

# **Jumping the Gap: Where Green Transphobia Leads**

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“Paul Kingsnorth is not a fascist. But his völkisch environmentalism opens wide the door to revanchist, heteronormative, neocolonial, and white nationalist currents which have long existed in parts of Western green politics.”

— anonymous Out of the Woods author, “Lies of the land: against and beyond Paul Kingsnorth’s völkisch environmentalism”.

## Warning Signs

Paul Kingsnorth is the author of *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* (2017), *One No, Many Yeses: A Journey to the Heart of the Global Resistance Movement* (2003), and *Savage Gods* (2019). He is co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project and former deputy-editor of *The Ecologist*. And he is someone I have admired for years. I have quoted him here and elsewhere many times. I resonate with his critique of Big Green environmentalism, of “sustainability”, of progress and progressivism, of globalism, and more. His own environmentalism and his critique of mainstream environmental activism grew out of a very down-to-earth love of the wild natural world. It’s probably not an exaggeration to say that Kingsnorth was my intellectual idol.

But something has happened, and given how much I have promoted his ideas, I can’t in good conscience stay silent. Kingsnorth’s story is a study in how someone squarely on the Left can slip into proto-fascism.

A few years back, Kingsnorth bought a small farm in Ireland and went more or less off the grid. I was sad to lose his voice, but contented myself with re-reading his old essays.<sup>1</sup> When I first noticed Kingsnorth had emerged again, it was with his announcement that he had converted to Orthodox Christianity.<sup>2</sup> As a former atheist and small-p pagan, his conversion has made him very popular with a particular subset of conservative Christians. I admit that was rankling to see, but since not all Christianities are equal, I kept an open mind about Kingsnorth’s conversion.

Kingsnorth had also resumed his writing on politics and culture, publicly at Unherd<sup>3</sup> and semi-privately on a paywalled substack, “The Abbey of Misrule”. And though many

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<sup>1</sup> I recommend Kingsnorth’s *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* (2017) and any of his writing at the environmentalist magazines Orion and Emergence. But I cannot, without qualification, endorse any of his writing after the spring of 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Kingsnorth’s conversion was all the more surprising given his prior critiques of the anthropocentrism and progressivism inherent in Christianity: “Towering over [our secular stories of progress] is a single, overarching story which dominates our way of seeing the world: the story of human centrality. Originally, it was a religious story: in the West it stems from the Christian notion that God created the world for humans, who in turn were created in His image. In Genesis, God specifically instructs Man to dominate, manage and act as stewards to the rest of nature.” (“Seeing our planet as a factory floor”) Ironically, in his conversion essay, Kingsnorth now claims that it is the promise of *limits* which made Christianity appealing to him!

<sup>3</sup> Unheard is ostensibly center-right, but it is definitely flirting at the edge of something else. It claims to be a “third way” between the politics of left and right—which, I have learned, is a common trope of fascists.

of his beliefs seemed to be unchanged, something was different. It was hard at first to put my finger on it.

Kingsnorth was already showing signs of a shift in 2017, when he announced that he had voted for Brexit. He caught a lot of slack for it from progressives. But that's not what was surprising in itself. Kingsnorth was a critic of progressivism even before his conversion. I would have called him an anarchist, though I don't think he's ever embraced that term. Like many anarchists, he was a critic of globalism, which he has described as "a benign-sounding word for the economic colonization of the world by market forces". That certainly didn't make him a "nationalist" though.<sup>4</sup>

I was willing to give Kingsnorth the benefit of the doubt<sup>5</sup>, and thought what he maybe meant was actually "localism" and not really "nationalism".<sup>6</sup> The former is about belonging to a place. The latter, at least as I understand the term, is a bigoted identification with one's race and/or the state. But Kingsnorth *did* choose to use the term "nationalism", saying what he wanted was a "benevolent green nationalism" (without elaborating what that meant). And then recently, following the death of Queen Elizabeth, he wrote an essay defending monarchy. An anarchist defending monarchy?! Something was definitely off.

