

Introduction

And [they] have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white.
James Baldwin, 'On Being White ... and Other Lies', 1984

Klimaschutz und Antifa geht Hand in Hand, das ist doch klar.
Chant at the Ende Gelände march to block the infrastructure of the Hambach coal mine,
October 2018

In 2014, the party then known as the True Finns published a cartoon featuring a black man. He is dressed only in a grass skirt, his belly protruding over the belt. His nose is pierced with an animal bone. Eyes dilated, a wide-open mouth flashing absurdly large teeth, hysterically waving his left hand, he holds in his right a wooden bowl, in which four more animal bones jump up and down. At the top of his lungs, he screams: 'Even though the climate has not warmed since 1997, with this computer, I predict that the climate will warm by one hundred degrees, the moon will melt and the surface of the ocean will rise at least six hundred kilometres!! By the next week!!' To his right are two smaller figures, a man and a woman, white of skin. They look frightened, paralysed, cowardly as they stare at the black man's bowl. Professionally clad, they manage the climate institute of Finland. The woman exclaims: 'Ooh!! We have to spend more on wind turbines that function for only three days in a year!!' Satisfied, the witch doctor of climate science offers nothing of value in return: 'Great

idea! I will give you a consultation.’ *True Finns*, of course, would never cave in in such a ridiculous and despicable manner. ‘So-called “climate science”’, the party explains in the caption, ‘has not been able to prove that human activity is the cause for the 1 degree rise in temperatures. Nevertheless, the climate directives force you to pay extra tax.’¹ *True Finns* would resist the extortion. They would refuse to believe in the fable, stop the pointless bleeding of resources and stand up for their own kind of energy.

Ever since climate change became a cause of concern, it has been widely assumed that people and policymakers will deal with it rationally. If they are informed about the danger, they will mend their ways. If only they realise how hard life will be on a planet that warms by 6 or 2 or even just 1.5°C, they will make an effort to emit less of the harmful gases and stake out a path towards quitting completely. If – having missed the previous warnings – they see the world actually starting to catch fire around them, surely they must then wake up and spring into action: this has been the premise for communication between the climate research community and the rest of society. The former passes on knowledge of how things are unfolding on earth and expects the latter to act in response, much as when a doctor gives an adult patient a diagnosis and prescribes a medication available at the nearest pharmacy. The condition is dire, but treatment guaranteed to have an effect. Ever the loyal crew of doctors, climate scientists have kept knocking on the doors of governments and delivering their messages – for instance, about how severe the consequences would be of a rise in average temperatures above 1.5°C, as laid out in a report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in October 2018 – and waiting for at least some minimally adequate reaction. The same assumption of rationality has underpinned the expectation that a shift from fossil to renewable energy will happen when the price of the latter has fallen, or that well-informed consumers will choose the least damaging commodities, or that the international community will come to an agreement, or that modern civilisation and the human enterprise will once again demonstrate their problem-solving ingenuity and press on with the improvement of life on earth.

This assumption has been taking a beating for some time. Few, however, would have thought that a 1°C increase in average temperatures, an ever-rising tide of extreme weather events, an unhinging of the climate

system observable to the naked eye in virtually every corner of the world would coincide with the surge of a political force that just flatly denies it all. The far right has not figured in any climate models. Variables of whiteness and race and nationalism have not been included. No IPCC scenario has counted on the possibility that deep into the early stages of global warming, just as the urgency of slashing emissions ought to be at its most overwhelming, state apparatuses in Europe and the Americas would be increasingly occupied by parties and presidents professionally clad and white of skin and eager to show the whole issue the door. In another conjuncture, the True Finns cartoon could be shrugged off as the bad joke of a good-for-nothing party on the European fringe; in the late 2010s, however, it plotted the inclinations of a far right storming into offices and chambers from Berlin to Brasília. Two trends now seemed to intersect: rapidly rising temperatures and rapid advances of the far right. There was no easily discernible end to either. Little, if anything, suggested that they would flatten or go into reverse of their own accord. So what happens when they meet?

