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Eco-fascism: The Rhetoric of the Virus

Jay Fraser

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The history of eco-fascism is somewhat cloudy, but its origin draws from the previously existent eugenics movement and combines it with a form of hideous ecological disguise that aims to justify its murderous elements. The eco-fascists, more or less, are the same people Murray Bookchin described as ‘self-professed deep ecologists who believe that Third World peoples should be permitted to starve to death and that desperate Indian immigrants from Latin America should be excluded by the border cops from the United States lest they burden “our” ecological resources.’ While there has been a great deal of trying to dress the movement up, often with deepening appeals to the sanctity of nature, the beauty of the natural world, and the ugliness of industrial pollution, the roots of the movement are inescapable; the essence of eco-fascism is the idea that the World is sick, and the illness is humanity. Therefore the eco-fascist claims that we should do our best to eliminate as many people as necessary – or at least accept their deaths – to allow the World to ‘heal’.

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It would be remiss to mention this without giving a brief mention to Thomas Malthus, the 19th Century English thinker who argued that the ‘power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race.’ That is, he argued that there were too many people (or at least, would be too many people) in relation to available resources, causing an inevitable issue for humanity. Malthus’ argument was, when boiled down to the most fundamental ingredients, that the Earth could only support so many individuals and that there needed to be some boundary put on how many individuals could be allowed to exist. Culminating in the idea that we should not seek to cure disease, should not seek to curb famine, and should encourage the poor to live in overcrowded and unsanitary environments, and that we should even ‘court the return of the plague’, Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population* is not the first piece of eugenical writing, but is certainly one of those most responsible for popularising these perspectives. Malthus’ nonsense drew a response from early English proto-anarchist William Godwin, whose lengthy *Of Population* opens with the claim that Malthus’ theory is ‘evidently founded upon nothing’.

Why write about this? At least, why write about this *now*; isn’t there a pandemic going on? Should I not be writing about that? The answer is a simple one, although malignant in its purity; with the world thrown into yet another new flavour of turmoil due to the outbreak and subsequent global spread of COVID-19, there has been an equal rise in opportunism designed primarily to take advantage of the fact that people are scared and worried. Ever the opportunists, and ever the predators of the fearful, one of the most prominent factions in this has been the far right wing, and even more specifically, the eco-fascist movement. Social media has made this even more prevalent, since messages can be distributed widely very quickly and all it takes is a single share for a piece of carefully designed propaganda to leak out from amongst one group into a

trial capitalism is there for anyone to see. Visiting a beach, seeing the endless stretches of logged forest, watching species after species vanish into extinction; all of this is undeniable to anybody willing to engage legitimately with the evidence. Capitalism is at extreme contradiction with ecological sustainability. For the eco-fascist, it has been trivial to marry these obvious observations with COVID-19 to introduce a form of self-destructive hippydom; at the core of fascism lies a desire for the end – as the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote, it is a ‘war machine that no longer had anything but war as its object’. Usurping the language of the environmentalist, the eco-fascist sees an opportunity to mask the violence and overt misanthropy of their ideology, but is only that; a mask. Fascism is, at its core, ‘a line of pure destruction’, to return to Deleuze, and any attempt to claim that the true motive is environmental sustainability is transparently absurd. The only true environmentalism is liberatory.

What needs to be enforced by the anarchist movement, at every turn, is the reality of the situation: COVID-19 and the subsequent shuffling of society has not proven that humanity is a curse with which to be done away; it has proven that capitalism is nothing but a series of choices and structures that we make and reinforce everyday, and those choices can be made differently; those structures can be torn down. Claim this moment and these apparent ecological recoveries as ideological, but claim them correctly; if there is something that needs to be sacrificed for the ongoing health of the planet and its inhabitants, it’s capitalism.

much wider pool of people who will keep the message going without really being engaged with the original sentiment. It’s easy for somebody to stumble into spreading fascist adjacent ideas without ever really meaning it – but more on that later.

One of the most pernicious roots of eco-fascism is in the eugenics movement that preceded it. While there are clear differences, they are largely differences in tactics rather than sentiment; the eugenicist seeks to sacrifice given groups of individuals to the altar of genetic superiority that they have in their heads, arguing that the existence of whichever group being discussed is a flaw in the species. The eco-fascist seeks to sacrifice groups of individuals to the altar of the environment, arguing that the existence of whichever group is being discussed is a core ingredient in ecological disaster. To return to Bookchin, it can’t be ignored that the groups under discussion are almost always the same in either case; the poorer people, the people of colour, the people who are differently abled.

COVID-19 has drawn much of this discussion into the public sphere. Whereas it’s generally seen as poor taste to refer to groups of people as infections, diseases, and plagues – for good reason – this seems to be forgiven when the group being referred to is non-specific. Hand waving at humanity in general, as if being vague is ethical bulletproofing, gets a pass. It is relatively common today to find another viral tweet with tens of thousands of likes gesturing towards the clearing waters of Venetian canals, or the wandering deer of Japan navigating neon-lit city centres and declaring that the Earth is healing itself; the smog-cleared skies of California receive a probing enquiry – perhaps we were the *real* virus all along?