Then there was the COVID article. It was interpreted by some as COVID denialism. But I defended it as a nuanced critique that raised legitimate questions about how far we are willing to obey the state in the name of public safety. Still, I found myself having to stretch in order to distinguish Kingsnorth's recent writing from that of right-wing writers.

Admittedly, this is not a new problem for leftist writers. It can be confusing to some people. You're on the Left, but you're against "free trade" and globalization? That doesn't make sense to progressives, who associate that position with the right.

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<sup>4</sup> Kingsnorth explained his opposition to the EU thusly: "I had always believed that small was beautiful, that people should govern themselves and that power should be reclaimed and localised whenever possible. ... Most people in the leftish, green-tinged world ... all these people, from a tradition founded on localisation, degrowth, bioregionalism and a fierce critique of industrial capitalism, were on board with a multinational trading bloc backed by the world's banks, corporations and neoliberal politicians."

<sup>5</sup> I'm not alone in having tried to rehabilitate Kingsnorth's call for eco-nationalism. In the socialist Monthly Review, Anthony Galluzzo acknowledges that there is much to criticize in Kingsnorth's Brexit essay, including his "troubled attempt to rebrand the bioregionalism he otherwise advocates as a green 'nationalism'", but he still defends Kingsnorth's ecolocalism: "Should we on the left cede the attachment to place, the love of nature, and the human propensity for myth to the right? And if the right historically has seized on these propensities and investments, often to catastrophic effect, what does this tragic history tell us about the political efficacy of a left enamored with its own myths of disembodied rationalism and technological self-deification? These are the questions red-green intellectuals and activists would do well to consider now, in the face of a resurgent neofascist right ..."

<sup>6</sup> "Nationalism" is a contested term. The anonymous Out of the Woods author observes that "the lines between decolonial nationalism and supremacist nationalism are not always clear cut" and that the concept of nation plays "an important role in so many struggles against colonialism and white supremacy".

To them, if you're against globalism, then you must be a nationalist, and that makes you a racist and maybe a fascist.

I've even had my own writing appropriated by fascists. An early critique of capitalism which I had published here (I later requested that it be taken down), was translated and posted (without attribution—for once I was grateful) on a couple of nationalist Romanian sites under menubar tabs like “The Jewish Question” and “The Gypsy Problem”.

In spite of this, I have argued that the far Left and the far Right are categorically incompatible, and I have tried to debunk the notion that “if you go far enough Left, you'll end up on the Right” (also known as the “horseshoe theory”). And so, I defended Kingsnorth.

*But then came the transphobic essay.*

## Green Transphobia

This was not the first time I've encountered transphobia among Greens.

Deep Green Resistance (DGR) is a radical environmentalist movement. I admire DGR and its co-founder, Derrick Jensen, for a lot of reasons. They are eco-centric, believing that the needs of the ecosystem are more important than the needs of one species (i.e., humans). They are anti-civ, believing that industrial civilization and wild nature are antithetical, and the former must collapse if the latter is to survive. They are dedicated to direct action, believing that organized physical resistance is the only viable way to stop or slow the destruction of the ecosystem by industrial civilization. They are anarchists, seeking to deconstruct hierarchy where they find it. They are feminist, perceiving a direct correlation between the denigration of wild nature and the denigration of women.

*But they are also transphobic.*

DGR was in the news last year, when indigenous activists broke ties with the organization because of their transphobic position. This was not the first time this had happened. DGR is explicitly and unapologetically trans-exclusionary. Some in the group have compared gender transitioning to eugenics and genital mutilation, and described it as a conspiracy of the medical industry.

The DGR website states: “Gender is not natural, not a choice, and not a feeling: it is the structure of women's oppression. Attempts to create more ‘choices’ within the sex-caste system only serve to reinforce the brutal realities of male power. As radicals, we intend to dismantle gender and the entire system of patriarchy which it embodies.” As Molly Taft at Gizmodo has observed, “people not well-versed in how modern transphobia manifests may skip over this sentiment or misread it for committed feminism.” But implied in the statement above (and made clear on their FAQ) is the belief that the trans rights movement reinforces the binary gender hierarchy.

