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Review: Ecofascism – Lessons from the German Experience

by Janet Biehl & Peter Staudenmaier (AK Press, 76pp
£5)

Anarchist Communist Federation

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Retrieved on May 13, 2013 from web.archive.org
Published in *Organise!* Issue 44 – Autumn/Winter 1996.

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This excellent pamphlet consists of two essays. The first looks at the pivotal role of ecology in the ultra-Right and the Nazi Party; the second at how green ideas are helping contemporary fascism modernise. Ecological science originated in nineteenth century Germany. Earnest Hackle coined the term in 1867, synthesising the naturalism and nationalism under the influence of anti-Enlightenment irrationalism (mysticism, occultism) of the romantic tradition. As a Social Darwinist he projected existing social structures such as hierarchy onto nature, where as ‘natural laws’/‘natural order’ they dictated how society must be organised. Thus ‘nature’ supported his promotion of Nordic racial superiority, opposition to mixing of races and advocacy of racial eugenics. Similarly another founding father of ecology, Ernst Arndt, whose stress on the inter-relatedness and hence equal importance of all life was enmeshed with rabid nationalism and racism: German soil, German people and Teutonic racial purity were paramount.

Wilhelm Riehl opposed industrialism and urbanisation, and glorified rural peasant values in openly anti-Semitic terms. Other Haekelian disciples such as Hentschel, Bolsche and Wille ensured that much ecological thinking, then and since, was embedded in reactionary social themes. The Volkisch movement of the late nineteenth century was a powerful cultural and social tendency uniting ethnocentric populism and nature mysticism. It was a response to the great social dislocation caused by industrial capitalism and national unification: the answer was a return to the land and the simplicity and wholeness of the 'natural' life. Alienation, rootlessness and environmental destruction were caused by rationalism, cosmopolitanism and urbanism, otherwise known as the Jewish conspiracy. The Wandervogel (wandering free spirits) youth movement of the early twentieth century brought this already respectable ideology to prominence. Right wing hippies, they mixed counter-cultures, eastern philosophies, neo-romanticism, nature mysticism and opposition to reason. They sought a return to the land and authentic, direct social relations. Like many greens and fluffies of today they defined themselves as non-political: the changes they wanted would come about through individual improvement. This lack of a social critique, which substituted romance for revolution, led to thousands of the Wandervogel joining the Nazis; a minority gravitated to libertarian politics. The Nazis made a religion of nature, mixing mysticism, 'scientific' ecology, anti-humanism and ideas of racial salvation through a return to the land — 'blood and soil'. Their main themes were natural order, organicist holism and the denigration of humanity. Organicism meant the co-ordination of all parts and organs for the benefit of the one and superior task of life. It was used to justify Lebensraum: the conquering of 'living space' in Eastern Europe for Germans, and provided the link between environmental and racial purity. Until 1941 the green wing of the Nazis was very influential, including Hitler, Himmler, Hess, Rosenberg, Darre, Todt and Siefert. The green

Nazis introduced large scale organic farming (in the teeth of much resistance from some in the hierarchy, especially Backe and Goring), and passed wide ranging protectionist legislation in 1933 and 1935. Even the Nazi's rapid modernisation of a technocratic industrial state, which obviously contradicted this current, had a significant green component. The green wing's influence in the Party was suppressed after Hess's flight to Britain in 1941. Ecology can be seen to have played a major role in the Nazi's success; it refurbished their anti-Semitism, and ideas of racial inviolability and revenge fuelled their anti-humanism. Mystical ecology's displacement of any social analysis of the causes of environmental destruction was very important.

The New Right in Germany, and elsewhere, appeals to similar themes as the Volkisch movement. They maintain that the destruction of the environment and repression of nationalities have a common root in monotheism and universalism. Rather than the 'mongrel' egalitarian culture of the US, they seek 'European civilisation', a 'Europe of the Fatherlands'. Fascists and the ultra-Right seek an ecologised heimat against US imperialism, immigration and foreigners. Opposition to the black population of the 'third world' is disguised under arguments against overpopulation, using the word culture rather than races. As in the 1920s and 1930s, mystical ecology may justify mystical nationalism; fascist and neo fascist ideas are influential in spiritual, mystical and pagan circles.

The authors correctly conclude that ecological themes require an explicit social context to have political relevance; the failure to provide this is the hallmark of reactionary ecology, under banners such as 'beyond politics' or 'apolitical'. This leads to ideas of natural law/natural order with all their regressive consequences. It is vital that there is an ecological left that is libertarian, anti-capitalist and internationalist, however without the libertarian municipalism they seem to advocate.