The rise of the far right has, of course, been extensively and anxiously commented upon, but rarely as a trend rooted in a certain material base and growing into the atmosphere. In the authoritative *Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, published in 2018, we find ‘chapters covering all major theoretical and methodological strands in this literature’: discussions of religion, media, gender, violence, youth, charisma, euroscepticism, globalisation and plenty of other factors, but nothing on ecology.² One widely recognised expert, Cas Mudde, put out a global survey of *The Far Right Today* in 2019 and passed by the issue with complete silence.³ The ‘surprising dearth’ of research on the climatic dimension has been noted.⁴ It creates a picture of the far right as rising somewhere else than in a rapidly warming world. But ‘from now on, every issue is a climate issue’, writes Alyssa Battistoni, formulating a theorem bound to become truer with time.⁵ Far-right politics in the 1930s or 1980s could perhaps be studied outside of the natural environment. In the 2010s or 2040s, one cannot understand what it is doing in and to the world if that context is bracketed out: here we propose to put it front and centre.

What follows is the first systematic inquiry into the political ecology of the far right in the climate crisis.⁶ We have investigated what the main far-

right parties have said, written and done on climate and energy in thirteen European countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Europe is the continent that gifted the world with both the fossil economy and fascism. On the other hand, some parts of it – particularly in the north – have, until recently, enjoyed a reputation as the most enlightened forerunners in climate policy as well as the most humane hosts of refugees. We focus on Europe, but we also look at two countries in the Americas – the United States and Brazil – that have long been recognised for their outsized impact on the climate system and that both, only two years apart, fell under the rule of presidents at the far-right end of the spectrum and on a rampage against nature.

One of them, Donald Trump, was, of course, the ubiquitous face of anti-climate politics in the second half of the 2010s. He has now lost the White House. The time has come to take stock of the phenomenon he represented and ponder in what guise it might reappear. Was he a four-year-long American nightmare that has finally ended – a freak of the local culture, unlikely to come back to haunt an even warmer world? Can we breathe a sigh of relief that at least we won't have to deal any more with this kind of insanity? Our prognosis is less upbeat. In fact, as we shall show, the phenomenon Trump represented – precisely insofar as fossil fuels and whiteness came together in his character – extends far beyond US borders. Only by subjecting it to comparative study, drawing in countries not known for giving their middle fingers to climate, can we catch sight of it as something more than a Republican eccentricity or even a personal Trumpian idiosyncrasy – namely, as a systemic tendency, emerging at a particular moment in the history of the capitalist mode of production. If indeed it has that status, it needs to be known and fought as such.

Part I presents the main findings. It offers a history of the conjuncture of climate change and nationalist politics. How has the far right dealt with global heating and its drivers so far? We look back on developments in recent decades, with an emphasis on the second decade of the twenty-first century. We trace the evolution of a set of ideas about climate and nation, energy and race, from the earliest organisation of denial to the stances of the party family that has shaken up European politics. Those ideas are neither set in stone nor uniform across the parties. To the contrary, the far right is in flux and adopts varying positions in different countries and will continue to

adapt to shifting circumstances. But the repertoire of far-right climate politics is not infinitely malleable. It will not expand much beyond some basic standpoints worked out in passionate devotion to the far right's universal object of love: its own ethnically pure nation. In the settings we examine, this means, to all intents and purposes, the white nation. So what does it mean to defend the white nation in a climate emergency? Some on the far right have inverted the logic of the Finns' cartoon and decided that the emergency is in fact real and the white nation the best shield against it. While this position might seem antithetical to climate denial, there is, we shall argue, less to separate them than first meets the eye.

[Part II](#) tries to make some sense of all this. How is it possible for the anti-climate politics of the far right to come to prominence at this late hour? What would it mean to live in a world both hotter and further to the right than now? Here we engage in what might be called political climate modelling: taking the trends of the recent past and following them into the future, extrapolating and speculating on possible scenarios.⁷ How should the phenomenon be designated and defined? In a pathbreaking essay, Cara Daggett has proposed the term 'fossil fascism': we consider its meaning and contrast it with classical fascism and compare the contemporary far right with that of interwar Europe.⁸ [Part II](#) thus sketches a deeper history of the nexus. It traces lineages of resurfacing ideas and contends that white skin and black fuel have been coupled for a long time – indeed, machines powered by fossil fuels were infused with racism from the very first moment of their global deployment. The European incubator for skin and fuel was an empire. Any exploration of it must begin with Frantz Fanon and continue with others who saw the onward march of metropolitan technology from the receiving end. It is our contention that one cannot understand recent developments, or their possible continuation and aggravation, without such a longer view.

