

Branding the nation in the era of climate crisis: Eco-nationalism and the promotion of green national sovereignty

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Abstract

This article examines the contemporary discourse of eco-nationalism and its promotion of national sovereignty and belonging. I consider some of the strategies, symbols and narratives by which nationalist movements and political leaders have evoked environmental problems and particularly the global threat of climate change to justify excluding populations from 'native' lands, erect walls or other physical boundaries around national territories, and limit international traffic of people and goods. This promotion of nation seizes on concerns for continued collective existence, turning away from participation in global networks of culture, capital and cosmopolitanism to act as a bulwark against these networks. As such, it presents a mirror image of global nationalism: whereas the aim is still to take heed of global phenomena, these phenomena now appear as dark clouds on the horizon, from which national citizens must take cover.

KEYWORDS

climate change, Cultural Nationalism, eco-nationalism, Globalisation, Anti-Globalisation, Media, Nation Branding, Nationhood/National Identity, sovereignty

1 | INTRODUCTION: NATION BRANDING GOES GREEN

The rise and spread of eco-nationalism—a vision of ecological sustainability and national protection rooted in xenophobia and exclusion—creates deep and lasting challenges to the ideals of the nation-state. As the twin crises of neoliberal globalization and climate disaster demand increasingly urgent and large-scale response, eco-nationalism

offers both capital-hungry state leaders and disgruntled citizens a mantle of sovereignty in a calamitous world. Even if this social imaginary involves a cynical mobilization of climate concerns to advance troubling rationales for border regimes, its increasing popularity in countries across the Western hemisphere demands consideration as a powerful if abhorrent articulation of a green planetary future.

This article examines the contemporary discourse of eco-nationalism and its promotion of national sovereignty and belonging. I consider some of the strategies, symbols and narratives by which nationalist movements and political leaders have evoked environmental problems and particularly the global threat of climate change to justify excluding populations from 'native' lands, erect walls or other physical boundaries around national territories, and limit international traffic of people and goods. This version of nation promotion seizes on societal concerns for continued collective existence, turning away from participation in global networks of culture, capital and cosmopolitanism (Calhoun, 2008) to act as a bulwark against these networks.

My interest in this topic derives from my prior work on national branding, another form of nation promotion that was invented to save the nation from disappearing. Amidst global flows of media, markets and migration in the 1990s, anxious national leaders turned to a transnational promotional class to help them craft a 'new and improved' national image for international audiences (Aronczyk, 2013). Nation branding applied the tools, techniques and expertise of marketing and branding consultants to attract international investment, tourists and skilled workers, and diplomatic benefits. It fed the conviction by national governments that the future of the nation consisted of finding a lucrative role to play within a globally integrated economic system.

Today, in countries around the world, new sources of anxiety have emerged around the future of the nation and with them different expressions of national belonging. The cosmopolitan promises of foreign investment flows, supranational memberships and global cultural industries to ready the nation-state for its renewed role in a borderless society have been upended both within and outside national boundaries. The last 15 years have witnessed the dramatic realities of growing unemployment and an increasingly emaciated social welfare system. States contend with the impact of market deregulation on their credit ratings and their political autonomy. News headlines announce flows across national borders, not only of capital but of migrants and refugees, of pandemics and pollution, of terror networks and organised crime. In the end, it seems that achieving the status of what Leslie Sklair (1997) cynically called global nationalism required compromises to the idea of the nation that could not be sustained.

Heralding and accelerating these transformations is an altered promotion of national belonging, called by turns eco-nationalism, ecobordering (Turner & Bailey, 2021) or eco-fascism. This phenomenon relies on the disillusionment of national citizens in the face of globalised processes they cannot control. It advocates the closing of borders, the erection of walls (Brown, 2010; Hultgren, 2015) and the expulsion of migrants and other nonnationals in shows of anti-multiculturalism and antiegalitarianism, framed as a moral injunction to protect national populations amidst the growing scarcity of natural resources, extreme weather conditions and the spectre of climate disaster. Eco-nationalism proposes a path for maintaining intact the idea of the nation. It offers a form of sovereignty rooted in territorial commitments in their most literal sense: the responsibility to take care of the earth in the face of diminishing resources of water, food and arable land. Historians of nationalism may recognise some of the genealogies of this discourse, rooted in determinist interpretations of nineteenth-century Malthusian theories of overpopulation, appeals to land and territory as sources of essentialist identity, and strains of American conservationism (Amend, 2020; Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995; Ojeda et al., 2020).