Strange as though it may seem, musings of this kind have become more and more common as the weeks have gone by and the evidence of nature ‘reclaiming’ previously populated areas has begun to accumulate. Suffice it to say, there is more than a little of the eco-fascist ideology floating around in the assumptions of that question; when somebody asks if humanity is the ‘real virus’, they

set up a system in which the Earth is a being and humanity a problem that needs to be solved. The solution being proposed is rarely stated outright, but it doesn't have to be because it's implicit in the question; you cure a virus by getting rid of it. Beneath the surface level wonder at seeing a wild boar shuffle across Italian cobblestones, there is a lurking belief that maybe the world would be better off without us. Or, more commonly, the world would be better off without *some* of us, with who that *some* is being left as a blank to be filled in by the subconscious of the questioner. Unquestionably, whoever that somebody is, will be someone else.

It doesn't take long to see the correlation between the eco-fascist ideal and the underlying logic of this line of reasoning.

Something that is vital to note is this; despite the fact that many of the assumptions of the 'humans are the *real* virus' rhetoric are shared with eco-fascists, not everyone who has spread it or internalised it *is* necessarily a fascist. Reality is sometimes difficult to parse, especially when so much is happening with such frequency. The difficulty is compounded by modern media, which bombards everybody with a deluge of barely intelligible nonsense composed of equal parts guesswork, blatant lies, misrepresentations, and government stenography. The baseline intuitiveness of the eco-fascist assumptions at work are easy to understand. For an individual lacking a systematic critique but searching for answers, it can be easy to adopt elements of this thought – this means that even people who would ostensibly balk at the idea of outright genocide being discussed openly, such as liberals or social democrats, are able to buy into and spread the auto-virality meme without ever truly realising the dangerousness that underwrites the entire concept. So what's the trick? How can this horrible concept become so natural that even relatively pleasant individuals can spread it and accept the logic at its base?

Simply put, there has been a piece of rhetorical trickery here; a bait and switch. We are constantly being told that these apparent ecological recoveries are the result of human beings receding

has taken every chance it can get to push towards its own goals; the left should do the same. Undeniably, there has already been a start; rent strikes have broken out in various countries; General Electric workers have demanded their factories be converted to build ventilators, and mutual aid networks have emerged in their hundreds. Those who consider themselves to be unconcerned with ideology have found that ideology is extremely concerned with them, and the already shaky grip that the centre has had on mainstream discourse for some time has become even more tenuous.

We cannot, however, allow ourselves to be fooled that a crisis will, with some minor coaching from a rent strike, end capitalism or the state. If any credit can be given to apparatuses such as these, it's that they have demonstrated a remarkable tenacity and the ability to worm their way into surviving nearly any disaster. Anarchists can't rely on the state to crumble under its own inadequacies; it must be pushed. Mutual aid networks are a fantastic start, despite how many of them have faced internal disruption from party political actors seeking to subvert them into hierarchical structures. The rumblings of worker solidarity found in factory walk-outs, and the backlash against landlords, too, are brilliant beginnings. But true change doesn't come with a few good signs; there must be increasing pushback against the state, and it must be continuous. COVID-19 has torn a hole in the veil of capitalist realism; what we knew for a long time – that things can be different – is now becoming common knowledge to those who have had their world rocked by this pandemic. Anarchists and other leftists cannot allow any avenue to remain unexplored, or to be reclaimed by the right; the ecological aspect is included in this.

For years, ecological catastrophe has been one of the few continually inescapable tears in capitalist hegemony. For years, it has been looming as a threat, with each news story growing increasingly alarming; scientists have been issuing dire proclamations of end-days deadlines for a long time, and there has been little reason to doubt the legitimacy of these claims. Damage caused by indus-

that we were told was inescapable is swept to the side; jobs that we were told were vital become meaningless as offices and executive suites get abandoned and huge portions of the workforce either become unemployed or begin to work from home – workers that have previously been treated as scapegoats or ignored and dismissed as menial and unskilled become ‘essential workers’ without whom no country could stand. This is, of course, the message anarchists and the left in general have been pushing for well over a century; so much of the work we do is unnecessary, and so much of the work that *is* necessary is demeaned and under-compensated.

Given this perspective, it becomes obvious that the eco-fascist framework in which any given human is part of a planet-wide disease is flawed at the core. Similarly, the diluted and diffused version of their discourse that gets spread around by largely well-meaning people is based on a misconception that confuses a social system with those individuals who take part in it. The outbreak of COVID-19 has, to return to Mark Fisher, thrown aside many of the claims that there is no alternative to our current system, revealing a variety of ‘fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality’ that make its contingency and fragility all the more obvious. Whatever the government and popular consensus might like us to think, it’s impossible to look at a world where workplace populations can drop so drastically without damaging any vital services and then fail to imagine that things could be different.