But colonial history is only one source of the problem we are dealing with. We shall have to attack it from multiple angles. From what sources does the far right pump its fantasies about defending the nation and fighting conspiracies and arming itself with superior energy for the tasks? What is the more profound significance – cultural, psychological – of the phenomenon in this very late capitalism? Not the least important, what is its relation to the regions of bourgeois civilisation that would abjure any association with the far right? Those who think that the mainstream way of

dealing with the climate stands in absolute, irreconcilable opposition to that of the far right will need to think again. The latter is not some *deus ex machina* that descended on earth just as the problem was about to be sorted out. We shall see how the one bleeds into the other. Or, to paraphrase Max Horkheimer: she who does not wish to speak of fossil capital and the liberal ideology that has sustained it should also be silent about fossil fascism and its prefigurations. One of our central arguments is that the anti-climate politics of the far right has risen in conjunction with some pressing material interests of the dominant classes. The tactics for protecting those interests have varied: they exist on a continuum, where the main thrust easily glides into the extreme.

What we will not do, however, is stack up a million footnotes to substantiate the reality of climate breakdown. We will presume knowledge of its ABCs. A superabundance of scientific evidence is always one click away; often it is enough merely to open the window. Whether it is a firestorm colouring the sky a hazy yellow or the snow that never fell this winter, the fingerprints of the crisis cover more and more of everyday life (which evidently does not mean it cannot be denied: a paradox we must probe). Sometimes, people gasp at the sights and say, ‘Oh, so this is what climate change looks like’, but they tend to forget that it is a cumulative process, the effects progressively magnified by the total amount of greenhouse gases emitted: and more are emitted each year, each week, every minute. A taste of global heating is only ever a foretaste. Ten years of business-as-usual from now, this year’s bushfires or mild winters might be remembered as rather pleasant by comparison: it’s as though we’re caught in an escalator, heading up, up towards temperatures of a ‘severity that makes ordinary human society impossible’.⁹

But the metaphor of an escalator is too deterministic. It is not the case that, once humans entered this process, destination and speed were fixed. Imagine, instead, a curious kind of elevator: a large company of people is invited into it by a clique of men who promise mind-blowing views from above. The elevator can only rise one floor at a time. At every floor, before advancing to the next one, the travellers must decide whether to push the ‘up’ button. They can choose instead to stop, start the descent and get out. Now imagine that, after some time, a fire alarm goes off. For every floor, it rings higher and blinks brighter; soon smoke starts seeping in. Arguments break out about whether to continue. Clearly, this metaphor is a little

contrived and partial – every metaphor of the climate crisis fails to do justice to its object – but it captures one aspect the escalator misses: each moment of sustained business-as-usual *is the outcome of conflict*.¹⁰

This book studies the behaviour of some people inside the elevator: the first part after the alarm has gone off, the second mostly before that moment. In the first, we present a contemporary history, but it is one that will reverberate for a long time to come. People around the world are already suffering the consequences of decisions made in the 1990s and early 2000s; in the next decade, they will start receiving the fallout from the 2010s. It takes about a decade for most of the warming from one pulse of CO₂ to materialise; then the heat stays on practically forever, so that people in, say, 2030 will live in the heat from what was emitted up to 2020.¹¹ Documentary records of the previous decade might then be informative. There are people who should be held to account.

Before the alarm, there was, of course, no innocent harmony, no evenly shared rewards from the panorama – to the contrary, those who insisted most forcefully on pushing the ‘up’ button employed a great deal of brutality.¹² But only under the sirens does the full significance of their acts become legible. This also applies to the forebears of the contemporary far right, namely the classical fascists, who shared with it the defining pursuit of the pure white nation.¹³ How did they deal with fossil fuels and their technologies? While fascism has been inspected from most points of view, its love affair with those particular productive-destructive forces have largely escaped attention as such: now is the time to revisit it. The prehistory of fossil fascism holds a key to the positions of the far right today, and it is part of what brought us into this mess in the first place. But fascism also has a history of love for nature, which is staging its own comeback. Where could it lead us?

