ECOSOCIALISM, OR FASCISM?

Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism (London and New York: Verso, 2021), 558 p. ISBN 9781839761744

"A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism", Marx and Engels state at the outset of their 1848 *Manifesto*. Today a very different spectre appears to be haunting liberal democracies: right-wing, fascistic governments that often have little tolerance for democratic practices, and seek to rally their followers to a "defence of the homeland" through repressive anti-immigration policies.

What has received relatively little attention in media coverage of these fascist movements until now, however, is how deeply their views of ecology and the environment have been imbricated into their worldview. This is the gap that *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (abbreviated WSBF hereafter) seeks to fill. It is a collaborative effort by Andreas Malm, winner of the 2016 Deutscher Prize for his book *Fossil Capital*, and the Zetkin Collective, a group of scholars, activists, and students researching the political ecology of the far right. They have produced a highly readable, at times dramatic, narrative accessible both to those with a background in Marxist theory and a general audience interested in the politics of our time.

The book offers "the first systematic inquiry into the political ecology of the far right in the climate crisis" (x), a study that tries to address an existential conundrum: Why does a portion of the developed world's population militantly reject overwhelming scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate disruption, and instead build a counter-ideology based on denial, repression, and retreat into mythical nationalism?

The book's opening chapter, "Fortunes of Denial", supplies a useful historical background of the denialist movement's activities since the mid-twentieth century. Key to its analysis is the contention that the fossil fuel industry (or "primitive fossil capital", as the book calls it) and its allies have constructed an effective Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), the term given by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser to "a system of defined institutions, organizations, and the corresponding practices, which, through their day-to-day activities, uphold some elements of the dominant ideology" (14). Central to the denialist ISA – which solidified its power in the 1980's with groups such as the Heartland Institute and the Global Climate Coalition – is the assumption that fossil

fuels are good for us: CO2 is not really a pollutant, and we are actually rendering a service to the biosphere whenever we burn fossil fuels.

In the 1990's, however, the hard-line denialist ISA began to crack under the increasing weight of evidence of anthropogenic global heating; prominent members of primitive fossil capital including BP, Shell, and Texaco withdrew their memberships from denialist groups. This gave rise in 1997 to the Kyoto Protocol, the first international attempt to impose mandatory limits on carbon emissions. In the wake of Kyoto, however, fossil capital seized upon a new paradigm that the authors call "capitalist climate governance", which accepts the fact of global warming but positions capital as its savior. Now, fossil capitalists claimed, the problem could be fixed through a combination of market-friendly mechanisms such as carbon capture and storage, emissions trading, and the purchase of carbon offsets. All of these mechanisms were intended to postpone a showdown with fossil capital indefinitely, and none imposed any serious limits on accumulation.

Chapter 2, "Fear of a Muslim Planet", hones in on the primary issue driving far-right politics and parties today: immigration, especially the widespread anxiety among its followers that elites are engineering a "Great Replacement" of the white population by non-whites, particularly Muslims. The authors draw deftly upon the work of Michelle Hale Williams in seeing immigration as the "funnel issue" through which all other issues on their agendas – including climate – must pass; different far-right parties adopt a variety of positions on climate issues, but they are always related to promoting their anti-immigrant bias.

The following two chapters adumbrate how deeply embedded climate denial has become in the policy agendas of several far-right European parties. One prominent example is Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party, which won the first parliamentary majority in twenty-six years in 2015 on a platform touting national pride in its coal industry as "the past, present and boundless future of the nation" (106). When the UN held its COP24 meeting in 2018 at Katowice, the heart of the Polish coal region, the PiS government decorated the conference's halls with artwork made of coal, and organized a "Clean Fuels Day" hailing coal as "an intrinsic part of Polish biology" (111).

One observation in this section that might have been developed more fully is the apparent irony that some European countries – Hungary, Spain and Sweden especially – possess nearly no domestic reserves of fossil fuels and are heavily dependent on imports; yet, their far-right parties stubbornly toe the line of "no climate regulations, no renewables". While one might expect an eagerness from them to seek alternatives in the interest of self-reliance, their attitude can be summarized in a statement by Martin Kinnunen, leader of the Swedish Democrats, who said in 2018: "There are no good alternatives to fossil fuels." (94) Apparently the logic of climate governance is the same as the logic of immigration: other ethnicities and religions are acceptable in their

own countries, but *not here*; and it might be in our long-term interests to seek climate mitigation, but *not now*.