Eco-nationalism emulates the tactics of mediatization and marketing we encountered in the heyday of national branding in the early 2000s and even appears to rely on the same ideological premises, but it carries within it troubling and violent implications. As such, it presents a mirror image of global nationalism: whereas the aim is still to take heed of global phenomena, these phenomena now appear as dark clouds on the horizon from which national citizens must take cover. Eco-nationalism is also a political rhetoric that promotes the reality and urgency of the global climate crisis and invests its advocates with the authority to respond directly to its effects. Eco-nationalism legitimises a social imaginary that prioritises the rights of national citizens to ecological, agricultural, energy and environmental

benefits. If it rightly raises climate concerns to the top of the national agenda, it does so in a way that connects this version of sovereignty to nativism, racism and illiberalism.

Scholars have considered the relationship of national sovereignty to climate change largely in terms of a series of challenges to state autonomy: legal (Rayfuse & Crawford, 2011; Skillington, 2016)¹; geopolitical (Hafner & Tagliapietra, 2020; Patrick, 2021; Werrell & Femia, 2016); and moral (De-Shalit, 2006; Kassner, 2021). From a cultural perspective, however, climate change and sovereignty are not an either-or proposition nor a zero sum competition. Indeed it seems that the conceptual issues complicating the relationship of climate change to sovereignty are similar to those that initially plagued the tensions between the ideas of globalization and nationalism: globalization was made out to be objective, agentless and deterritorialised, whereas nationalism was framed as subjective, driven by self-interested local actors and resolutely territorial. In the last 30 years, scholars of both nationalism and globalization have tried to undo this anchored presumption of a duality between the global and the national and especially of the idea that one would replace the other, instead pointing to their mutually reinforcing features (Calhoun, 2007). It is more accurate, as Sassen (1996) explains, to see pockets of denationalization and renationalization of particular institutional arenas and governance frameworks and the relocation of sovereignty into different aspects of this reconfigured system. The idea that climate change diminishes sovereignty misrecognises the discursive potential of both concepts and their ability to intersect in both novel and historically grounded ways. Like the discourse of nationalism, the discourse of climate change is available for uptake by a wide variety of actors and can be put to different uses, for different ends.

In the sections that follow, I elaborate a set of ideas about eco-nationalism in the current era. I begin with a brief account of three expressions of national sovereignty amidst the global realities of climate change, with the aim of exploring the discursive relationship between these concepts. The purpose of this section is to reflect on the uses of national identity and belonging in the context of global warming and to set the stage for the emergence of eco-nationalism as a radical, reactionary expression of this practice.

I then chart the historical roots of eco-nationalism and its unfurling into branches of nationalist claims in the present, looking at the ways that far-right groups have adopted the discourse of climate catastrophe to justify xenophobic thought and action. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the longevity of a social imaginary that marries concern for the land with territorial power. As John Hultgren has argued, the ethos of 'green sovereignty' relies on the articulation of nature, political community and governance as necessarily interconnected (Hultgren, 2012: 301), leading to antidemocratic schemes of population control, majority rule and economic independence amidst resource scarcity.

In the final section, I illustrate how nation promotion of eco-nationalism manifests in empirical contexts. Drawing on news coverage and first-person narratives of attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019, and the shooting of Hispanic immigrants 5 months later in El Paso, Texas, I explore how the communications environment has fostered the circulation and uptake of such damaging nationalist narratives.

In the conclusion, I reflect on the implications of my analysis for more inclusive expressions of eco-nationalism. How can a more progressive agenda be forged between nature and nationalism? What is required for nation-states to produce public policies that protect their jurisdictions while apprehending planetary climate concerns? And what ought to be the role of nation promotion in crafting visions of a more just and equitable future?

2 | THREE SHADES OF GREEN: PROMOTING NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY AMIDST GLOBAL WARMING

The sovereignty of the nation-state has been challenged in multiple ways by the climate crisis. The challenges are both material and symbolic: material, in the undeniable fact of climate change as a planetary crisis that recognises no geopolitical borders (even though its effects are not evenly felt across geographic terrain); and symbolic, in that any signals of national response, no matter how focused on national security, citizen protections or local infrastructure,

must take place in the context of other nation-states' decisions. Although for decades climate change was treated by policy-makers as a distant, slow-moving and mainly invisible phenomenon, current environmental crises, from so-called 'natural' disasters to ecosystem destruction to the COVID pandemic, have forced the issue to the top of national agendas. Three 'shades' of national sovereignty have emerged to respond to this priority.

