Lies Of The Land

against & beyond Paul Kingsnorth's völkisch environmentalism

Out of the Woods Collective

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On Saturday 17th March 2017 *The Guardian* published a lengthy essay by the writer, poet, and climate campaigner Paul Kingsnorth. Titled 'The lie of the land: does environmentalism have a future in the age of Trump?', it calls for a nationalist environmentalism that its author believes to be a suitable response to our current ecological and political conjuncture. It has been widely shared on social media and attracted praise from - among others - *Guardian* political commentator John Harris and Greenpeace Senior Political Advisor Rosie Rogers. This horrifies us. It is, quite simply, a dangerous piece. Its argument and its logics must be rejected by those seeking to think through an environmental politics appropriate to the era of climate change.

In the essay, Kingsnorth finds inspiration in those he calls 'the new populists' - reactionaries like Stephen Bannon and Marine Le Pen; and outlines a programme that leaves the door wide open to a fascist environmentalism. Terrifying though this is, it is not without precedent: environmentalist and ecological politics in the West too often tend towards reactionary views. For example, some environmentalists continue to advocate closing national borders to 'protect our environment', the sterilization of women in the Global South to reduce the global population, transmisogyny in the name of the 'natural', and utilize violence against Indigenous populations to 'protect' National Parks.

Marine Le Pen is centring 'the environment' in her French Presidential campaign. And there are chilling historical precedents too: the Nazis drew on the the work of early geographers and ecologists such as Friedrich Ratzel to promote *'lebensraum'*, the 'living space' held to be necessary for the flourishing of a 'pure' nation. It is also worth noting that Kingsnorth situates himself within the legacy of the anti-globalization movement which, although largely left-wing, sometimes repeated or overlapped with fascist ideas and imagery.[1] And whilst we focus on the essay itself in what follows, Kingsnorth himself is no stranger reactionary nationalism.[2]

At one point in the essay, meanwhile, Kingsnorth rhetorically asks if he is 'a fascist?', as if to suggest that any such accusations would be patently absurd. Our concern here is not whether Kingsnorth himself is 'a fascist', but rather to show how close much of his environmentalism is to fascism.

In this piece we outline our key areas of concern with Kingsnorth's argument and connect them to broader errors in the way that he understands the world. Although he attempts to distinguish between a 'benevolent green nationalism' and the quite-obviously less benevolent policies of the right, we show that no such separation can be made. Indeed, the key oppositions that structure his argument are precisely those that

[1] Raphael Schlembach (2014). *Against Old Europe: Critical Theory and Alter-Globalization Movements*. Farnham: Ashgate.

[2] We have serious concerns about the 'Dark Mountain Project', which Kingsnorth co-founded and 'editorially directs' with Dougald Hine. Vinay Gupta - who has 'been around the Dark Mountain story since before it had a name', has spoken at its festivals and has been published in two of its books - has openly stated that he would 'seriously consider helping out' a basically human ecological fascism' (so long as it's credible).

structure fascist environmentalism. Rejecting these, we close this essay by pointing to the possibility of anti-fascist and decolonial ecological struggle.

People, Place and Nationalism

Kingsnorth opens his essay with an admission that he voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. He proclaims his astonishment that friends on the 'leftish, green-tinged world' had not done similarly, wondering why those who come from 'a tradition founded on localisation, degrowth, bioregionalism and a fierce critique of industrial capitalism' would vote to remain part of the EU.

At this point it is worth noting that over 15,000 people have died as a result of EU borders since the turn of the millennium; and that the EU routinely and deliberately subjects migrants to appalling conditions at the camps it runs.[3] Yet this is not the source of Kingsnorth's ire: indeed, migrants are notable only by their absence from his essay. Rather, Kingsnorth buys into the UK's dominant (and alarmingly right-wing) framing of the EU: that it erodes borders in favour of free movement; and that this free movement erodes cultural differences.

Accordingly, he positions Brexit as 'the people', 'fuelled...by a sense of place and belonging', seeking to take back power from 'rootless' 'globalists'. For him, this is the key political division of our current moment and regardless of whether or not Brexit achieves these aims (spoiler: it won't), the vote 'exhilarates' Kingsnorth. Astonishingly, so does the election of Donald Trump.

