Ecofascism

How Benign Ideas Can Go Wrong

We have a chapter by Peter Staudenmaier in a book by Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier entitled Eco-Fascism (Lessons from the German Experience). The chapter is entitled «Fascist Ecology: the Green Wing of the Nazi Party» and its historical antecedents.

From the jacket of the book, Peter Staudenmaier is a left green activist who has been involved in anarchist and ecological politics in Germany and the United States for over a decade. Also, read this little blurb from the back of the cover about the intent of this book, it says the reappearance of fascism in many countries of the western world is one of the more disconcerting facts of the late 20th Century (so you know, when this book came out).

Equally disconcerting is the attempt by fascist ideologists and political groups to use ecology in the service of social reaction. This effort is not without long historical roots in Germany (both, in its 19th Century romanticism and in the Third Reich in 20th Century).

In order to preserve the liberatory aspects of ecology, the authors (as social ecologists) explore the German experience of fascism and derive from it historical lessons about the political use of ecology, a problem that is of great relevance to ecology movements today.

I thought this was a good thing to read in light of the first two writings and maybe particularly the one by Faye from Archaeofuturism (as he is a thinker of the new right). And here we have an author who is going to explain how the old 20th century fascists used ecology in order to further their ideological vision.

I think one of the lessons that the authors want to get across and that I definitely wanted to get across this week is that while we normally associate ecological concerns with the left, there that environmental issues and environmental theories are not the exclusive province of the left, and in a world where we're coming closer to really feeling the effects of ecological harm and where some people are starting to talk in kind of catastrophic terms about the effects of that harm, as political theorists we need to think about how the shock of ecological catastrophes can be used to develop and promote political ideologies.

In the left accelerationists, we saw authors who were willing to entertain the possibility of abandoning procedural democracy and engaging in top down or “vertical” (as they put it) politics and maybe instituting something like a technocracy (all launching off of the harm and damage that's been done by neoliberalism). That, more or less, forces us (they say) to change our ways and then, on the European far right, we have Faye who has basically argued that ecological catastrophe will force us into his bifurcated vision of small developed pockets of peoples and many underdeveloped or undeveloped peoples coexisting with each other and returning to much greater cultural and ethnic homogeneity and greater levels of cooperation.

I'm sure you found this chapter by Staudenmaier interesting. You probably never had any notion that Nazis were fairly deeply engaged in green thinking, or that fascists (some of them) were rather rabid environmentalists. So, the author starts out referencing romanticism (or the romantic tradition) and its anti-enlightenment irrationalism.

In a nutshell, romanticism was an intellectual and artistic and literary rebellion against enlightenment rationalism. It's a mid-19th Century movement and Staudenmaier references two thinkers (neither of one of whom I was familiar with): Ernst Moritz Arndt y Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl. I guess I would put Arndt into the category of anti-enlightenment or reactionary thinker (to use terms I'm a bit more familiar with in political philosophy). They didn't like the universalizing tendencies of the enlightenment (the idea that all human beings were equal, somehow, also implied to them same). They could see that enlightenment thought tended to downplay ethnic and cultural identity and tended to be critical of religious faith, and you know, anything about human beings that wasn't rational, including motivations (like virtue and honor, love and charity). They feared the coming onslaught of the bourgeois mentality (you might say, all business).

He says Arndt environmentalism was inextricably bound up virulently with xenophobic nationalism. His eloquent and precious prescient appeals for ecological sensitivity were couched always in terms of the well-being of the German soil and the German people and his repeated lunatic polemics against miscegenation (which is the mixing of races), demands for Teutonic racial purity, and epithets against the French, Slavs, and Jews, marked every aspect of his thought. So, he was an ecologist who wrote an 1815 article on the care and conservation of forests. He says he rails against the short-sighted exploitation of woodlands and soil condemning deforestation and its economic causes. And the reason why would be because these threaten the very soil from which these people (the German people) get their sustenance and out of which their culture comes.

Riehl, the other person he references, was a student of Arndt. He says he was an implacable opponent of the rise of industrialism and urbanization. His overtly antisemitic glorification of rural peasant values and undifferentiated condemnation of modernity, established him as the quote founder of agrarian romanticism and anti-urbanism. So, agrarian romanticism and anti-urbanism (he says) matured in the second half of the 19th century in the context of the Völkisch Movement (a powerful cultural disposition and social tendency which united ethnocentric populism with nature mysticism). So, out of romanticism and out of what I would call “reactionary thought”, comes this Völkisch Movement which is tied up with ethnic identity with the peasant mentality of anti-urbanism and with nature mysticism.

You've probably heard the term or the phrase «Blood and Soil» as a slogan of the fascist movement. That's a focus idea. It's the idea that the blood (you know, which is tied up with ethnic identity) is drawn out of the soil that it is conditioned by the place where you live: The food that you eat and everything around you, it's what makes you different from people living in other places (with different soil and different climate).

