Is Eco-Fascism a Form of Ecologism

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Is Eco-Fascism a Form of Ecologism?

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Undergraduate essay relating to 'green' movements in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to ecologism, generic fascism and assessment of compatibility of ecologism and fascism.

99031967
Linden Farrer

To what extent can the fascist regimes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the Blut und Boden and Strapaese movements which operated within them, and generic fascism be considered ecological?

Generic fascism is a "revolutionary form of nationalism driven by the myth of the nations imminent rebirth from decadence" and "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core...is a palingentic form of populist ultra-nationalism". Using this theoretical definition, this essay examines the fascist Blut und Boden ('Blood and Soil') and Strapaese ('Hyper-village') movements, both pure strands of fascist ideology which supplied potential mythic cores for the Nazi and Fascist regimes. Using an outline of the ideological characteristics of ecological thought, which provide the contextual framework required to answer the essay question, it then argues that Blut und Boden and Strapaese, the Nazi and Fascist regimes and generic fascism are all inherently incompatible with the ideological characteristics of ecologism.

Basing the need to implement ecological policies on growing evidence of the unsustainability of current levels of resource usage and environmental damage, ecologists are rapidly becoming a force in parliamentary politics, strength of support they command, and in the direct action taken, by its supporters.

The four distinctive elements of ecological ideology are the fundamental value of nature, the repudiation of the overall development trajectory of contemporary industrial civilisation (such as the mistaken identification of progress with ceaseless industrial and economic growth), the reality of natural limits of resources and the emancipatory impulse which will set humans free from humanity's ruthless quest for absolute domination. This emancipatory impulse, to "oppose injustice and defend the vulnerable against oppression" is linked to the belief that human domination or oppression of the environment is at the root of the perceived ecological catastrophe which currently awaits humankind.

This perceived ecological catastrophe is due to the 'crisis of unsustainability', of which there are four causes, these being the moral justification of domination which saturate our belief systems, actions that ignore our linkage to and dependence on ecosystems, the economic institutions and relations which compel towards ever-growing economic activity and capitalist economies. To achieve sustainability, we need to rid ourselves of unsustainable social relations, eradicate domination from all facets of society through devolution and democracy, and develop an economy free from the control of market forces and the constant need for growth. Thus, "the first step towards sustainability is to create social relations and structures that impede, not promote domination".

To this end, ecologists advocate policies that promote localisation as a way to combat global ecological issues. Localisation (or decentralisation) of power makes domination by the few more difficult and democratises society by involving citizens more thoroughly in the decision making process, giving them a say in how things are run on a local level; it is believed that local people know how to utilise and organise more efficient use of limited natural resources than a domineering centralised power. Localisation recognises that ecologies are regional, national and international and seeks to match the ecological diversity of the planet with politically diverse institutions. In short, the urge to inhibit the dangers posed by continued ecological exploitation "provide the most compelling of motivations for embracing decentralisation, participatory democracy, self-sufficiency, egalitarianism, alternative technology, pacifism and internationalism".

Using the outline of ecological ideology outlined about, it is now time to consider the ecological potentials offered by the Blud und Boden movement. This movement emerged from the Wandervögel, roaming bands of students who took to the woods and mountains of Germany for the first two decades of the 20th century, the German Youth Movement which "had a potent back-to-the-land element" and the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel who first coined the term 'ecology' to refer to the study of interactions between organisms and their environment. These movements emerged at the same time as völkisch nationalist thought, which promoted the belief that it was the destiny of the German nation to reconstitute "as members of an organic, national/racial community (Völksgemeinschaft)". By the turn of the 20th century, völkisch thinkers had perpetrated a myth of organic solidarity which was a "pathological response to modernity...In the face of the very real dislocations brought on by the triumph of industrial capitalism and national unification, völkisch thinkers preached a return to the land, to the simplicity and wholeness of life attuned to nature's purity".

