvest in the values of nationalism. When this happens, the national interest will become subordinate to the global interest. The values of national sovereignty and autonomy become temporarily suspended and environmental action becomes compulsory. Only once the global community disavows the values of nationalism from our response to the environmental crisis do we stand a chance of effectively mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change.

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