The first is at the intergovernmental scale, with the renewed autonomy of member states in the United Nations climate regime. Until 2015, with the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) international treaty known as the Paris Agreement, member states had limited self-determination in the realm of climate policy. From the earliest days of this international treaty in 1992, the UNFCCC had defined strict timetables and targets for controlling national greenhouse emissions, to which member states were required to adhere (though in practice, these were difficult to enforce and rarely achieved).

With the signing of the Paris Agreement, adopted by 196 parties to the Convention on 12 December 2015, nation-states claimed a new level of autonomy in their climate-related response. Rather than UN-led timetables and targets, each member state now communicates its own goals and planned commitments, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). NDCs are periodically measured against others in a 'global stocktake', meant to serve as ongoing incentive for each state to ratchet up its own commitments to match those of its peers.

The promotional dimension of this approach was not lost on observers. Aykut et al. (2021) termed the approach an 'incantatory system of governance', pointing to the adoption of ritualised, performative and symbolic devices such as NDCs as 'core instruments' for the articulation of climate response. Under the attention-grabbing media spotlight of the annual global COP summits, nation-states could engage in tournaments of climate diplomacy, each promoting its own self-structured pathways to emissions reductions, mitigation systems or adaptation plans. The United Nations, in turn, acted less as an intergovernmental power and more as a global manager, brokering relationships between nations and 'orchestrating' climate governance between private sector and public sector actors (Gordon & Johnson, 2017).

If this decentralization was intended to produce greater equity among member states by recognising their unique contributions to climate change and their capacities to respond, the result to date has been to reproduce longstanding inequities among member states in the climate arena. Although less privileged member states used their NDCs to document their need for support in terms of capacity-building, financing or technological transfer, more well-off states did not document in their own NDCs any intentions to provide support (Pauw et al., 2019). In other words, the awarding of greater sovereignty to nation-states under the rubric of NDCs seems to have been more impactful at the symbolic level than in any material transformation. Although major fossil fuel-emitting countries such as the United States, China or India use the NDCs as promotional devices to enhance their legitimacy as climate-sensitive actors and to gain authority in international policy-making, many of the countries that have contributed the least to the problem of global warming find themselves further isolated in their suffering as a result of global warming (Harvey & Mason, 2021).

A second shade of green colours the emergence and institutionalization of subnational actors in national climate governance. In some respects, this version of eco-nationalism is related to the one discussed above: it promotes the sovereignty of the nation in articulating solutions to the climate crisis, in league with the intergovernmental policy framework of the United Nations, but this is an approach that advocates international carbon markets, technical fixes and private sector partnerships as solutions to the climate crisis (e.g., Goldstein, 2018).

In the United States, for instance, the power of subnational actors to assert a national response to climate change was made apparent after then-president Donald Trump's announcement, in June 2017, that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord (Shear, 2017). A campaign called America's Pledge appeared almost overnight, promising ongoing participation in United Nations climate goals by substate and non-state actors, including city and county mayors, colleges and universities, religious and healthcare groups, businesses and investors, and NGOs and climate advocacy organizations. The Pledge committed the United States to developing ways to assess their efforts in transitioning to lower carbon initiatives as well as to compile additional opportunities by which they might reduce greenhouse gas emissions (America's Pledge, 2017).

Some observers have characterised this approach as a form of 'catalytic cooperation' (Hale, 2020): a solution to a global collective action problem that gives non-state actors greater pride of place as part of a movement toward shared climate leadership and the projection of collectively desired futures. At the same time, the approach underlines the primacy of capital in contemporary claims to sovereignty (Klein, 2014). As Brown (2010) has emphasised, whereas 'states remain important global actors in world markets, in the moral-political discourse of international human rights, and in a variety of international and transnational relations governed by Realpolitik', they are neoliberal actors, subordinate to the requirements of capital structures. 'States do not dominate or order, but react to the movements and imperatives of capital as well as to other global phenomena, ranging from climate change to transnational terror networks' (79).

A third incorporation of environmental concerns into national sovereignty presents no less of a challenge to the idea of national belonging, though it is arguably far more damaging in its effects on democratic ideals. This brand of eco-nationalism proposes to care for the earth by devaluing human life—particularly those lives less valuable to the perpetuation of a White ethnostate. The rise of eco-nationalism in its extreme incarnation is both symptom and effect of a series of pressures and provocations: increased concern about climate change by national voting populations; failures of state policy to adequately manage the influx of migrants and refugees across their borders; and the COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant anxieties about the proximity of people and animals as vectors of disease. The sudden circulation of specious and poorly formed arguments online, at the outset of the pandemic, claiming that the earth was 'healing', whereas populations remained in lockdown, suggested to some that the natural environment was improved by the reduction of people in it.² Eco-nationalism has gained ground precisely because of its claims to reinvigorate the power of the state to protect national populations in the context of border-defying threats.