Appeals to 'the people' are common in political discourse and are a central feature of populist politics. But as a political subject (and actor), 'the people' never pre-exists such appeals. Rather, it is constructed through them; and acknowledging this can be an important step in constructing a politics to challenge the status quo.[4] Kingsnorth elides this and presents his people as a self-evident matter-of-fact. They are grounded in and emerge from a timeless 'natural' environment: the nation.

This nation is a 'cultural' formation associated with 'traditions, distinctive cultures...religious strictures [and] social mores'. It is the source of 'colour, beauty and distinctiveness' and fosters a 'belonging and a meaning beyond money or argument'. Such 'belonging' is held to be particularly strong in 'traditional' places: Kingsnorth references the Standing Rock Sioux as exemplary and there is a passing reference to the Zapatistas.

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[3] Reporting on the condition of child migrants at the now closed reception centre on Lesbos, Tzanetos Antypas, head of the humanitarian organisation Praksis, stated that: 'there were some [children], I'm not kidding, whose hair had turned white. When we moved them to an open camp they chose to remain listless in their tents. After so many months incarcerated in such overcrowded conditions, I was told they had forgotten how to walk.'

[4] Jason Frank (2009) *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Here there is a temptation to read Kingsnorth charitably: perhaps he is proposing a radical understanding of 'nation' (and the concepts associated with it) in line with that offered by many Indigenous peoples, an idea to which we return below. But no: elsewhere 'the nation' coincides with the (colonial) state - he draws heavily on Jonathan Haidt, for whom key nationalists include Marine Le Pen and Victor Orban. Kingsnorth may try to distance himself from 'angry nationalism' and Trump (while expressing 'exhilaration' at their surge to power), but given his arguments this can only ever work as a disavowal.

This conflation of Indigeneity with the nation state is a key rhetorical device for the white supremacist right (think of calls to 'protect' indigenous Britons', for example). It is particularly abhorrent given that so many nation states exist because of their genocidal dispossession of *actually* Indigenous populations: those whose identities and ways of life are inseparable from their dynamic relationships with the more-than-human ecologies of particular places (unlike Kingsnorth's nationalists, who appear from static places as if by magic).[5]

There is no France without the subjugation of the Berber populations of North Africa. There is no United States of America without the destruction of Turtle Island. The borders separating Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia have divided up the traditional lands of the Indigenous Sami population, preventing them from continuing their traditions of fishing, herding, hunting and trading.

Where Indigenous populations have been decimated by the brutal violence of colonialism, Kingsnorth's 'nation' is threatened by a nefarious fantasy of 'globalism' that promotes migration and dissolves borders; and supports multiculturalism whilst 'enthusing about breaking down gender identities'.[6] Accordingly, 'border walls and immigration laws' are held to be 'evidence of a community asserting its values and choosing to whom to grant citizenship.' As with fascism, this 'cultural' politics is in fact a racial - and racist - politics.

Kingsnorth regurgitates the antisemitic trope of globalism as 'rootless'[7] and twice raises the spectre of 'violent' Islam to add weight to his claims. Not once does he mention that Muslim majority countries are disproportionately affected by climate change; nor that Islamophobia drives the EU's policy of leaving migrants to drown.[8]

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[5] Kim TallBear (2013) 'Genomic articulations of indigeneity', *Social Studies of Science*: early online view, 6-7.

[6] The implicit transphobia of this statement is not the only time Kingsnorth mimics the sneering language of alt-right fascists: elsewhere he takes a dig at those who have (supposedly) told him to 'check his privilege'.

[7] Werner Bonefeld (2014). 'Antisemitism and the Power of Abstraction: From Political Economy to Critical Theory'. In Marcel Stoetzler (ed.), *Antisemitism and the Constitution of Sociology.* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 314-332.

[8] For a historic overview of European Islamophobia (and, indeed, the necessity of Islamophobia for the construction of Europe), see Gil Adijar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (2003: Stanford University Press). As its title suggest, this also charts the historic imbrication between Islamophobia and antisemitism.

And although Kingsnorth is right to say that 'Green spokespeople and activists rarely come from the classes of people who have been hit hardest by globalisation', his reference to Standing Rock is as close as he comes to rectifying this. Despite his hostility to those who fly, he makes no reference to Black Lives Matter UK's shutdown of London City Airport, undertaken to highlight the racist dimensions of climate change.