It was Walther Darré who brought about the convergence of proto-ecologism, 'back to the land' nationalist-conservation, and fascist...
ideology. As a member of the Nazi party, and prominent spokesperson on agricultural and environmental affairs, he was promoted to the position of leader of the Agricultural Affairs Bureau. In this position of power he became a chief exponent of Nazi 'ecological' thought, promoting the vision of the ruralisation of Germany through a revitalised peasantry which would ensure the racial health and ecological sustainability of the German nation. Believing that the German peasant farmer was a "superior individual and that the city represented a moral swamp", he proclaimed in 1930 that the "unity of blood and soil must be restored" and that Germany "must plan and prepare for a political organisation which will make the farmers the cornerstone of the new state". He provided a potential mythic core of the German nation "whose central figure was...the bourgeois farmer", a blueprint from which he hoped the National Socialists would bring about the rebirth of the German Nation to overcome the decadence of industrial, urban society.

During the early years of the regime, Darré had some success promoting his policies. His most important innovation was the introduction of large scale organic farming methods or "lebensgesetzliche Landbauweise" - "farming according to the laws of life" - to tens of thousands of smallholdings and estates across Germany. Himmler, one of Darré's chief political allies even established experimental organic farms to produce homeopathic medicines for the SS. The 1935 Reichsnaturschutzgesetz - the Reich Nature Protection Law - was introduced which, (at least in theory,) protected threatened environmental habitats. By 1939 however, his ideas of organic farming, protection of hedgerows and musings about soil erosion and the suitability of reverting to horse-drawn ploughs rather than combine harvesters left him politically isolated. It was the outspoken support for Darré's policies by anthroposophists associated with the defector Rudolf Hess after 1941 that eventually resulted in his forced resignation in 1942. Despite his 'ecological' leanings, the fact that Darré was a fascist cannot be escaped. He stated, for example that the peasant had a "biological function in the body politic (Volkskörper)"...The peasant's agricultural activity [is] not just a matter of production, but a means of maintaining the Idea of Peasantness itself". Thus his definition of the 'mythic core' and the corrupting 'decadence' of German society - though in agreement over 'German blood' - were simply at odds with the imperialist aims of the fascist Nazi regime. Not only had he failed in his aims of making Germany self sufficient in food, and in reversing the trend of movement from the countryside, but worst of all, provided convenient "green camouflage" for the colonisation of Eastern Europe as well.

This is where the paradox at the heart of Darré's fascist vision is glaringly apparent for Darré declared that the "concept of Blood and Soil gives us a moral right to take back as much land in the East as is necessary to establish a harmony between the body of our Völk and the geopolitical space" which could only be acquired through war. War required the "support of capitalist financiers and renewed heavy industrial output...the net result was an onslaught on the natural environment in the form of autobahn-building, military construction, land-drainage, further industrialisation, urbanisation and so on...meaningful environmental considerations came a long way behind military and economic priorities...Blut und Boden, was for Hitler, little more than a useful but short term political tool". So although "at the level of ideology...ecological themes played a vital role in German fascism", the creation of a purer, more environmentally 'connected' peasantry was impossible to realise, at least in the short term, under the Nazi regime. As the Third Reich increasingly gravitated around the needs of rearmament based on heavy industry with the aim of fulfilling increasingly imperialist ambitions, the "financial and economic resources for stimulating areas such as small-scale craft production or small business inevitably restricted"; taking Blut und Boden seriously would have meant the "sacrifice of those long standing imperialist goals to which the regime was dedicated...the option for industrial rearmament in 1933...was an option against the new aristocracy of Blut und Boden and in favour of the long-term dynamics of industrial society".