I would respond that any expression of binary gender theoretically reinforces the gender hierarchy, but that is as true of cisgender as it is of transgender. And in any case, it seems to me that transgender *actually breaks down that binary*—and hence the hierarchy—by embodying (literally) the permeability of those categories.

While a genderless society might be the ideal, we don't live in that society, and until we do, opposing trans rights won't help us get there. Gender is a social construction, but if we try to eliminate the category of gender outright, then the experience of transgender people living in a cis-normative society is erased. By way of analogy, while a raceless society is the ideal, race-consciousness activism (like BLM) is a necessary step in that direction. You can't end racism by ignoring the experience of people of color. And you can't break down the gender hierarchy by ignoring the experience of transgender people.

Which is why I don't buy it. I don't believe that DGR's trans-exclusiveness really derives from a feminist desire for a genderless society. I think it comes from something else. I think it comes from a mistaken belief about "nature" and what's considered "natural". It's this, and not the decentering of the human species, that makes them fascistic. And that brings me back to Kingsnorth.

It started with the odd hetero- and cis-normative statements. Here and there, interspersed in articles about progressivism and globalism I noticed passing contemptuous references to liberal gender politics. For example, in the aforementioned Brexit article, while criticizing the Left for its embrace of globalism, Kingsnorth described the former as "enthusing about breaking down everything from gender identities to national borders".

In another article critiquing the global merger of state and corporate power in pursuit of progress, Kingsnorth wrote: "The new world would be progressive, inclusive, open, sustainable, gender-neutral and, above all, intensely profitable." Why did he include "gender-neutrality" in that list? (Or "inclusiveness" for that matter?) These kinds of gratuitous digs were worrisome.

And then came the transphobic essay, entitled "The Abolition of Man (and Woman)". I have to admit that, I had such respect for Kingsnorth, that I approached his article thinking that maybe there was something about transgender that I had been missing. It's a little embarrassing, but his writing had been so influential on the development of my own ideas, that I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. But where Kingsnorth has gone, I cannot follow.

## Deconstructing Transphobic Arguments

The essay is behind a paywall<sup>7</sup>, so I'll summarize it here.

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<sup>7</sup> Kingsnorth has yet to be so clearly transphobic in his publicly-accessible writing, like his essays at UnHerd where he most limits himself to gratuitous digs at liberal gender politics. His transphobic article has nevertheless been quoted at length by The American Conservative.

Kingsnorth begins by describing an encounter he had during a book tour in the U.S., where he met a father of a trans girl who wanted to start hormone treatment. The father was in shock and was really struggling to make sense of it. He said he had gone on a bender and disappeared for days after talking to his child. He told Kingsnorth, “It’s like I’m losing my child. My only son. It’s like my son is dying.”

I feel for this father. I really do. But I also feel for his daughter. And that’s what is missing from Kingsnorth’s article: *the experience of trans people*. Kingsnorth didn’t even try to imagine how the daughter felt, nor did he express any compassion for her.

What followed is a series of tropes that you will be used to seeing if you read any transphobic writing. It starts with a vague allusion to “news” they have “heard”: “Here in Ireland today, the news I hear from the local schools is that many children—especially girls—are confused about what they have all learned to call their ‘gender’.” There’s a lot to unpacked there. Note that Kingsnorth chooses to start with children, not adults. (Check the box for the “save the children” narrative.) And he assumes they are “confused”, rather than coming out or experimenting. (Check patronizing marginalized people who don’t really understand what they are experiencing and need a cis-het man to explain it to them).

In the process, Kingsnorth unintentionally reveals his own confusion about what gender is. Throughout the article, he conflates sex and gender. Note his quotation marks around “gender” in the quote above, thus implying that gender isn’t a thing and that biological sex is all there is. (Check the confusion of gender and sex.)