Many people don't know enough about where anti-semitism came from but this is one of the places where it comes in he says it pointedly refused to locate the sources of alienation rootlessness and environmental destruction in social structures laying the blame instead to rationalism cosmopolitanism and urban civilization and here's the key the stand-in for all of these was the age-old object of peasant hatred and middle-class resentment the jews jews were seen in other words as the ultimate bourgeois the ultimate in rationalism cosmopolitanism and urban civilization they were seen as by anti-semitic semitic semitic germans as nomadic people who lived all over the world and weren't attached to any particular soil that were not attached to any particular place but rather attach themselves wherever they uh landed so you can see that the anti-semitic notion of the jews as a sort of parasitic class that is about self-interest and money came out of this reactionary way of thinking that was also anti-urban and in a sense worshipped the natural environment he says in 1867 the german zoologist ernst haeckel coined the term ecology and began to establish it as a scientific discipline dedicated to studying the interactions between organism and environment hako also was the chief populizer of darwin and evolutionary theory for the german-speaking world and developed a peculiar sort of social darwinist philosophy he called monism the german monist league he founded combined scientifically based ecological holism with bulkish social views and getting to the heart of the matter uh a student of hagel the author says claimed that the change from an agrarian to an industrial society had challenged had hastened the decline of the race in contrast to nature which engendered the harmonic forms of germanism there were the big cities diabolical and inorganic destroying the virtues of the race so after discussing briefly some of the intellectual precursors of the type of eco-fascism that he's going to talk about he turns to the development of the youth movement and the weimar era the weimar republic was the government that existed prior to the nazi takeover in germany he says the youth movement is what took these ideas and kind of ran with them in the first three decades of the 20th century it's as if he's saying without them we might not have nazism he says the youth movement was a hodgepodge of countercultural elements blending neo-romanticism eastern philosophies nature mysticism hostility to reason and a strong communal impulse in a confused but no less ardent search for authentic non-alienated social relations back to the land emphasis spurred a passionate sensitivity to the natural world and the damage it suffered okay i just want to stop there and notice that this could be a description of hippies during the 1960s too and i say that because i just want to emphasize that at a certain point right and left when you get to the far end of the spectrum on both the right and left they almost meet and this is an illustration of that for sure also again just want to emphasize that the far right is not pro-capitalist and in fact is very capable of criticizing capitalist enterprise as polluting the environment and destroying cultures every bit as much as the left this isn't an argument to throw everything out because these issues have been solely by people on the far right and the far left or anything like that basically though it's a caution on the part of stoddenmeyer that ideas that normally are positioned in current political discourse as idealistic or as left-wing but not dangerous or misguided perhaps might be seen by contemporary conservatives as misguided but not malicious in the right hands or the wrong hands can become malicious or can lead to malicious things in this case the ecological ideas were very much tied up with racial homogeneity and ethnic identity and the reason for preserving the environment was to preserve the volk to preserve the people in their racial and ethnic identity and the romantic view of nature and the sort of spirituality that developed out of it became a rejection on the part of some of these people of christianity in favor of neo-paganism a famous thinker that stodden meyer deals with is martin heidegger a famous philosopher but also a member of the nazi party he says heidegger preached authentic being with a capital b and harshly criticized modern technology and is therefore often celebrated as a precursor of ecological thinking on the basis of his critique of technology and rejection of humanism contemporary deep ecologists have elevated heidegger to their pantheon of echo heroes we will be studying deep ecology later on in this course a bit critique of technology probably goes without explanation but by rejection of humanism he really means here the view that human beings have interfered too much with nature and with the natural course of things and that they need to be more a part of the whole rather than a dominating force he says heidegger was an active member of the nazi party and for a time enthusiastically even adoringly supported the fuhrer adolf hitler as far as the nazi religion of nature he has one historian describing it as a volatile admixture of primeval teutonic nature mysticism pseudo-scientific ecology irrationalist anti-humanism and a mythology of racial salvation through a return to the land so i think that sums up a lot uh very succinctly regarding how race land and religion all get tied up together here the constellation of traditional agrarian romanticism and hostility to urban civilization all revolving around erodedness in nature he says was most pronounced among the neo-pagan elements in the nazi leadership above all heinrich himmler alfred rosenberg and walter dari rosenberg wrote in his colossal the myth of the 20th century quote today we see the steady stream from the countryside to the city deadly for the folk volk the cities swell ever larger unnerving the volk and destroying the threads which bind humanity to nature they attract adventurers and profiteers of all colors thereby fostering racial chaos and then a little further down i have i'm quoting more than usual but i want to emphasize these spots because they're just kind of eye-poppingly surprising hitler and himmler were both strict vegetarians and animal lovers attracted to nature mysticism and homeopathic cures and staunchly opposed to vivisection and cruelty to animals himmler even established experimental organic farms to grow herbs for ss medicinal purposes and hitler at times could sound like a veritable green utopian discussing authoritatively and in detail various renewable energy sources including environmentally appropriate hydropower and producing natural gas from sludge as alternatives to coal and declaring water winds and tides end quote as the energy path of the future then he has a section on blood and soil