The Fascist regime in Italy also found itself heir to a whole range of movements, marked - in some contrast to Germany - by the degree to which they competed with each other. The movement which is shows the most distinctive parallels with Blut und Boden was the Strapaese movement. Intellectualising the attitudes of the squadristi of the provinces who felt betrayed by the regime's compromises, Strapaese was a provincialist movement located in Tuscany, centred on its ideological mouthpiece, the journal Il Selvaggio meaning 'Wild One'. Its key thinkers were Mino Maccari and Ardengo Soffici and its best known advocate was Curzio Malaparte. Strapaese envisaged "something like a restored Italian Renaissance with its many independent city-states, each with disciplined, public minded citizens living close the land, doing work that expressed their artisanship and satisfied their spiritual needs, and living free of the commercial distraction that produce the softness of the modern bourgeoisie". It was thus nativist and anti-cosmopolitan and anti-bourgeois in so far as bourgeois meant urban and attacked modernity as "bastardly, international, superficial and mechanical".

Strapaese saw the national character - the core myth of the nation - as being exemplified by the humble and traditional ways of rural life. This core myth was threatened by the 'decadence' of the commercialism of city life and the undercutting of traditional ways of life associated with small provincial towns and countryside. Thus, to Strapaese, the provincial village was the repository of national tradition and "offered a way to build a national culture on autochthonous models"; it therefore opposed all theories and practices that corroded the authentic and sober customs of the provinces.

Strapaese struggled against futurism and Straccià which celebrated other fascist-modernities, did not get the support that Blut und Boden enjoyed in the early stages of Nazi Germany, and "seemed so harmless that the regime never bothered to silence it". Supporters of Strapaese and other fascist cultural movements in Fascist Italy "who were sincerely committed to a radical transformation of society would soon discover that the heterogeneous composition of Fascism, Mussolini's political flexibility, and the resulting tendency to come to a more or less amicable understanding with vested interests...[this] placed frustrating restrictions on their freedom of action". Strapaese, like Blut und Boden was thus a sidelined force; the implicit ecological strands of thought within the movement - those being tradition, small scale production, local self sufficiency (and the celebration of rural life) - are buried beneath the industrialised, imperialist direction that the Fascist regime took.

Fascist Italy, like Nazi Germany, was industrially modernist, and whilst the Italian regime pursued too many vague and conflicting goals, industry knew exactly what it wanted; it was industry that was the "socio-economic force that resisted the revolutionary aspiration of Fascist innovators". Fascist corporatism emphasized production and aimed to perfect this to strengthen the national productive force. It engaged in huge land reclamation schemes such as the draining of the Pontine Marshes near Rome, increased yields from farmland by mechanising production and by bringing marginal land into production. The imperialist ambitions of the regime, with its invasion of Abyssinia and entry into the Second World War are but the 'icing on the cake' of an ecologically unconcerned regime; the Strapaese movement was neither ecological in outlook, nor powerful enough to force the regime to take any measures that might have any accord with ecological ideology.
In conclusion, both Blut und Boden and Strapaese were responses "to the crisis in modernity that European intellectuals experienced in the two decades prior to the First World War" and the similarities between Blut und Boden and Strapaese are, as outlined above, quite profound. Being strands of fascist thought, they share a repudiation of contemporary society, recognising within modern society the decadence from which the nation was to emerge through a national rebirth. More significantly, they identified a rationalised vision of a national mythic core for which to base this rebirth upon.

Neither movement, nor the mythic cores they presented to the fascist regimes, can be considered ecological however. Rather than seeing industrial society as dangerous to the planet and ecosystem, they saw it as nationally polluting and a threat to the identified fascist mythic core which represented the national essence - the peasant völk and humble and traditional way of the province. Both celebrated the local or provincial but they did so not because local production and self-sufficiency was ecologically desirable, but because the rural peasant and village society represented the mythic core of their strands of fascist thought. In addition, Blut und Boden shares with ecologism an explicit belief in the intrinsic value of nature, but instead of seeing intrinsic value in ecological terms, saw it as embodying the geneditically based relationship between the völk and the soil. The early environmental - more accurately, agricultural - policies of the Nazi party were due to the opportunism of Hitler in wooing the peasant vote. A few organic farms and attempts to "return to the soil" and simpler ways of life are environmental policies, based on fascism, not ecologism; ultimately, the mythic cores that Blut und Boden and Strapaese offered to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, were rejected.