Kingsnorth cites a report of a 1500% rise in diagnoses of gender dysphoria in Sweden. It needs to be said here that, if your start near zero, then, any rise will appear to be exponential. (See [here](#) for the real reason for the rise in reporting.) Also that gender dysphoria does not equal identification as transgender, and transgender identity does not equal medical transitioning. This is important, because Kingsnorth tries to create an impression of an epidemic of medical transitioning using numbers of gender dysphoria. (Check pearl-clutching about rising numbers of people identifying as transgender.)

Kingsnorth dismisses offhand the idea that people have always been transgender (which he puts in quotes—check) but that they are just more free to talk about it now. This, he says matter-of-factly, is “plainly not true”. Instead, he attributes the increase in awareness of transgender to “internet activism”. He links to an article from a Swedish newspaper (check obscure sourcing of claims) describing an “epidemic” of gender dysphoria and comparing it to the spread of eating disorders and self-harming behaviors through social media. The implication of the term “internet activism” is that this “epidemic” is being intentionally created by some group. (Wait, we’ll get to the conspiracy theory in a minute.)

Kingsnorth then cites “one teenage girl I know” who told him that it was scientific fact there are 72 genders, and she wasn’t sure which one she was. What’s remarkable here is not one teenager’s confusion about science or their gender, but that someone with Kingsnorth’s intelligence (and someone who is himself a parent) would quote this

as evidence of anything. Later, he links to a substack post by a self-described TERF mother who says that a quarter of the children in her daughter's class identify as trans and that this is because they were taught that "if you feel uncomfortable in your body, it means you are transgender". (Check dubious hearsay about extreme behavior to bolster your argument.)

In America, says Kingsnorth, "thousands of girls are undergoing double mastectomies, and teenage boys are being given 'puberty-blocking' drugs". He offers no source for this vague statistic. But even if that's true, and there are 10,000 children transitioning, that represents 0.02% of the 43 million young people (ages 10-19) in the U.S.—hardly an epidemic. (Check hysteria about the numbers of transitioning people.) The real number appears to be closer to between 1,000-2,000, so put another zero in front of that percentage.

Kingsnorth then links to a case of a person who transitioned and is now suing the British NHS because they regret their decision. A simple Google search would show that the vast majority of children who transition still identify as transgender years later. (Check the "point to the handful of people who regretted their transition" box.)

## The "Trans-Conspiracy"

Having made his case (or tried to) for an "epidemic", Kingsnorth then begins to construct the conspiracy. He states that anxiety in young people about gender is being "nurtured" by "the media, the cultural elite, a slew of well-funded but unaccountable NGOs, and much of the education and political systems." The only support he offers for this bold claim is a single link to an article about the BBC distancing itself from an LGBTQ+ lobby group after questions were raised about its journalists' impartiality when reporting on public policy debates in which the group was taking an active role. If you're wondering what that has to do with a conspiracy to get children to transition, the answer is: "Nothing". (Check unsubstantiated claims of a conspiracy.) But Kingsnorth claims this is evidence of "an agenda to reprogramme society with an entirely new conception of the human body—and thus of nature itself." (And there's the "nature" word. I'll come back to that.)

Predictably, Kingsnorth also links to an article about death threats against J.K. Rowling to make you feel sorry for people like him who can't express their views publicly without "savage retribution". (Check the "free speech is under attack" box.)

Mid-way through, Kingsnorth launches into an extended tangent about the undermining of "the foundational assumptions of Western Christianity" and the "unmooring [of] the culture from its spiritual roots" by such figures as Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, and the sixties counterculture and women's lib movement—all the usual villains in the conservative Christian's account of the culture war. (Check the nostalgia for an imagined past where things were less confusing and more comfortable for



straight people.) As I will explain below, this tangent about cultural decline is actually the key to understanding what Kingsnorth is doing.

Kingsnorth claims that what we are seeing is not the liberation of an oppressed minority or healthy questioning of society's expectations of what it means to be a man or woman, but rather a fundamental shift in our understanding of "the nature of biological reality" and "what it means to be human". This, says Kingsnorth, will ultimately lead to the "abolition of biology", to a transhumanist future where we are completely disconnected from our bodies.