Chapter 5, "Ecology is the Border", highlights far-right parties' long-standing preoccupation with "green nationalism", an ideology that identifies nature with nation, and promulgates the view that the nation can be kept clean only if foreign sources are kept outside its borders. As Marine Le Pen, leader of France's far-right Rassemblement National party, said in 2019: "He who is rooted is an ecologist. He does not want the land where he raises his children to go to waste. But the nomad does not care, because he has no land!" (136) WSBF's authors identify two major strains of green nationalist thinking: those who take a hard-line Malthusian view of the effects of uncontrolled population growth on the biosphere, exemplified by Garrett Hardin (*The Tragedy of the Commons*) and Paul Ehrlich (*The Population Bomb*); and those who are more generally critical the effects of "globalism" on the land within one's borders, such as Paul Kingsnorth and the Dark Mountain Project.

The authors emphasize that despite its patriotic rhetoric and semi-romantic longing for a virginal, unspoiled land, green nationalism can lead to tragic consequences when taken to extremes, as in the case of Brenton Tarrant, a twenty-eight-year-old Australian who slaughtered fifty-one Muslims with a high-powered rifle in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019. Tarrant left behind a seventy-three-page manifesto titled "The Great Replacement", which reads in part: "For too long we have allowed the left to co-opt the environmental movement to serve their own needs. The left has controlled all discussion regarding environmental preservation while simultaneously presiding over the continued destruction of the natural environment itself through mass immigration and uncontrolled urbanization [...] The Europe of the future is not one of concrete and steel, smog and wires but a place of forests, lakes, mountains, and meadows." (151–152) Tarrant was heavily influenced by another far-right green nationalist, Norway's Anders Breivik, who wrote before his own murder spree: "It's the birthrates. It's the birthrates. It's the birthrates. Muslims are drowning the world with their children, which is why those children need to be killed." (150)

WSBF's authors conclude Part I of their book with a consideration of two recent petro-nationalist regimes, "White Presidents of the Americas", that looks at the US's Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. Trump articulated an ideology of "energy dominance", where national sovereignty is based not only on becoming independent of other fossil-fuel producing nations, but on literally dominating them. Upon taking office in 2017, he immediately greenlighted pipeline projects placed on hold by his predecessor, set about systematically dismantling hundreds of Environmental Protection Agency regulations, and installed climate deniers in many key posts. Moreover, he emulated his border-protecting European green nationalist counterparts by slapping a ban on travel from several predominantly Muslim countries and planning a highly fortified border wall stretching over hundreds of miles of the Mexican border.

Much of Trump's presidential tenure is paralleled by that of Bolsonaro, who demonized the Amazon's indigenous population and Landless Workers' Movement while supporting corporate agribusiness development that greatly accelerated the Amazon's deforestation. Bolsonaro's foreign minister, Ernesto Araujo, wrote before the election: "The left has appropriated the environmental cause and perverted it to the point of paroxysm [...] Climatism is a globalist tactic to scare people and gain more power." (214) Bolsonaro also emulated Trump's "energy dominance" paradigm by initiating the world's largest expansion of offshore oil and gas production by Petrobras, Brazil's state-owned fossil fuel corporation.

Chapter 7, "Towards Fossil Fascism", begins a pivot to the book's Part II, where WSBF's authors attempt to "make sense of all" (xii) the material presented in Part I. Is it possible for an anti-climate politics to become dominant on the far right in the twenty-first century, and if so under what scenarios might that happen? Chapter 7 suggests a heuristic grounded in two steps. First, the methods of two prominent contemporary theorists of fascism are counterposed: Roger Griffin, who believes that fascism should be studied as a set of ideas; and Robert O. Paxton, who believes fascism should be studied as an active historical force. WSBF's authors appear to suggest that we can learn from both approaches. Second, they propose several possible "Scenarios of Fossil Fascism" (239–247), wherein primitive fossil capital is compelled to respond to crises of both mitigation and adaptation. While the scenarios they propose might be considered overly hypothetical and arbitrary by some, I found all of them to be plausible visions of what may lie ahead in this century.

Out of all this, the authors propose a provisional definition of fascism in Chapter 7: "[A] politics of palingenetic [Griffin's term combining the Greek words for birth, "genesis", and again, "palin"] ultranationalism that comes to the fore in a conjuncture of deep crisis, and if leading sections of the dominant class throw their weight behind it and hand it power, there ensues an exceptional regime of systematic violence against those identified as enemies of the nation." (235) WSBF's authors assess that in the third decade of the millennium we are rapidly sliding down a slope into "fascisation" (251), where a conjuncture of ascendant nationalist politics, deep crises, and realignment of class interests poses an increasing challenge to the West's liberal democratic paradigm.