In addition, the Fascist and Nazi regimes cannot in any way whatsoever be considered ecological. Their imperialist ambitions resulting in the most destructive form of environmental destruction - mass warfare backed by an industrial state and their subsequent reliance on increased industrial productivity - are diametrically opposed to the aims of ecologists. Their, authoritarian and centralising tendencies in domestic policy, destruction of democracy and anti-empiricist policies are also quite opposed to those pursued by ecologists; the fascist regimes with leaders which 'embodied' the people is at a complete odds with the ecological belief in non-hierchical decentralisation.

Generic fascism, despite sharing a common belief in the 'decadence' of industrial, liberal society and the vision of an alternative version of modernity (shared to some extent with other revolutionary ideologies such as Marxism and anarchism) is also quite incompatible with ecologism. Whilst fascists aim for the rebirth of the nation or people to destroy a mutable definition of decadence, which can embrace far more than industrial society, ecologists demand an unprecedented paradigm shift in the symbiosis between living and non-living rather than a palingenesis of these relationships. Fascism is centred on a unit (the nation) within which the mythic core is identified as being ripe for rebirth, whilst ecologism centres on the relations between living and non-living. The fascist commitment to the 'national interest' is at odds with ecologism's recognition that global warming, oil spills and the depletion of the ozone layer are issues that affect the world.

Thus, to call fascism that incorporates ideas of conservation and environmentalism a form of ecologism is a misnomer, and a dangerous one at that. This needs to be made absolutely clear as the new right creates "a coded discourse which views 'race' as part of a supposedly unique cultural and national heritage". Ecologists must express their commitment "to a clear, coherent set of anticapitalist, democratic, anti-hierarchical views" to prevent the new right and 'eco-fascism' from "a cynical but potentially effective attempt to mystically link concern for present-day environmental problems with [their] time-honoured fears of the 'outsider' or the 'new'.

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References - not linked unfortunately.

Endnotes


Carter A - A Radical Green Political Theory; Routledge, 1999, p1-23 for an outline of the perceived environmental problems facing the planet, and a list of illuminating sources. The Ecologist and Corporate Watch also provide critiques of free market economics and liberal parliamentary democracy.

This essay contrasts the ideal types of fascism and ecologism, and the actual actions of the Nazi and Fascist regimes; green political parties and theories of 'green capitalism' are omitted because they do not fit the ideal types of ecological ideology as outlined here. Groups such as Reclaim the Streets, Earth First!, and People and Planet take action of a number of types, borrowing heavily from ecological rhetoric and ideology; Manes C - Green Rage; Back Bay Books, 1990, tells the history of Earth First! and describes the motivations behind taking 'direct action'.


Ibid., p346.

Exemplified in the phrase "think globally, act locally".


Staudenmaier P in Biehl J & Staudenmaier P - Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience; AK Press, 1995, p8: Haeckel believed in Nordic racial superiority, strenuously opposed race mixing and enthusiastically supported racial eugenics; from the very start 'eco-nationalist' thought was bound up in an intensely reactionary political framework.

Griffin R, op.cit., p85.


Staudenmaier P in Biehl J & Staudenmaier P, op.cit., p17, referring to Darre W - Um Blut und Boden: Reden und Aufsätze, Munich, 1939, p28. The quote is from a 1930 speech entitled 'Blood and Soil as the Foundations of Life of the Nordic Race'.

Fischer C - The Rise of the Nazis; Manchester University Press, 1995, p148; referring to an extract from Lane B & Rupp L (eds.) - Nazi Ideology before 1933: A documentation; Manchester, 1978, p133-134.