If this seems like a huge leap, you're not wrong. From "thousands" of transitioning children to the "abolition of biology". From "divorcing sex from the relatively new notion of 'gender'" (new?) to "freeing ourselves from the prison of our biology". Kingsnorth seems to think it's a short step from one to the other. (Check huge logical leaps.) And this is how he justifies the vilification of the transgender rights movement, which he describes as "the latest manifestation of a long struggle for technological liberation from nature itself".

"the transgender movement which is presented to us today as a civil rights struggle is actually something else. In the divorce of 'gender' from sex, in the promotion of multiple 'identities' to young and vulnerable people, in the notion that the given body is a problem to be solved<sup>8</sup> and in the foundational proposition that our 'identity'—even our biology—is not naturally occurring but constructed in our mind, we are witnessing the latest stage of modernity's long rebellion against nature."

— Paul Kingsnorth, "The Abolition of Man (and Woman): Gender, Sex and the Machine".

Kingsnorth cleverly concludes that "the unifying driver" between the transgender rights movement and transhumanism is "the desire for *trans-cendence*".

He isn't alone in linking transgender and trans humanism, though. It's increasingly common among transphobic writers—as well as the rare trans activist. Kingsnorth cites Martine Rothblatt (who he misgenders), a transgender entrepreneur, LGBT activist, and founder of the transhumanist organization, Terasem. She is the author of *From Transgender to Transhuman: A Manifesto On the Freedom Of Form* (2011), in which she states that "transgenderism is the onramp to transhumanism." While it is interesting that there is a prominent transgender transhumanist who has drawn the connection between the two, it is an enormous leap to say that the entire transgender rights movement is really a conspiracy to get us to upload our consciousnesses to the cloud.

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<sup>8</sup> It needs to be said that the human experience of embodied consciousness has been a "problem to be solved" for at least as long as there has been writing or cities—and this "problematizing" was accelerated by the Christianity which Kingsnorth now defends.

Kingsnorth does admit that Rothblatt's manifesto is "an unusually explicit manifestation of the merger between progressive politics and techno-capital". But the key word there is "unusual", not "explicit". He ends his essay acknowledging that not all trans people (or people "who consider themselves to be transgender" as Kingsnorth dismissively calls them) and not all trans rights activists are transhumanists—or have even heard of transhumanism. (No shit.) But he says, "People with gender dysphoria, girls with short hair, boys who play with dolls, people whose sexualities differ from the norm: they are not, in fact, the real issue." The "real issue", he says, is an entire generation of people who are immersed in technology and increasingly alienated from nature and their bodies.

Admittedly, the latter is its own problem. But it is too convenient for Kingsnorth to say that the real issue isn't trans people. Doing so allows him to dismiss their experience entirely—which is exactly what he does throughout his article, from the opening account of the father of the trans girl, to his patronizing use of quotation marks, to his attempt to link the transgender rights movement to a fringe idea like transhumanism. It's like saying that LGB rights isn't about LGB people, but about the sanctity of marriage or declining birthrates. If you're willing to disregard the experience of LGBT people offhand, then the issue of LGBT rights becomes a lot simpler for you.

## How a Fascist Gets Made

I've followed Kingsnorth's writing for years. He has been a thoughtful writer and a profound thinker. But his reasoning has become sloppy, and the internal contradictions pile up. The critique of the technological liberation from nature has been a theme running throughout Kingsnorth's work. But the addition of this attack on transgender rights to that theme is spurious at best and disingenuous at worst.

I share Kingsnorth's concern about the combination of progressivism, capitalism, and technology—what he calls "the Machine". (I've written about it myself here.) But I don't buy Kingsnorth's rationale. I don't think his concern about transgender is really about transhumanism or capitalism or progress or what it means to be human.

I think it's really about "nature" or what Kingsnorth and other transphobic people *think* is nature. Of course, if any of these people took a second to actually look at sex in nature, they would find a great deal more diversity than their binary categories allow for. Not only is homosexuality common in many species, but there's even species which can change sex under certain conditions. And there are also animals of one sex that imitate another sex.