Margulies (2021) attempts to classify these varieties of eco-nationalism by distinguishing between ecological and environmental movements and between ethnic and civic nationalisms. In his classification, ecologism and ethnic nationalism are mutually constitutive, 'both deriving their legitimacy from the cultural and spiritual essence of land for human populations' (23), whereas environmentalism and civic nationalism are connected by their common managerial approach to resources, appealing to economic self-interest as the basis of sovereignty. Although some may contest this 2 × 2 matrix scheme for its oversimplification of complex and porous practices, it nevertheless demonstrates the range of national narratives that are invoked in the name of environmental commitments; and the ongoing tensions present in the hyphen between 'eco' and nationalism.

There is a discomfiting similarity among these three examples, however, and this is that each posits a 'national' nature in order to prompt responses by national leaders. To the extent that the world system of nation-states is still the most legitimate system for citizen rights and protections, it stands to reason that nation-states have a role to play in apprehending the climate crisis. But in terms of the planetary realities of climate change (among other crises of global health), claims to national sovereignty appear piecemeal and short-term at best and disastrous at worst.

Writing of the deployment of national 'nature' as a strategy of identity, Hultgren (2015) has argued that environmental thought 'lacks an understanding of the political terrain on which struggles over nature intersect with the norms, practices and institutions of sovereignty' (3). It seems that the obverse is equally true. How does political thought reckon with the articulation of ecological integrity as a foundation of national identity and demarcated territory? Where do these ideas come from? And to what uses have they been put over time? In the following section, I attempt to answer these questions by excavating the roots of a chauvinistic and antagonistic green nationalism.

3 | GENEALOGICAL ROOTS OF ECO-NATIONALISM

In *A Strategic Nature*, Maria Espinoza and I describe the intertwined relationship among strategic communication, environmental awareness and the making of national publics in the United States (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2022: chapter 1). This relationship grew out of early twentieth-century contests between ideas of conservation and preservation of natural resources. The so-called naturalist and conservationist president, Theodore Roosevelt,

anchored policies of land protection, forestry management and national parks during his administration. But alongside this story of emergent national awareness of the natural environment as a source of national identity is a second story of national self-protection against the diminishment of this resource by immigrants. The American lawyer and aristocrat Madison Grant, a confidant of Roosevelt, was highly praised for his book, *The Passing of the Great Race, or the Racial Basis of American History*, in 1916. In a letter to Grant, Roosevelt called it 'a capital book; in purpose, in vision, in grasp of the facts our people most need to realize' (Purdy, 2015).

Other figures around Roosevelt, such as federal forester Gifford Pinchot and naturalist John Muir, expressed equally complicated sentiments about preserving forests and animals over populations, such as native peoples and other non-White people, whose growth troubled American ideals. Prolific writers both, their ideas circulated not only in newspapers but in society meetings, magazine articles, pamphlets and textbooks, further cementing their ideas in an American society becoming conscious of itself as a nation. These ideas were themselves inspired by nineteenth-century notions of nature and belonging as well as Malthusian philosophies of imposing limits to population size.

These same ideas found purchase throughout Europe and shaped national projects in multiple settings. Staudenmaier (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995) traces the lineage of the German 'blood and soil' mythos, noting that Germany is not only the site of the origins of ecological science and Green politics but also the heart of 'a peculiar synthesis of naturalism and nationalism forged under the influence of the Romantic tradition's anti-Enlightenment irrationalism'. This synthetic bond was expressed as early as 1815, connecting care for the land with an aggressive nationalism that embraced eugenics and scientific racism.

Such ideas in Europe and in the United States found expression in environmental tracts and nationalist campaigns throughout the twentieth century. The most infamous is the rise of the National Socialist Party and its commitments to the land and the natural environment, which provided 'green camouflage for the colonization of Eastern Europe' (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995) through moral arguments about the need to extend Germanic peoples' rights over Germanic soil in the name of sustainability. We also see such alignments in seemingly liberal environmentalist statements such as Paul Erlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) and University of California ecologist Garrett Hardin's *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968) (cf. Mildemberger, 2019).