The right wing and the state has already taken advantage of this, of course; opportunists, as mentioned earlier, are on top of this kind of thing. Governments across the world have taken this opportunity to hand out enhanced police powers, to enforce lockdowns and punishments for people who might be out of their home too often; Hungary has already managed to skip straight into out-and-out dictatorship, using the pandemic as an accelerant to Orbán’s bigoted fire. As the surface of political discourse shifts, forced into motion by the earthquake that has caused decades of neo-liberal consensus to show the cracks in the foundations, the right wing

from the world; the more of us that are quarantined or in self-isolation, the fewer of us that there are out and about causing environmental issues. On the surface, this appears to make some kind of sense; the fact that this formulation isn’t immediately and obviously nonsense is the hook that eco-fascists use to draw in even the well-meaning liberal. The trick is to realise that what has primarily changed is not humanity at all – the death toll of COVID-19 is growing, and it is both tragic and politically infuriating, but it hasn’t yet killed the millions, or potentially even billions, that would be required for the change to be attributed to fewer humans. The fact is that there are almost as many human beings today as there were months ago: what has changed is the *behaviour* of those human beings. That is to say, what has changed, to some degree, has been our modes of social organisation.

The language of the eco-fascist claims that human beings are the problem, and that with their self-isolation – that is, their removal from the system – has come ecological recovery. Such individualised and atomised analysis prevents the ever-important systematic approach; the real problem is capitalism, and it is with the interruptions and staggerings of capitalism that recovery has come along. Deeply embedded in the language of the right wing, the misattribution of the worst elements of capitalism to the mere existence of human beings exists as a dual weapon.

Firstly, it allows them to turn their vitriol upon individuals. Which individuals are chosen as targets is obvious beyond discussion; in this case, the virus has been racialised by members of the right as the ‘Chinese Virus’, a horrible formulation that has come with a rise in anti-Chinese racism and (as a simple visit to the front page of various popular newspapers will reveal) a desire to punish. This has leaked out even into supposedly left-wing and liberal discussions of the subject: a recent collection of essays published by the editorial initiative ASPO bears the name *Sopa de Wuhan*, (Wuhan Soup), and features essays by the usual list of left and liberal thinkers: Slavoj Žižek makes an appearance,

alongside Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, David Harvey, and Franco Berardi. Secondly, it allows them to imply a connection between the two; to link the existence of capitalism to the existence of individuals and bind them together ideologically; to present capitalism *as* human and therefore inevitable and inescapable.

It has long been argued that one of the worst impulses of capitalism, and really the one which puts a firm cap on how long it can last, is the requirement for continual growth and expansion. Capitalism, to put it lightly, is greedy and constantly demands more; more production, larger markets, more factories, more profit, and therefore more extraction, more waste-product, more fuel burned, et cetera. When left in the hands of governments and corporations, this tendency is indulged as often and as wantonly as possible. COVID-19 is a virus, and it is not beholden to capitalism, and therefore it doesn't care that its proliferation puts a spanner in the works. People self isolate, the amount of work that's being done slows; 'it's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs, or legal consultants to [...] vanish', David Graeber writes in his book *Bullshit Jobs*, and mass quarantine and self-isolation has answered the unasked question: humanity would not suffer. These jobs are entirely superfluous and could be done away with; so much of the work humanity does is done purely to keep people occupied, and it has become abundantly clear that this occupation is no good for most people.

Further, with self isolation and the closing of so many workplaces, the number of cars on roads drops, the amount of fuel being burned drops, and the result is some measure of ecological bounce-back. But we all know, and anarchists have argued for a very long time, that nobody needs to *die* for this kind of thing to happen. Observations that the world has begun 'recovering' since the introduction of mass quarantine would be premature – you don't 'fix' the environment in a few weeks – but it's hard to argue that visibly clearer air isn't good on at least some level. It would be entirely

within the bounds of imagination to do away with millions of cars on the road in any given day and to replace them with better forms of public transport, which serve more people and vastly reduce environmental damage. The abolition of nonsense work and the restructuring of transport are just two examples of improvements to our lives that are realistic and easy; we simply need to re-organise our society.

Slightly more than a decade ago now, British writer, theorist, and music critic Mark Fisher published his now classic book *Capitalist Realism*, an attempt to diagnose and decipher the cultural environment of modern capitalism and begin thinking about how we might escape its grasp. To cut a relatively short story – *Capitalist Realism* is a very brief work – even shorter, Fisher argues that capitalism has been perceptually fused with 'reality' in such a way that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism; that capitalism is the 'only game in town'. He also argues that one of the best ways to point out how artificial and potentially changeable this kind of social organisation is, is to look towards the un-ignorable crises that appear to rip into the fabric of capitalist realism. Fisher chose, in 2009, to use mental health issues, bureaucracy, and incoming climate catastrophe as his examples. Today, these examples loom ever larger, with mental health having been largely ignored and the horrors of apocalyptic climate change bearing down on us with an increasing rage. It is now commonplace to hear statistics claiming that vast swathes of the population have serious issues with depression, anxiety, and a host of other conditions. Similarly, it's not unusual to turn on the news or (more commonly) open up Twitter and see how yet another wildfire has ravaged yet another country, leaving smoking forests and smouldering corpses behind.

However, we can now add another example to the list of things which lift the veil and expose the levers and pulleys working behind the scenes; COVID-19 has, if nothing else, shown that a pandemic can do much the same as any wildfire. Suddenly a way of life