I was drawn to Kingsnorth by his writing about wild nature and the more-than-human world, but the way he writes about nature has changed. For one thing, there is no longer a "sign of any real, felt attachment to any small part of [the] Earth" (as Kingsnorth once wrote about the contemporary environmental movement). He no longer seems to be "writing with dirt under his fingernails." Like other transphobic

(and proto-fascistic) writers, “nature” for Kingsnorth seems to actually be code for something else. What transphobic writers call “nature” is more of a social construction, a set of mental categories, often reinforced by institutional authority, like the state or the church.

It’s not a coincidence that Kingsnorth’s transphobia appears to have started around the time he converted to Orthodox Christianity. That’s when his own conception of the holy “migrated” from the earth (“the swamps of the material realm”) to heaven (a “mysterious, untouchable, numinous force outside of creation itself”). And that’s when he started writing about a supposedly universal desire for “transcendence”, which is behind both religion and the secular drive for progress.<sup>9</sup> Given his criticism of the “*trans*-cendence” of transhumanism and (supposedly) transgender, Kingsnorth’s own appeal to transcendence is ironic, to say the least.

While he still writes about “nature” (and “land” and “place”), more and more, Kingsnorth has been writing about something he calls “culture”<sup>10</sup>—and more and more it seems like he’s using all these words to mean the same thing. “Culture”, like “nature”, can be another one of those code words. It can mean the way people living in a particular place over a period of time “be” together, the way they make that place and time “home”. But it also can mean something like “the way I am comfortable with things being” or “the way I imagine things used to be”. It can be code for patriarchy, White supremacy, and hetero- and cis-normativity.

Kingsnorth makes it clear elsewhere that what he means by “Western culture” is really the institutional Christian church. And the lost elements of that culture which he laments include “patriotism, Christianity, cultural conservatism, sexual modesty”.<sup>11</sup> This isn’t culture. It’s empire. And Kingsnorth has nothing—nothing at all—to say about the historical injustices of the “culture” that he so pines for. (Of course, as a White, cisgender, heterosexual man, there were far fewer injustices that would have affected him.)

*And this is how a Green anarchist becomes a transphobic proto-fascist.* It happens when culture (specifically *your* culture) and nature become conflated in your mind. It happens when nature stops being something outside your door and becomes something inside your head, when it stops being the living present and becomes a romanticized past. It happens when an idealized culture becomes more real for you than the experience of flesh and blood people—especially people who are different from you. From

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<sup>9</sup> In my last essay here, “The Original Heresy”, I wrote that this pull toward the transcendent, while seemingly “eternal” (to use Kingsnorth’s word), is really a product of civilization, which alienates us from the land, from our bodies, and from our communities.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Kingsnorth’s series of articles at Unheard on the decline of Western culture: “The West has lost its virtue”; “The West has lost its roots”; “The West needs to grow up”; and “The West is homeless”.

<sup>11</sup> At the mention of “modesty” (and after recovering from my mental cringe), my mind went to a picture of Kingsnorth with his family, the women with their heads covered, in his Orthodox Church. I’ll defend any woman’s right to cover her head, so long as she has genuine freedom to choose—but gods save us from men and their talk of modesty!

there it's not a long way to imagining "natural" categories and social hierarchies which must be reinforced with the power of the state—the definition of fascism.

And, if there had been any doubt in my mind that it *is* fascism we're talking about here, Kingsnorth put it to rest last November, when he published an article entitled "The truth about eco-fascism", in which he argued that there is no such thing as eco-fascism, because he has never met anyone who actually called themselves an "eco-fascist".<sup>12</sup> When I read this, I felt a little nauseated. Denying the existence of fascism is one of the favorite strategies of fascists in a liberal society. If you didn't know better, you might suspect Kingsnorth of just being eristic or sophistic, but he's too smart to really believe such fallacious thinking. The only question for me now is whether Kingsnorth is already a crypto-fascist or is just a "useful idiot" reactionary on his way toward a full-fledged fascism.