Chapter 8, "Mythical Energies of the Far Right", highlights the constitutive power of myth and conspiracy in the formation of eco-fascist ideology. Key to far-right thinking is the myth of "palindefence", a variation on "palingenesis" introduced in the previous chapter; the palindefence myth posits that "we defended ourselves and our inestimable estate in the past; we were under siege but eventually rebuffed the enemy; we fought hard and gallantly for what will always be ours and *now we have to do it again*" (257). WSBF's authors offer numerous examples of how palindefensive tropes have inflected far-right activism: Italian Lega activists bringing heraldry copied from the Battle of Lepanto to a demonstration; Spanish Vox activists assembling at Covadonga, where the

expulsion of Moors and Jews from Spain supposedly began in the eighth century; and most tragically, Serbian nationalists invoking their defeat in 1389 at the hands of the Ottomans to justify the wholesale slaughter of Muslim civilians at Srebrenica. Moreover, ethnonationalists have often used the palindefence myth effectively to support their climate views: if we are entering an epoch of multiple mitigation and adaptation crises, then a defensive posture is necessarily best; if there is climate-induced migration to Europe, then those migrants will likely be Muslim, and should be repulsed from the "homeland" even more vigorously than other groups.

Conspiracy theories of the far-right complement this mythical thinking by offering deniers a warm cocoon of reassurance. If the overwhelming consensus on anthropogenic climate change by tens of thousands of scientists cannot be accepted, then how can it be accounted for? Only by postulating a conspiracy, where these scientists – and, by implication, the millions who accept their conclusions – have ulterior motives to collude in fabricating data. Chapter 8 probes some of the most widespread of these conspiracies, beginning with the so-called "left climate conspiracy", which proposes that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989 the left tried to recoup its losses by fixating on climate change as the new crisis of capitalism. In the 2010s this merged with traditional theories of "Cultural Marxism", with the result that "[t]he take of the green nationalists would be that Cultural Marxism has arrogated ecology to itself and must be kicked out of it" (206–207).

What does it mean to be recognized as "white"? Why does one's recognition of their (and/or their associated group's) whiteness frequently include an inherent bias in favor of fossil capital? These are the subjects of Chapter 9, "Skin and Fuel", which draws upon Althusser's theory of interpellation to explain how racial self-recognition often leads seamlessly into trusting the "stock" of fossil fuels over the transitory "flow" of renewables. "Whiteness", WSBF's authors quote sociologist Ruth Frankenberg, "is a location of structural advantage in societies structured in racial dominance. It is not a shortage of eumelanin in the basal layer of the epidermis, but a 'standpoint' and 'site of privilege'" (332). It is an attitude that unconsciously dictates the view that those perceived as non-white are "trash", less than fully human, and as fully fit for exploitation as non-human nature.

Much of Chapter 9 is devoted to a historical review of the ways that white people's mastery of fossil-powered technology, beginning with the coal-fired steamships that propelled the British Empire's nineteenth century expansion, led to an ideology WSBF's authors label "techno-racism". Whites were entitled to land formerly occupied by non-whites, it was assumed, because their mastery of technology – concomitant with their mastery of nature – proved their superiority over those who did not use the land "productively", that is, imbricated with the circuits of capital accumulation.

Chapter 10, "For the Love of the Machine", documents how the ideology of fossil-powered technology became a central trope in the rise of twentieth century European fas-

cism, articulated in the writings of Filippo Marinetti (Italy) and Ernst Jünger (Germany). Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto of 1909 was a foundational text for the rise of post-World War One Italian fascism. In a typical passage from it he writes: "Combustion engines and rubber tires are divine [...] Gasoline is divine. So is religious ecstasy inspired by one hundred horsepower." Destruction of nature was a key part of Marinetti's technophilia; he dreamed of leveling Italy's hills and valleys and filling them with rail lines and superhighways to facilitate fossil-powered transportation. Jünger played a similar propagandistic role for the nascent Nazi regime; in works like *Storms of Steel* (1920) and *War as an Inner Experience* (1922), he glorified war as an opportunity to exercise the power of burning fossil fuels. For Jünger, the rise of the German "Volk" that was so central to Nazi ideology was predicated on the subjugation of nature; while the "masses" (a term equivalent to Jews and communists for Nazis) were led willy-nilly by unruly nature, the Volk would find their dominant role by submitting to the dictates of the (fossil-powered) machine.