Schoenbaum D, op.cit., p161.


Bramwell A, op.cit., p176; referring to Darre W - Bauerntum, Landarbeiter und Explosivegefaehr written or published 10.3.34.

Ibid., p175; stated in August 1940, just after his organic farming campaign began.

Bramwell A, op.cit., p187-189; describes that although his anti-Semitism was well established he was found not guilty of 'anti-Semitism leading to Jewish extermination' in his post 2nd World War trial. On the other hand, his racial theory of Germanness or Deutschtum, such as that cited in Griffin R (ed.) - Fascism; Oxford University Press, 1995, p126-127 [originally published as Neuadel aus Blut und Boden, Munich, 1930, p59-60, 178-80, 190 & 226] can only have played into the hands of anti-Semitic eugenics.

Riordan C in Riordan C (ed.) - Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives; University of Wales, 1997,
In fact, the trend towards urbanisation actually accelerated. Staudenmaier P, in Biehl J & Staudenmaier P, op.cit., p19. Idem, citing Darre W - Bergmann - Agrarromantik und Großstadtfeindschaft, p312. Riordan C in Riordan C (ed.), loc.cit. Staudenmaier P in Biehl J & Staudenmaier P, op.cit., p17. Peukert D - Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life; Batsford, 1987, p88. Schoenbaum D, op.cit., p 251. Tannenbaum E - Fascism in Italy: Society and Culture 1922-1945; Allen Lane (Penguin), 1972, p305: “a typical second-rate literary intellectual who began as a Fascist populist, became an internationally-minded Communist towards the end of the 2nd World War and seems to have turned to Maoism shortly before his death in 1957”. Adamson W - The Culture of Italian Fascism and the Fascist Crisis of Modernity: the Case of Il Selvaggio; Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 30, 1995, p568. Cannistraro P (ed.) - Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy; Greenwood Press, 1982, p520. Ben-Ghiat R - Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945; University of California Press, 2001, p26-27. For brief outlines of these movements see Cannistraro P (ed.), op.cit. Maccari M states in Griffin R (ed.) - Fascism; Oxford University Press, 1995, p60 (, originally published in Il Selvaggio, 2, 1927) that he has “no desire to ‘abolish’ modernity…we would like to see a modernity which is more Italian than American or German”. Tannenbaum E, op.cit., p306. Sarti R - Fascist Modernization in Italy in American Historical Review, Vol. 75, No 4 p1031-1032. Ecological thought does not celebrate ‘rural life’ per se, but strands of ecological thought such as primitivism do. Sarti R, op.cit., p78. In 1935 it was claimed that 800,000 hectares of land were involved in some for of land reclamation. This type of ‘reclamation’ would be abhorred by ecologists if it took place today. Adamson W - The Culture of Italian Fascism and the Fascist Crisis of Modernity: The Case of Il Selvaggio in Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 30, 1995, p555. Both were also incidentally openly anti-semitic because Jews were blamed for modernity which in turn was identified with decadent, corrupting cosmopolitanism. It must be noted that primitivists might well argue against this assertion; however, their position is at odds with the ecological consensus that had been outlined above. Searchlight, April 1997, No.262, p14. Biehl J in Biehl J & Staudenmaier P, op.cit., p66. Ibid., p66. As such, Anna Bramwell's book, which received rave reviews in right-wing magazines such as 'The Scorpion' (Issue 11, Summer 1987, p36), her participation in talks (see 'The Scorpion', Ibid., p3) with fascists such as Michael Walker (a central organiser for the NF), Obert Steuckers ("one of the new Rights most forefront thinkers" - see http://obsidian-blade.com/synthesis/interviews/steuckers.htm), and a photograph of her on the front of a publication called "An Introduction to the National Front", should be seen as a typical attempt of the new-right to co-opt ecologists and mislead those concerned about the environmental problems facing our planet; see Searchlight, loc.cit for more information.

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