The environment

In fact, 'climate change' is mentioned only twice - each time in relation to forms of environmentalism that Kingsnorth pits himself against; and it is startling to note how peripheral Kingsnorth's concern in this regard appears. There is not a single mention of climate change's devastating impact on food production; nor on how it fuels conflicts, including the civil war in Syria.[9] Rather, his environmental concern is driven by a privileged romanticism that culminates in the nation state: 'wild' 'nature' contributes to the distinctiveness of the nation, providing it with some of that 'colour, beauty and distinctiveness'.

This nature is framed as part of the 'birthright' of a nation, and in a disturbingly völkisch turn-of-phrase Kingsnorth states that if 'you want to protect and nurture your homeland - well, then, you'll want to nurture its forests and its streams too'. This desire to wrap forests in the flag clears the way for what the critical scholar of ecofascism Peter Staudenmaier calls a 'deadly connection between love of land and militant racist nationalism.'[10]

Recalling Kingsnorth's dig at those who challenge gender identities, we would add that this 'love' of the land is also a deeply gendered, thoroughly heteronormative romance. As Lee Edelman writes:

'Nature [is] the rhetorical effect of an effort to appropriate the 'natural' for the ends of the state. It is produced, that is, in the service of a statist ideology that operates by installing pro-procreative prejudice as the form through which desiring subjects assume a stake in a future that always pertains, in the end, to the state, not to them'.[11]

For Kingsnorth, the reproduction of the nation state is inseparable from the reproduction of its 'nature.' His writing falls back on the imagery of 'mother earth:' pure, bountiful yet fragile, a set of ideal characteristics which can then be imposed on gendered subjects. The idealised reproduction of nature can then be used to discipline human reproduction, which is itself the precondition of the nation state - after all, what is a 'birthright' without births? When Kingsnorth talks of the desire to 'nurture your homeland,' we can see this as the implicit operation of what Edelman calls 'installing pro-procreative prejudice' - the word 'nurture' has a rich subtext of child care and gendered labour.

[9] John Wendle (2016), 'Syria's climate refugees', *Scientific American*, 314: pp. 50-55.

[10] Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience.

[11] Lee Edelman, *No Future*, Durham; Duke University Press, 2004, 52.

The quiet assumption is that the nuclear family will continue to function, that kids will keep being born and that women will continue to do the (unwaged) work of caring for them. On this, Kingsnorth's national future depends, and thus we can recognise it as an iteration of what Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism.'

In the face of this all-enfolding reproductive duress we should remember that 'what is at stake [is] not the ability to reproduce, but the capacity to regenerate, the terms of which are found in all sorts of registers beyond heteronormative reproduction.'[12] These words of Jasbir Puar's push us to reject the western imposition of mother earth in favour of an anti-colonial 'cyborg earth' - one that rejects the colonial, heteropatriarchal values of bounty, purity and fragility, and poses instead the possibility of liberated life.

The relentless coloniality of Kingnorth's thinking is expressed again in his chosen example of (supposedly 'benevolent') nationalist environmentalism. He cites Roosevelt's creation of the US National Parks as proof that nationalism can choose to define itself by 'protecting, not despoiling, its wild places'. Yet the creation of National Parks saw the forced relocation of thousands of Indigenous people and their existence is possible because of long (and ongoing) histories of genocide and dispossession.[13]

By ignoring racism and colonialism in this way, Kingsnorth undermines his own argument: when lauding the Standing Rock Sioux he suggests that Indigenous populations are exemplary close-to-nature 'nations', yet here they are an obstacle to the flourishing of nationalist nature.[14]

Other aspects of Kingsnorth's fusing of environmentalism and nationalism fall apart under even the slightest scrutiny. Whilst geological features are often used in the drawing of national borders such that they acquire an air of natural permanence, regional ecologies do not match up to national borders (think again of the division of Sami lands); and the most important ecological changes in the contemporary world are driven by global forces that nation states can do little to challenge. Climate change does not respect borders.

Those on the left might at least find some solace in Kingsnorth's naming of 'neoliberalism' as a 'global' formation opposing environmentalism; and in his references to the 'carbon-heavy bourgeoisie' and the 'bankers' who threw 'the people of Greece, Spain and Ireland to the wolves'. Yet his criticisms are moralising rather than structural. There is no account of the bourgeoisie's role in colonialism; nor of the fact that 'bankers' act as they do because that is what capital demands of them.

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[12] Jasbir Puar (2007). *Terrorist Assemblages*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 211.