This latter essay, which appeared in the journal *Science* in December 1968, has been revered as a signature statement for the environmental movement. It takes the view that humans' competitive behaviours prompt us to exploit the finite natural resources humanity needs, leading to environmental degradation—hence, a 'tragedy of the commons'. Hardin's views have anchored not only environmental advocates' calls to regulate consumption but also White nationalist claims to border closure and population (immigrant) control amidst the threat of civilizational collapse. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (n.d.), 'Hardin used his status as a famous scientist and environmentalist to provide a veneer of intellectual and moral legitimacy for his underlying nativist agenda'.

In recent decades, this version of nativism—the synthesis of naturalism and nationalism Staudenmaier described—has found full-throated expression in political parties. Turner and Bailey (2021) identify the use of 'ecobordering' narratives among parties in 20 European countries.³ In France, the far-right political party, Le Front National, launched a New Ecology movement, promoting cities where it holds power as examples of reduced consumption, localism, traditionalism and community-building (Onishi, 2019). Such promotional campaigns align unemployed youths, struggling farmers and other disgruntled, often working class sectors of the population with an identity-based environmentalist argument for ending trade agreements, relying on national industry (in this case France's nuclear industry for energy), restricting immigration and fortifying borders (Neslen, 2014). As the Front National leader Marine Le Pen describes it, this eco-national identity 'hits on the essential: the pleasure of being French, being at home on one's own land, in one's own environment, among one's own' (Agence France-Presse, 2021).⁴ In other countries such as Hungary, eco-nationalism extends to the protection of native plants and animals by 'invasive species' from outside the country (Neslen, 2014).

Davidov (2015) describes a related phenomenon in post-socialist Russia, whereby distrust of the state and cultural nostalgia gave rise to an eco-nationalist movement called the Ringing Cedars. Inspired by a series of cosmic

new age novels that describe healing properties in the forest trees, the movement mobilises a belief system in which nonhuman elements are imagined to be more powerful than the state or corporate system, advocating a mythic 'return' to a simpler, spiritually rich familial and agricultural tradition. Davidov coins the term 'ecological personhood' which 'integrates deep nationalism, distrust of the post-Soviet state, and conservative family values, through the medium of nature and prescribed forms of human-nature relations and practices'. The author discovers an active web forum for the group, with tens of thousands of users discussing practices of living off the land, and describes the movement's internationalization, with 'ecovillages' appearing in the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany and the Netherlands.

In the United States, the 'America First' policies enshrined by former president Donald Trump have been reframed as environmentally sensitive. In a 2019 promotional video by the right-leaning (and misleadingly named) group Progressives for Immigration Reform, the narrator calls on the Trump administration to establish an environmental legacy through the restriction of migrants, saying 'Part of making America great again ... is making it green again' (Amend, 2020).

In April, 2021, Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich filed a lawsuit against the Biden government, claiming that the newly inaugurated federal government's executive order to halt border wall construction between the United States and Mexico did not follow procedures required by environmental legislation (Brnovich, 2021). The claim is that under the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and according to the rules of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), any federal action with a potential effect on the human environment must prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for public review before it can be undertaken; and that freezing border wall construction had a negative environmental effect on the state of Arizona due to the supposed influx of migrants:

Migrants, like everyone else, need housing, infrastructure, hospitals, and schools. They drive cars, purchase goods, and use public parks and other facilities. All of these activities have significant environmental impacts, including displacement of undeveloped lands and additional air emissions

(Brnovich, 2021).

It is relevant to add that when NEPA was written, in 1969, its language expressed a concern for population growth as an inevitable outcome of development. This was very much in the spirit of the times, as we have discussed above. Current eco-nationalist claims seize on this concern, some insisting that NEPA be amended to include immigration as a specific instance of population growth affecting the environment (Axelrod, 2018, 2020).

Turner and Bailey (2021) identify three themes common to ecobordering claims, each of which is designed to 'encourage reactionary nationalistic responses to the climate crisis': 'fallacious depictions of migrants, an ignorance of the material economic drivers of ecological degradation, and a narrow focus on 'national' nature' (112). These three themes resonate throughout the genealogy of eco-nationalism.