There is a continuum from reactionary conservatism through to genuine fascism. While Kingsnorth probably falls closer to the reactionary side of that spectrum, what concerns me here is his trajectory away from Green anarchism into a kind of proto-fascism and the way that movement opens the door to more clearly fascist discourse (his own or others'). The unifying logic which paves this path is an idealization of nature and culture, which is based on an imagined past and is dissociated from real-life places and people in the present. This dissociative logic is evident throughout Kingsnorth transphobic essay and other writing of late.

## Resisting the Fascist Creep

Kingsnorth's story is a cautionary tale for anarchists and other leftists. There is such a thing as a "fascist creep". Evidence of it can be found uncomfortably close to home. Others have described a "radical feminist to alt-right pipeline" through transphobia. Queer theorist Judith Butler has identified the "gender critical" movement as a fascist trend which embraces inconsistency, adopts an "equal opportunity approach to rhetorical strategies of the left and right, and "through a spate of inconsistent and hyperbolic claims they concoct a world of multiple immanent threats to make the case for authoritarian rule and censorship." Sound familiar?

There may not be an anarchist to alt-right "pipeline" per se, but there are indications that one is in the process of being built. The fascist creep is seductive because there are a lot of things that Kingsnorth and people like him are right about: Industrial civilization *is* destroying the planet's ability to sustain life. Modernist materialism and liberal universalism *have* left us spiritually unmoored and thus susceptible to capitalist manipulation. Capitalism *is* desacralizing the world and levelling all human (and other-

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<sup>12</sup> Kingsnorth denied the existence of eco-fascism less than a year and a half after publishing an earlier article entitled, "Eco-fascism is our future", in which he stated that "an actual eco-fascism was on the horizon—a global merger of state and corporate power in pursuit of progress that would have made Mussolini weep". So which is it? Is eco-fascism our future? Or is it a phantasm?

than-human) diversity down to a monoculture market. Progressives *have* made a devil's bargain with neoliberals and sold out the working class. Identity politics, important as it is, *can* be and *is* being used by savvy politicians to distract us from class-conscious politics.

Kingsnorth's critique of the Machine is spot on. The diagnosis is right, but his prescription is wrong. He presents a false dichotomy between what he calls "the Machine and the Cross", between techno-capitalist progressivism and regressive authoritarian traditionalism. But those aren't the only options.

If you're really going to look to the past for a culture of "people, place, and prayer", I'm not sure why you would stop when you got to medieval Christianity. If you're looking for a religiosity which arises out of a people's experience of place, the obvious alternative is the *pre-Christian* peoples of ... well, anywhere—especially before the rise of the transcendental religions in the Axial Age, in the mid-1st millennium BCE. Or, since we're looking for an antidote to cosmopolitanism, *and since Christianity was very much a religion of the polis*, we should go back even further to a time before the rise of cities, back to the Neolithic. It's there we would be most likely to find people living in organic relationship with the wild world.<sup>13</sup>

The key to resisting the seduction of both capitalist levelling *and* fascism is, I believe, not to retreat into a transcendent world as Kingsnorth urges us, but to keep coming back to the things we can actually touch: To the literal ground that we walk on. Not some romanticized "land", but the literal soil. To the living, flesh and blood people who we share that land with. Not some idealized "people" or "folk" or "blood", but real people we share our places with. And to genuine relationships with those people. Not some abstract "culture", but real lived life with those others.

I'm reminded of these words which I first read 25 years ago. I have not always been faithful to them, but they they seem more relevant today than ever:

"In the flesh all wisdom begins. Beware the thing that has no flesh. Beware the Gods, beware the idea ...

"I tell you, we would be hard put to determine what is more evil—religion or the pure idea. The intervention of the supernatural or the elegant abstract solution! Both have bathed this earth in suffering; both have brought the human race literally and figuratively to its knees. ...

"It is not man who is the enemy of the human species. ... it is the spiritual when it is divorced from the material; from the lesson in one beating heart or one bleeding vein."