[13] Isaac Kantor (2007) 'Ethnic Cleansing and America's Creation of National Parks.' *Public Land and Resources Law Review*, Vol. 28, pp.41-64.

[14] As we have noted elsewhere, this contradiction is central to settler colonialism. In settler colonialism's expansionist, extractive guise, Indigenous populations are treated as part of 'nature', which acts as a resource for extraction, a limit to growth and a sink for waste. In its romanticist, protectionist guise, Indigenous populations are positioned as a threat to 'beautiful' 'nature': they are held to be too lacking in scientific knowledge to understand how to protect it. Kingsnorth veers between offering (problematic) support for Indigenous populations resisting the first of these modes and adopting the second mode himself.

Such moralising is not in and of itself leftist: fascists, too, are completely at home making such critiques; and Kingsnorth's aformentioned racialization of 'globalists' leaves the door wide open for them. Given capitalism's ability to continue functioning with and in fascist regimes, such an 'anticapitalism' (or anti-neoliberalism) is in fact useful for capitalism. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer noted, it 'seeks to make the rebellion of suppressed nature against domination directly useful to domination'.[15]

To set this antisemitism in historical context it would be important to engage with the influence of Martin Heidegger on strands of the environmentalist movement; and on the overlaps between his work and Kingsnorth's. Heidegger drew heavily on the Greek concept of *autochthony*, which names the way in which people are (supposedly) rooted in the environment of a specific region. In his philosophical writings he opposed this to the 'rootlessness' of 'modernity'. Heidegger was, of course, a member of the Nazi Party, and in his diaries this 'rootless modernity' is figured as *Weltjudentum* ('world Judaism'). Warren Ellis connects Kingsnorth's essay to another notion of Heidegger's here. For more on Heidegger, *autochtony* and Nazism, see Hood, Stephen l'Argent. "Autochthony, promised land, and exile: Athens and Jerusalem revisited." (2006) PhD diss., Rice University: online here. The idea of 'rootless' Judaism also fuelled antisemitism in the USSR. Far from being an exhilarating avatar of the 'ending' of 'the end of history', Trump shows us that such words are as true as ever.

Another environmentalism is possible...

Like fascists, Kingsnorth promises the future to those who can successfully harness his carefully curated vision of a national birthright: that they 'will win the day' is, for him, 'as iron a law as any human history can provide.' We reject this. History does not have 'iron laws' but is produced through struggle. In mentioning Standing Rock Sioux resistance to DAPL and the Zapatistas, Kingsnorth seems to know this too, at least on some level.

The struggles of Indigenous peoples across the world are not, in any sense, equivalent to the proto-fascist, völkisch environmentalism he otherwise espouses; and have much to offer those seeking to develop an ecological politics within, against and beyond our current crises. Although they - like many people subject to colonial violence - often organize around 'the nation', to conflate the way the term is utilized here with the nationalism of colonial states is deeply disingenuous. As Frantz Fanon notes, 'national consciousness...is not nationalism'; and does not mean 'the closing of a door to communication'. Rather, it is is 'the only thing that will give us an international dimension.'[16]

Some may be perturbed by any organization around the nation, and the lines between decolonial nationalism and supremacist nationalism are not always clear cut:

[15] Quoted in Bonefeld, Antisemitism and Abstraction, 326-327.

[16] Frantz Fanon (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, p. 179

as Maia Ramnath notes in Decolonizing Anarchism, postcolonial states have 'perpetuated the same kinds of oppression and exploitation carried out by colonial rule, but now in the name of the nation.' (p.5) Yet the postcolonial nation is not the same as the decolonial or decolonized nation, and Ramnath notes that it would be churlish for anarchists to reject the concept of nation out of hand given that it plays such an important role in so many struggles against colonialism and white supremacy (p.22 in particular, but this sentiment animates the entire book).

Indeed, in contrast to Kingsnorth's static, essential understanding of 'place', Indigenous concepts of place central to much Indigenous 'nationalism' are dynamic and relational: 'place', 'land' and 'territory' (and roughly translatable terms) function as ways of understanding the relationships between people, animals, minerals and plants across different scales. It is their dynamism on social, political, geologic and biological levels that gives them their very 'sense of place'.

These relationships do not separate out human society from the natural world, as Kingsnorth does, but see them as inextricably linked.[17] Learning from such understandings and exploring the resonances with what we have elsewhere called 'cyborg ecology' is key if we are to prevent the worst excesses of climate change from taking hold.