While this is a big book that tries to catch up with a sorely under-studied topic, we make no pretence of an exhaustive or conclusive inquiry: this is a first essay. Many of our interpretations are tentative, in the nature of hypotheses. We deal with the Old World and two of its offshoots in the New, leaving out some – notably Canada and Australia – that have their own distinct articulations of energy and race. Nor do we deal with the far right in any country in the global South besides Brazil; India is a major omission. We offer no richly textured ethnography of the lifeworlds of the

people who might sympathise with the parties and their climate and energy policies. One member of The Zetkin Collective, Irma Allen, is doing just this work among Polish coal miners; another, Ståle Holgersen, is planning the same among oil workers in Norway. We concentrate on climate, paying scant attention to other aspects of the ecological crisis – the sixth mass extinction, the collapsing insect populations, the plastic and air pollution, the land depletion ... Certain factors of class and gender deserve more in-depth treatment than we give them here. We home in on race and racism, the far right and fascism in the past and present, without capturing more than a fraction of their determinants; we cannot provide a total overview of the variables that have conspired to breathe new life into them, nor of the political content of the parties we study.¹⁴ Our object is both overdetermined and contradictory, and we reflect on some of the many nuances.

We are, furthermore, aiming at a moving target. The climate system and the political systems of the world are drifting towards pronounced volatility – in the former case, without precedent in the annals of human history – and many of the faces and names in our story might soon sink into oblivion. Trump is a man of the past. During 2019, when most of this book was written, three far-right parties were ejected from government: the Austrian FPÖ, the Lega Nord of Italy and the Danish People's Party.¹⁵ If global heating goes one way, the rate of CO₂ ever rising – two or three more parts per million each year – the advances of the far right are distinctly less unilinear. They have proven rather easier to reverse with resistance. By the late 2010s, one formation of the European far right that only years prior appeared among the most formidable and fearsome had come to an inglorious end: the Golden Dawn of Greece (another case here left out). But as such, the far right seems here to stay for a while. Its forces may look different tomorrow, but they are less likely to vanish overnight than to evolve and gather force and put their imprint on any transition away from fossil fuels, if such a thing ever transpires. We are trapped inside the elevator with them, and we need to have an idea of where they come from, what they do, how they think, what steps they might take next.

Because those seeking to go higher and burn more fossil fuels have never ceased to be victorious, we are now in a situation where full breakdown can be averted only with the most herculean redirection and

restructuring of the world economy. Every barrel of extracted oil, every container of coal, every cubic foot of gas: every tonne of carbon released into the air speeds up the rush. But, conversely, every piece of fossil fuel left untouched limits the hazards. Every emission avoided relieves suffering. Every step to decarbonise our economies – fully and immediately freeing them of fossil fuels and starting the hard work of undoing the damage – counts. These are the parameters within which a difference is made, now and in the near future. Sustained business-as-usual is, more than ever, the outcome of conflict: during 2019, the world saw the greatest popular mobilisations around the climate issue so far in history. This book deals with the opposite side, which no climate movement can wish away. Progress has a tendency to provoke furious reaction, and this movement has not been an exception. Nor will anti-fascists and anti-racists be able to ignore this context. Rather, their old struggle against the far right is taking on a novel aspect. It is increasingly difficult to tell it apart from the struggle to preserve the conditions in which human and other life can thrive on this planet.

After Clara Zetkin had written the first essay to ever engage in depth with fascism from within the workers' movement, months after Mussolini's march on Rome, in early 1923, she was tasked with drafting a resolution on the topic for the Comintern, still not under the full control of Stalin. She called for 'a special structure to lead the struggle against fascism, made up of workers' parties and organizations of every viewpoint' and listed six outstanding tasks. Number one: 'Collecting facts on the fascist movement in every country.' (Number five on a subsequent list: 'Refuse to ship coal to Italy.')

¹⁶ It is in this spirit we submit the following study: our contribution to the resistance, the product of a collective project that we hope will be of some use in other collective projects.

If nothing else, the anti-climate politics of the far right should shatter any remaining illusion that fossil fuels can be relinquished through some kind of smooth, reasoned transition with everyone on board. Climate is reputed to have a unique ability to inspire fraternisation and 'post-political' consensus: because it concerns humanity as a whole, people of all loyalties and persuasions should be able to agree on a safety plan.¹⁷ But a transition will happen through intense polarisation and confrontation, or it will not happen at all. Things might well get ugly. Indeed, they already are.

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The manuscript for this book was originally completed in late January 2020. Weeks later, contemporary politics underwent the caesura known as Covid-19. As so much else, publication was put on hold, while the jagged upwards curve of the far right – if not of global heating – turned downwards in some places, went into prolonged fall or quickly rebounded, in a world now suffering from two emergencies (if not more). We have left the manuscript all but unchanged. Instead, we have added a postscript that surveys the scene of 2020, the year when the overheated world became officially sick, another year of continued mutations on the far right.

The Zetkin Collective
November 2020