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<sup>13</sup> Though, it needs to be said that any attempt to recreate the past as an antidote to the present—regardless of whether that past is Christian or pagan—is naive and would be a species of the pre/trans fallacy. We cannot escape capitalism, modernity, or Christianity by traveling to the past. We can never be pre-modern again, and we can never be pre-Christian again. At best, we can be post-modern and post-Christian. As Steven Posch has written, "the only pagans that we can honestly be is the pagans for our own time and place."

— Anne Rice, *Queen of the Damned* (1988).

## Coming back to earth

I can only speculate about what combination of psychological and social factors led Kingsnorth to forget “the lesson in one beating heart or one bleeding vein” (I believe he knew it once) and to “jump the gap” between anarchism and proto-fascism. But there are some hints in his story of the social isolation and the tendency to intellectual abstraction which might have been contributors.

After returning to public life, but before his conversion, Kingsnorth published *Savage Gods* (2019), a stream-of-consciousness meditation on his ambivalence about language, writing, and being a writer. In it, he bemoans the unreality, the transparency, of his words, which he contrasts with the solidity of the Earth and the slow-growing Scots pine trees on his land. He wonders, “How would we live if the only words we spoke were as solid as this great giant of a tree that has been standing here for a century? Has there ever been a culture, a people, for whom that was true?” I’m pretty sure there has been. And I wonder what might have been different if Kingsnorth had tried a little harder to answer his own query, instead of just asking the question eighty different ways and then rhetorically throwing up his hands.<sup>14</sup>

In *Savage Gods*, Kingsnorth writes about two archetypal forces within us: fire and water. “Fire”, he says, is an upward force, which “overcomes, climbs, triumphs, pushes above and beyond”. (It’s the transcendental impulse I described in my last essay here.) “Water” is a downward force, pulling us back to the earth, to real places, and to belonging. (It’s the (small-p) pagan impulse I described in part 2 of that same essay.) Though Kingsnorth recognizes his need for “water”, his need for a *rite de passage* from fire to water, and he even dreams of the Norse goddess Freya asking him for water, *Savage Gods* is indubitably a book of fire. It never comes down to earth. And it ends, abruptly, without any water in sight. I wonder what might have been different if Kingsnorth had listened to what the gods were trying to tell him.

Around the same time, Kingsnorth was a part of a British Traditional Wiccan coven and practiced occultist magic, and it was in preparation for one of the group’s esoteric rituals that he says he felt the call of the Christian God. I wonder how the course of his spiritual journey might have been different had he found a more truly earth-centered form of contemporary Paganism to practice instead, one which treated magic as a form of participation with, instead of control over, nature.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout *Savage Gods*, something—which Kingsnorth variously identifies as God or the gods or his own unconscious—is urging him to turn from the unreality of all the words, all the “talk talk talk”, to stop writing, to stop talking, “to just shut up” for a while, and to make some space. Instead, he wrote another book—a *book about words, for gods’ sake*—and probably the most heady, most “talky” piece of writing I’ve ever read.

<sup>15</sup> Kingsnorth describes his spiritual journey from small-p paganism and Zen Buddhism to his conversion to Orthodox Christianity, with a layover in a Wiccan coven. There is precious little detail

I wonder too what might have happened if it hadn't been for the social isolation caused by COVID, and if, at the time Kingsnorth converted, he hadn't been living in Ireland, which had the longest lockdown in Europe. The closing of, and subsequent limiting of access to, the pubs in particular seems to have been especially hard on Kingsnorth, for whom the pub has an archetypal significance.<sup>16</sup>

And, more than anything else, I wonder what might be different if Paul Kingsnorth had ever known a single trans person closely.<sup>17</sup>

Who knows ... I might still have my idol.

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about his experience there. However, in a subsequent essay, he says that the form of Wicca he experienced was "traditional" and part of the Western Mystery Tradition. I have previously written critically about British Traditional Wicca, which did not begin as a nature religion, but as an esoteric mystery cult. (See Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1997).)

<sup>16</sup> Kingsnorth writes extensively about English pubs in *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland* (2009).

<sup>17</sup> I inquired about this in the comments to Kingsnorth's article, and though he responded by denying that he was dismissing anyone's experience, he did not claim to have any intimate transgender friends or family.

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