Many Indigenous and colonized people see the places they inhabit as being destroyed not by the opening of borders but by the very imposition of colonial borders in the first place. Accordingly, they play an active role in the migrant solidarity movements that will be of continued importance in providing solutions to climate-driven migration.

In 2010, when 492 Tamil refugees aboard the MV Sun Sea arrived on the shores of the West Coast [of Canada] and faced immediate incarceration, Indigenous elders opened the weekly demonstrations outside the jails by welcoming the refugees. As their contributions toward a national day of action to support the detained Tamil refugees, the Lhe Lin Liyin of the Wet'suwet'en nation hung a banner affirming, "We welcome refugees." And as part of this same national day of action, Pierre Beaulieu-Blais, an Indigenous Anishnabe member of NOII-Ottawa, declared, "From one community of resistance to another, we welcome you. As people who have also lost our land and been displaced because of colonialism and racism, we say Open All the Borders! Status for All!"[18]

Hence a concern with culture, place and identity does not imply nationalism, and neither can border violence be glossed as simply 'a community asserting its values'. Nor do Indigenous and colonized people necessarily feel threatened by the challenges to gender norms that Kingsnorth so sniffily frames as part of a globalist agenda. Indeed, Western gender (and sexual) norms are - like borders - often seen as colonial impositions

[17] See, for example, Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez & Nathalie Kermoal (2016), 'Introduction: Indigenous Women and Knowledge' in Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place, Edmonton: AU Press; Glen Coulthard (2010). 'Place Against Empire: Understanding Indigenous Anti-Colonialism', *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4: 79–83.

[18] Harsha Walia (2013) *Undoing Border Imperialism.* Oakland: AK Press/Institute for Anarchist Studies, p.123 (digital edition).

that have done much much to damage gender roles, identities and sexualities that do not meet these norms.[19] Again, exploring the resonances (and tensions) between such approaches and calls to 'queer' ecological activism are of considerable importance.

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. But the 'other environmentalism' of the movements and approaches discussed above is also an already existing one. It doesn't prefigure the kind of static world that Kingsnorth seeks, but in its dynamism and struggle (including internal struggles) prefigures the flux and complexity of an ecologically just world. It exists simultaneously locally - in the cracks and interstices wrestled or protected from capitalism, the state and colonialism - and globally, in the internationalist spirit of solidarity that will be essential if we are to reject proto-fascist environmentalism. It creates 'the people' not as a static avatar of racialized nationhood but as dynamic, heterogenous collective seeking to build a new world.[20]

On the decolonial potential of 'the people' as a heterogenous formation inclusive of difference and internal struggle see George Ciccariello-Maher (2017) *Decolonizing Dialectics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p.128.

[19] See, for example, Ifi Amadiume (2015/1987) *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books; Sandeep Bakshi (2016) 'Decoloniality, Queerness, and Giddha'. In Sandeep Bakshi, Suhraiya Jivraj and Silvia Posocco (eds.), Decolonizing Sexualities: Transnational Perspectives, Critical Interventions. Oxford: CounterPress, pp.81-99; Phoenix A. Singer, Colonialism, Two-Spirit Identity, and the Logics of White Supremacy; Tamasailau Sua'ali'i (2001) 'Samoans and Gender: Some Reflections on Male, Female and Fa'afafine Gender Identities'. In Cluny Macpherson, Paul Spoonley and Melani Anae (eds.) *Tangata O Te Moana Nui: The Evolving Identities of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, pp.160-180; Sujata Moorti (2016) 'A Queer Romance with the Hijra', *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 3(2), pp.18-34. An engagement with such accounts should not lead us to the understanding that Indigenous and colonized societies have 'the answers' to misogyny, homophobia and transphobia; nor that they are always-already inherently superior to the West on gender (see Moorti on this in particular), but they certainly dispel the notion that only 'globalist' Westerners are concerned with undoing gender norms.

[20] For one example of the different scales of Indigenous activism, see Graham H. Cornwell and Mona Atia (2012). 'Imaginative Geographies of Amazigh Activism in Morocco', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 13(3), pp.255-274.

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<libcom.org/article/lies-land-against-and-beyond-paul-kingsnorths-volkisch-environmentalism>
Paul Kingsnorth, writing in *The Guardian*, has called for an explicitly nationalist environmentalism. Out of the Woods offer a critique and an alternative.