Nazi "ecology" was a curious thing, as WSBF's authors point out: while some prominent leaders were vegetarians, and the regime instituted a short-lived nature preservation law in its early years, Hitler's Reich ruthlessly conquered and exploited both land and the fossil "stock" beneath it to shore up its industrial base for war. I. G. Farben grew into Europe's largest private corporation in the 1920's by developing a "hydrogenation" process that transformed lignite coal into both gasoline and petrochemical products that powered the German Wehrmacht. (Auschwitz, the authors point out, was a site for extracting and processing coal before it became a concentration camp.) In the end, the Reich prefigured Europe's current green nationalists by privileging borders over ecology; theirs was a "hyperfossil" (443) regime that, in Walter Benjamin's telling, created an aesthetic of power with fossil capital central to its material processes.

In their final chapter, "Death Holds the Steering Wheel" (a quote from Marinetti, interestingly!), WSBF's authors undertake a wide-ranging examination of why climate denial has been so successfully interpellated on the far right, why it has formed the substratum for the rise of fascist movements, and how it may be part of a civilizational "death drive" discussed by Freud and others. The work of Stanley Cohen (*States of Denial*) is cited to suggest that there are three categories of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory; the last of these, where the facts and gravity of a situation are accepted but not acted upon, is the dominant form of denial in advanced capitalist countries. Why, the authors ask, has this form of denial taken root so strongly? Importantly, denial is at least as much a product of the collective imaginary as the individual's. Leaders of capitalist economies assume that capitalist production and accumulation are for the general good (ignoring negative externalities like damage to the biosphere, of course). When a problem comes along that potentially challenges capitalist class interests, leaders react reflexively with some combination of misperception and reluctance to intervene. Meanwhile, workers participate daily in their own, unconscious forms of denialism:

driving to work, cooking on a gas stove, flying on a plane to their vacation, and so on, all of which appear rational to them but are arguably "irrational" from a climate point of view. An apropos quote by Adorno is offered: "People are inevitably as irrational as the world in which they live." (485)

Ultimately, the authors suggest, far-right denial involves a regression into narcissism (again, both individually and collectively), a refusal to accept any responsibility for the degraded environment, a retreat into victimhood, and a reflexive blaming of "others" for climate change. It is at the point where the populace feels most confused and insecure about their future that the fascist leader rises, offering panaceas like palingenesis and expulsion of racial minorities. Fascists understand that the masses suffer feelings of insecurity, isolation, and powerlessness, and manipulate them with fantasies of omnipotence over – that is, the ability to destroy – both humans and nature.

WSBF concludes with a Postscript that reviews events in both Europe and the Americas significant to the climate movement in 2020, the year Covid struck. (The authors mention in the Introduction that the book's manuscript was completed in January 2020, so this section is their attempt to bring the discussion closer to the publication date.) Many events are assessed for their effects upon far-right climate politics, including anti-lockdown protests, Black Lives Matter marches, demonization of Asians as the putative source of the "China Virus", wind farms in the UK, Danish shutdown of oil and gas exploration, and others. The authors find cause for both optimism and pessimism in these events: the electoral strength of several far-right parties waned in 2020, though it is probably too early to tell whether this constitutes a turning point. More ominously, they speculate that "[p]erhaps the anti-lockdown movements prefigured another form of fascism: a revolt against adaptation, in defense of white petty-bourgeois layers constricted or even declassed by it" (520).

Where, in the end, do ecosocialists turn for hope and solidarity in the face of fossil fascist forces that appear to be gaining strength in the past decade? The authors attempt an answer in a brief essay titled "Coda: Rebel for Life" that precedes the Postscript. The far-right, they conclude, cannot be humored; it must be beaten. And there is fertile ground for doing so: "In their perpetual blurring and overlapping – denialism, capitalist climate governance, green nationalism, fossil fascism – the dominant classes and the far-right merely demonstrate that they have no real way of dealing with this crisis. Counter-apparatuses have plenty of material to work with here." (508) The dominant ideology is plainly destructive; rebelling against it becomes a rebellion for life itself.

White Skin, Black Fuel deserves a wide readership among everyone interested in ecology and the current state of global politics. The book has two major limitations: its discussion is confined geographically to Europe, the US and Brazil (a limitation that a follow-up volume will hopefully address by expanding its purview), and it could have offered a more specific agenda for what an ecosocialist response might look like. But

the authors do offer an astonishing breadth of material covering the history, ideology, and recent activism of eco-fascists. Those who cling to the assumption that liberal democracy will "save" our planet would be wise to heed its warnings.

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