These themes equally prey on and amplify current anxieties over belonging and identity in the context of ongoing globalization. Wendy Brown's *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010) exposes a central paradox. With the forward momentum, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, of global flows of media, money and migration, national politics were inclined toward open borders and legal allowances for newcomers to nation-states. Not 10 years later, national governments were not only closing borders but putting up boundaries—physical walls, fences, blockades—in the name of sovereignty and identity protection. Brown explains this paradox via the 'theatricality' of walls; walls as performative devices to symbolise the power and protection that states no longer provide. The walls also serve as a control system, to convey a message about who is allowed in and who must be kept out, promoting a twisted logic of peace and stability within, versus strife and violence without. The erection of walls, Brown argues, reflects 'a series of intersecting nationalist rejections of free trade, open borders, and multiculturalist democracies' (17), even as transnational institutions take shape and global phenomena creep in:

Clearly ... the recent border fortifications that have sprung up from the Netherlands and Austria to the Balkans, Macedonia, and Turkey are more than theatrical shows of nation-state power performed for economically frustrated and xenophobic citizens, even as they are also this. They have become part of an intricate ad hoc network of spatial and governing technologies for diverting, channeling, policing and governing migrant flows

(Brown, 2010: 15).

The force of these themes lies not in their veracity but in their emotional power as strategic narratives. Thus, another cruel irony is instilled: in making use of eco-nationalism to gather support in electoral contests, far-right groups introduce a path for consideration of climate change by sectors of the population that traditionally would not countenance such topics; but even as it expands acceptance of the reality of global warming and the need to do something about it, it restricts the possibility of collective action, inviting instead conflict and antagonism.

In the next section, I turn to two empirical cases of antagonistic eco-nationalism in action: deadly attacks in New Zealand and in the United States by individuals claiming environmentalism as justification. The purpose of this section is not only to reveal the distortions of eco-nationalist narratives but also the ways that such narratives are framed, promoted and amplified in communications media.

4 | ECO-NATIONALISM AND VIOLENCE

In March 2019, a White Australian man killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Moments before his attack, he posted a manifesto on 8chan, an online forum harbouring extremist and White nationalist views. Analyses of the 74-page manifesto noted the prevalence of memes and inside jokes intended for the 8chan community (Edwards, 2019).⁵ It also contained a commentary on the urgency of protecting the natural environment. This was the primary justification for the killer's deadly intervention: that the natural environment—the land—was the ultimate prize:

Green nationalism is the only true nationalism. There is no Conservatism without nature, there is no nationalism without environmentalism, the natural environment of our lands shaped us just as we shaped it. We were born from our lands and our own culture was moulded by these same lands. The protection and preservation of these lands is of the same importance as the protection and preservation of our own ideals and beliefs

(Tarrant, 2019).

The killer's manifesto was titled *The Great Replacement*. The manifesto's title was taken from French writer Renaud Camus's self-published book *Le grand remplacement* (2012), advancing the conspiracy that White Christian Europeans are being 'replaced' by invasions of non-White, non-Christian immigrants. 'Continued immigration into Europe is environmental warfare and ultimately destructive to nature itself' (Tarrant, 2019).

Evoking themes of anti-urbanism and the 'return' to prior traditions, and a mythical, unspoiled Eden at a remove from the polluting civilization, the manifesto further reads:

The Europe of the future is not one of concrete and steel, smog and wires but a place of forests, lakes, mountains and meadows. Not a place where English is the defacto language [sic] but a place where every European language, belief and tradition is valued. Each nation and each ethnicity was melded by their own environment and if they are to be protected so must their own environments

(Tarrant, 2019).

As is now well known, the Christchurch killer made extensive use of digital technology to broadcast his choreographed attack. Wearing a head-mounted camera (GoPro), he livestreamed his massacre via Facebook, ensuring its global recirculation. As content moderators began to remove the video from its various platforms, users edited it on YouTube, so it would escape detection—one popular YouTube personality recorded himself reading the manifesto aloud, allowing the video to circulate for 2 days before it was removed (Cox, 2019; Macklin, 2019). If the manifesto itself was a made-for-media text, its content—which included a mock ‘interview’ between the killer and himself—was equally an effort to manage the media narrative.

A devastating proof of the effective circulation of this manifesto of hatred was the mass shooting, 5 months later, of several people (including but not limited to Mexican immigrants) in El Paso, Texas, by a 21-year-old White man claiming The Great Replacement manifesto as his inspiration. Analysis of influences on the El Paso killer linked to the Pine Tree Party, a far-right eco-fascist group that advocates ‘back to nature’ nationalism in opposition to urbanism and centralised government (Shajkovi, 2020). Both the El Paso and the Christchurch killings additionally claimed inspiration from the massacre, in 2011, of 77 people, mostly teenagers, by a far-right radical in Norway. The Norway killer, Anders Breivik, indulged in beliefs in White Nordic peoples as a master race and argued for limits of ‘Third World’ populations.⁶

This Texas shooter also posted a manifesto to 8chan, and it circulated widely on the private social media channel Telegram.