as official doctrine that starts off with a quote from dharay the unity of blood and soil must be restored you know the old old phrase they used germany for the germans you know that that stems partly from this notion that the environment in which your people grow makes them unique and they should be allowed to grow without being interfered with by other elements other racial elements that are foreign to that area and the jews again were seen as a particularly foreign people since they did not have one single homeland in nazi policy he says dari's most important innovation was the introduction on a large scale of organic farming methods significantly labeled german i can't read it or farming according to the laws of life is what it means the german the the term points up yet again the natural order ideology which underlies so much reactionary ecological thought the impetus for these unprecedented measures came from rudolf steiner's anthroposophy and its techniques of biodynamic cultivation so again here we have something developed with no intention of lending itself to racist or fascist interpretations being taken up by fascists this in the case of biodynamic and or organic farming methods and turning them into a part of a racist ideology proving again that no idea is innocent in the hands of the wrong people he talks about alwyn seifert who had the official title of reich advocate for the landscape and whose nickname was mr mother earth he says seifert dreamed of a quote total conversion from technology to nature end quote and would often wax lyrical about the wonders of german nature and the tragedy of humankind's carelessness i have to mention another factor here [Music] in the anti-enlightenment tradition that no doubt came into play was the notion that high civilization had weakened people russo actually criticized um civilization in this regard nietzsche also though too and nietzsche was a great inspiration to the nazis although um very misunderstood but um they had this notion that that living closer to nature made people stronger and more hardy and sturdy and of course in nazi uh art you know you see these idealized people you know really robust um healthy young you know strapping men and women out in the fields and in the forests no need for a doctor you know no need for a lot of intervention hearty pure etc living in cities uh being highly civilized eating food that's too rich and so on and so forth was was seen to weaken people um and of course there's more than grain of truth to that but it's how it's turned how it's how that insight is used it becomes a total insight instead of just a partial truth too and then it's turned in the direction of supporting racial purity reich chancellor rudolph hess was also in the green wing hitler's devoted personal deputy he was an inveterate nature lover as well as a devout steinerite that's another reference to rudolph steiner's biodynamic farming hesse insisted on a strictly biodynamic diet not even in for for our purposes at this point read biodynamic as organic although it has particular ways of of doing organic farming not even hitler's rigorous vegetarian standards were good enough for hess and accepted he only accepted homeopathic medicines under hesse's leadership a bunch of environmental legislation took place including reforestation programs bills protecting animal and plant species and preservationist decrees blocking industrial development suspect you probably find a lot of this just incredible i know when i first read this i did i was not aware of this convergence between ecology and the nazi party and again i want to emphasize this book is written by two environmental advocates these people are not right wingers who are trying to bash ecologists they are ecologists but they um they want people to be aware that ecological ideas can be brought into other ideological agendas and that all ecological proposals should not be considered in the same light i suppose you might say that seems to be their reason for right and so the authors give their own um account of the lessons they want you to draw they say it's tempting to draw precisely the wrong conclusion namely that even the most reprehensible political undertakings sometimes produce laudable results but the real lesson here is just the opposite even the most laudable of causes can be perverted and instrumentalized in the service of criminal savagery the green wing of the nazi party was not a group of innocents confused and manipulated idealists or reformers from within they were conscious promoters and executioners of a vile program explicitly dedicated to inhuman racist violence massive political repression and worldwide military domination their ecological involvements far from offsetting these fundamental commitments deepened and radicalized them in the end their configuration of environmental politics was directly and substantially responsible for organized mass murder in the end he says genocide developed into a necessity under the cloak of environmental protection because the jews were blamed for all of the environmental problems and threats and all of the negative consequences associated with urbanization and industrialization i think among other things this chapter serves as a check on our naivete and i include my own about environmental ideas and about ideas that sound good generally that you always have to assess the purpose and the reason and the bigger picture involved in any ideas and sets of proposals and you also have to ask yourself how can the ideas be misused and what unintended as well as intended consequences can flow from these as the author says ecology alone does not prescribe a politics it must be interpreted interpreted mediated through some theory of society in order to acquire political meaning failure to heed this mediated interrelationship between the social and the ecological is the hallmark of reactionary ecology ecology i guess i'd say rather than failure to heed this mediated inner relationship i'd say the hallmark of reactionary ecology is mediating the relationship in the wrong way making the wrong connections dangerous connections between ecological purity and cultural purity for instance or racial purity or the strength of the nation and the blaming of others for ecological problems without taking responsibility on oneself when we take these types of turns we are involved in a reactionary ecology it's a it's a warning the chapter and the information that we've covered is a warning to us to be humble enough to check ourselves and as well as others in the ideas that we formulate concerning ecology as he says an ecological orientation alone outside of a critical social framework is dangerously unstable the record of fascist ecology shows that under the right conditions such an orientation can quickly lead to barbarism all right i hope you found that chapter interesting bye