... our lifestyle is destroying the environment of our country. The decimation of the environment is creating a massive burden for future generations ... I just want to say that I love the people of this country, but god damn most of y'all are just too stubborn to change your lifestyle. So the next logical step is to decrease the number of people in America using resources. If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can become more sustainable

(Latino Rebels, 2019).

The El Paso killer unwittingly brings forth another dimension of the quandary. In its drive to situate the threat to national belonging in the immigrant subject, the discourse of eco-nationalism sidesteps those economic measures and conditions that have in fact hastened environmental collapse: the continued fealty to market solutions to public problems; technological innovations instead of more sustainable patterns of living; and creative accounting instead of limits to overconsumption (Espinoza & Aronczyk, 2021; Goldstein, 2018, 2019). Eco-nationalism deliberately redirects attention away from economic issues, leaving intact capitalist structures designed for constant growth (Turner & Bailey, 2021). This strategic narrative is endemic to the recent history of (quasi-)ecological arguments for the protection or expansion of national identity and territory. (For instance, Ehrlich (1968) and Hardin (1968) glide over industrialization to focus on overpopulation.)

Goldstein (2019) observes that elements of the El Paso narrative are also present in a strain of American mainstream environmentalism, one that argues that because Americans are unwilling to change their lifestyles to limit their overuse of resources, responses to climate change must find alternative solutions that do not disrupt material prosperity (see also Aji, 2021). It is here that we see the emergence of industrial, entrepreneurial, technological and/or market-making solutions to climate problems—what Goldstein calls ‘planetary improvement’—an approach that ‘is less about improving the planet in some objective, ‘natural’ sense than it is about improving and sustaining a very distinct mode of inhabiting this planet, of making natures and organizing lives (human and nonhuman alike)’ (Goldstein, 2018: 13).

And it is here that we see the connection between ‘a green spirit of capitalism’ (Goldstein, 2018) and the ‘green spirit of nationalism’ of far-right claims. Both hold onto established political and economic structures that appear to favour their positions, promoting a version of national belonging that is not—in the context of the planetary climate crisis—sustainable, neither in its formulation nor its continued practice.

This helps us understand how eco-nationalism is a kind of nation branding—designed to maintain the primacy of markets and capital flows even as it claims to be intended for national sovereignty. Both are somewhat elitist as well in their orientations, privileging elite fractions (Goldstein, 2019). By distorting the principles of modern, Western

nationalism, eco-nationalism brings to the fore some of the intractable problems with both nationalist and environmentalist precepts: their tendencies toward elitism, hierarchical power, whiteness and techno-optimism.

5 | CONCLUSION: DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS

It is tempting to consider eco-nationalism as 'merely' strategic—that is, as an instrumental, deliberate or Machiavelian attempt to co-opt 'real' concern with the environment and transform it into electoral votes or justification for national enclosure. This is the approach adopted by some scholarly and journalistic observations about the so-called 'resurgence' of nationalism more broadly. For some, the problem with what has been misleadingly called the 'new nationalism' (Foreign Affairs, 2019) is that it is not really nationalism. Rather, they argue, the current era is dominated by 'populist poseurs' using the rhetoric and imagery of nationalism to gain support for their views (Müller, 2019: 35). These 'charlatans, stooges, and tyrants', as Lepore calls them (Lepore, 2019: 11), make claims to power as the true representatives of the people in contrast to establishment elites. They reinforce their position by calling out certain appearances or behaviour as inauthentic (e.g., anti-American). In this view, when populists gain power, either through elections or by other means, what they do is to 'perform a sort of nationalist pantomime of largely symbolic gestures' (Müller, 2019: 38) without really intending to do anything for the good of the entire national body.

In this schema, we could characterise eco-nationalist discourse as a means to a different end, as a resource of antagonism; or we could label it as propaganda and disregard it on that score. I wish to work against these tendencies. In this article, I chose to retain the label of *eco-nationalism* rather than its alternatives such as *eco-fascism* or *ecobordering*, to emphasise the fact that this phenomenon must be considered as *part of the discursive formation of nationalism* and not external to it (see Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Although it is clear that violence in the name of the nation cannot be justified, the position of good nationalism versus bad nationalism does not seem likely to persuade those who engage in it. Calling what these groups are doing a misuse of nationalism will not solve the problem. Although the pattern of us-vs-them thinking has long structured the discourse of nationalism, trying to enforce distinctions between posers and authentic speakers maintains this thinking rather than revealing its fallacies. Asking, 'who is the better nationalist' is the wrong question.

It is equally dangerous to succumb to the temptation of seeing the current era as fostering the 'wrong' kind of nationalism, with the 'right' kind espoused in terms of the liberal values of the European Union, the United Nations or other supranational or transnational organizations. In this understanding, the current antagonistic nationalism is the fault of ethnic groups spurred to revolt by a lack of access to power and a growing sense of economic, social and cultural inequality. It is also the fault of political leaders who appeal to primordial visions of the nation to demonise ethnic groups within their borders.⁷

As Calhoun (1997) has written, we cannot separate out 'good' from 'bad' nationalism but must see both as working along a spectrum of what gets called nationalism. The point is to observe and analyse what nationalism does in the world, and that—despite its intentions and limitations—includes these troubled narratives.

Herein lay the seeds of critique in connection with the theme of national promotion. Promotional narratives are, by definition, articulating a vision of the nation that is at once inclusive and exclusive; it is demarcating those populations, ideas or practices it wishes to gather around itself and those it wishes to distance or marginalise. Analysing eco-nationalism in terms of those elements that are within the narrative and those that are left out or made invisible is a key to recognising the parallels among so-called 'left' and 'right' or 'bad' and 'good' versions of nationalism.

For those of us invested in the implications of nation as ideology, as a set of interests and institutions and as a 'practical category' (Brubaker, 1994), the question confronting us today is how to define the root causes of these troubled times, and how our research might contribute to understanding and explaining them. At the same time, we are faced with a major paradox, which is that *it is precisely the promotion of claims in the name of the nation that is precipitating these troubled times*.

Here, perhaps, the urgency of climate change may present an opportunity. Although it is not feasible to declare the futility of national borders in the context of planetary destruction, it is essential to develop approaches that more

transparently reflect the ways that borders can metaphorically and literally disintegrate in the face of climate crises. More pragmatic would be a recognition of the role of sovereignty in transnational collective action to mitigate climate effects. Current efforts by intergovernmental bodies like the United Nations to allow 'nationally determined contributions' makes sense in the abstract; but in practice, as I describe above, it has rather resulted in a tournament of value by which states competitively assert their capacities while retaining their self-interest. This rationalised approach is not the collective action we need. It leaves intact the political and economic structures that have sat at the heart of the problem of climate inaction for decades.

Beyond discussions of sovereignty, may we imagine a collective response that takes into account the very nature of a public problem: to construct the environment as a matter of concern by which we are all affected? In this task, we have much to learn from projects of indigenous climate justice. Potawatomi relative Whyte (2020) argues for centring values of consent, trust, accountability and reciprocity in approaches to climate crises, values that are essential to justice-led coordination among institutions at national and extra-national levels. Yet, as he succinctly puts it, these values 'are necessary for taking urgent action that is just, but they cannot be established urgently' (2020: 2). Exacerbating the problem of time, Whyte points out, is 'how urgency and alarm are expressed problematically in climate change media, literatures, publicity, education, advocacy, research and political rhetoric and conflict' (2). The climate emergency framework has similarly enabled what Jamie Peck (2011) calls 'fast policy' integration: the legitimisation of neoliberal global governance templates aiming to 'solve' social problems at scale in the name of apparently urgently required intervention. If we do not privilege the slowness required to build relationships of trust and consent between vulnerable and powerful communities, we will increasingly lack forms of resistance to these technocratic and privatised models. As Whyte laments, it may already be too late.

In the ongoing study of the power of national discourse, our task is to heed the multiple, diverse and opposing frames of belonging that are currently being expressed. This can allow us to ask why and how people forge their claims at the level of the nation, what kinds of power this discourse offers and by what means and with what effects it is circulated, so that we might understand how to formulate a truly collective response.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For instance, if climate change deprives a state of key statehood criteria, such as territory, can it still be considered a state under international law?
- ² For one egregious example masquerading as academic research, see Arora et al. (2020).
- ³ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.
- ⁴ The original quote, in French: 'On touche à l'essentiel, le bonheur d'être Français, bien sur son territoire, bien dans son environnement, bien parmi les siens'. Translation by the author.
- ⁵ The killer also emailed the manifesto to the New Zealand prime minister, Jacinda Arden and to 70 media outlets. See Macklin, 2019.
- ⁶ The shooter in the May 2022 massacre of supermarket shoppers in Buffalo, New York, also claimed that immigration amounted to 'environmental warfare' (Aton, 2022).
- ⁷ Lars-Eric Cederman notes the role of nostalgia in some of these claims, where leaders (e.g., in Russia, Hungary or Turkey) invoke former glories of empire to justify repressive tactics (Cederman, 2019: 64–65).

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