Red/Brown Warnings

A Review of Peter Staudenmaier, "Ecology Contested: Environmental Politics Between Left and Right"

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Antifascist researcher Spencer Sunshine offers a critical look at ecofascism and Peter Staudenmaier's book, *Ecology Contested.*

The increasing embrace by White Supremacists of environmentalism, which they use to justify their racist ideologies—dubbed "ecofascism"—is on the lips of many today. This has been driven by its mention in the manifestos connected to White Supremacist massacres in El Paso, Texas and Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019; between the two, 74 were murdered. Additionally, the new interest paid by fascists in Ted Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber, also shows rising interest in this trend.

Because of this, historian and anarchist Peter Staudenmaier's book is a timely reminder that ecofascism is not just not a new problem, but also one that provides a bridge between the far-Right and the Left and anarchists. His book is a call, in the best radical environmental style, to blockade that bridge and stop fascists from entering radical circles.

Since the early 1990s Staudenmaier has been associated with the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE). The school was co-founded in 1974 by anarchist theoretician Murray Bookchin, and is best known for promoting what he dubbed social ecology—a fusion of Hegelianized Marxism, classical anarchism, and ecological thought. But ISE members have also been some of the earliest to warn anarchists about the danger of Red/Brown politics, especially in the radical environmental movement.

For example, Staudenmaier co-authored the 1995 book *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* with Janet Biehl. His half was one of the first treatments in English documenting the "green wing" of the original Nazi Party, clearly showing how the fascist embrace of environmentalism has a long history and impeccable pedigree. But—especially in the context of Bookchin's occasionally injudicious, and sometimes downright vicious, attacks on rival radical environmental currents—*Ecofascism* was controversial when it was published. Today it stands as a prescient warning of what was to come.

(The term "ecofascism" itself is muddy because of the different ways it's invoked. Staudenmaier, following the clear understanding of different far-Right factions which antifascist work requires, uses it to refer to genuine fascists who embrace environmentalism. Other leftists use it

to refer to all right-wingers who *oppose* environmentalism. Meanwhile, many conservatives use it to smear environmentalists themselves!)

Ecology Contested is yet another warning about the thriving postwar ecofascist currents. In the increasingly crowded field of writings about this subject, Staudenmaier's book stands out by its focus on the relationship between the Left and Right on environmentalism, but also anti-tech and animal rights politics. He does so by showing their overlapping theoretical, but also in some cases existing political, relationships. Like his 1995 book, *Ecology Contested* is sure to ruffle feathers. Some may even see it less as a warning of potential right-wing incursions and more as an attack on their own politics.

The five essays in this anthology were written over a period of two decades. The first and last ones, "The Politics of Nature from Left to Right" and "Blood and Soil Revived: Ecological Politics on the far-Right," provide copious examples of the history of these ideas on the far-Right, from the 19th century on. He focuses on the notion of "blood and soil," one of the main Nazi ideas the Alt Right later embraced (it was famously chanted in 2017 at Charlottesville) and which remains popular today.

In support of this, he documents a dizzying array of groups, spanning many decades and countries, which have embraced ecology and/or animal rights. Just some of these include both pre-and post-war Nazis and sympathizers in Britain and Germany (including Nazi agriculture minister Richard Walther Darré); crypto-fascist "National Anarchist" Troy Southgate; Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly Front National) in France; Casa Pound in Italy; the Nordic Resistance Movement in Sweden and Norway; and Golden Dawn in Greece. Last, U.S. groups include the multiple organizations in the Tanton Network, which influenced Donald Trump's administration; the White Order of Thule; and Richard Spencer's AltRight.com.

But still there are so many more examples. He does not address how a formerly imprisoned Earth Liberation Front activist, "Exile," became an Evolian fascist. And he only mentions Dave Foreman, one of the founders of the radical environmental movement Earth First!, in the footnotes. Foreman embraced anti-immigration politics and was pleased about the mass deaths of Ethiopians during a major famine in the 1980s.

Staudenmaier's short "Disney Ecology" from 1998 is aimed at misanthropic environmentalists who see nature as wild and pure, and humans as a cancer. Staudenmaier argues that this is a colonial viewpoint, a view that is widely acknowledged today. Rather than an 'untouched' wilderness discovered by Europeans, almost all of the areas seen this way had previously been occupied by indigenous people, who in turn formed and shaped the land—at least until their genocide.

But more importantly, the piece places front and center the nub of one of the book's main arguments: Staudenmaier holds that notions of a purity that must be defended is a theme found on both the Left and the Right, and as such can link the two in disturbing ways. The answers he offers to the criticisms he makes here, and elsewhere in the book, all draw from social ecology. And so, depending on their own attitudes about this theoretical perspective, readers will likely find them either compelling or annoying

Social ecology sees humans and the natural world as inescapably intertwined. Following this insight, Staudenmaier argues that philosophically separating humans and nature makes for a wrong-headed theory at best, while at worst harmonizes with fascist views. The answer to all these problems is the neo-Hegelian dialectic which drives social ecology: If humans can acknowl-

edge this reciprocal relationship, they have an opportunity to self-consciously create a social and ecological politics that brings (what only appear to be) two separate spheres into harmony.

The longest essay in *Ecology Contested*, "A Revolution Against Technology," was written in 2005 and revised in 2019. (In the interest of transparency, I provided feedback on the original version). It plumbs the intellectual origins of Ted Kaczynski, dubbed the Unabomber, who was imprisoned after engaging in a bombing campaign based on apocalyptic, anti-technological politics. Living in a remote cabin in Montana, between the 1970s and '90s his bombs killed three people and wounded about two dozen.

Staudenmaier wrote his investigation into Kaczynski's thought at a time when there was a wide breadth of speculation on it. The reason for this uncertainty was because Kaczynski carefully hid his intellectual progenitors in his manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," which the *New York Times* published in return for him agreeing to stop his campaign.

The essay correctly dismisses the argument that the origins of Kaczynski's thought are either in pure nihilism or leftist criticisms of modern industrial society. In particular, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, one of the most popular books in the 1960s New Left and similar in approach to Bookchin's early works, is defended from these accusations. Staudenmaier admits that there is "little direct evidence about what Kaczynski may have read," and therefore "such hypotheses remain speculative." Nevertheless, he places the origins of the manifesto's ideas in the anti-tech and anti-modernist strains of German far-Right thinkers associated with the Conservative Revolutionaries, who directly preceded the Nazis. Of these, the primary culprits fingered are Ludwig Klages, Oswald Spengler, and Friedrich Georg Jünger, who together forwarded a "reactionary critique of civilization." Staudenmaier claims that there are "too many telltale signs…to ignore Kaczynski's debt to right-wing thought."

Ultimately, Staudenmaier, like the others who tried to make sense of Kaczynski, was unable to decipher his theoretical pedigree—and for good reason. In a 2021 article, "The Unabomber and the Origins of Anti-tech Radicalism," Sean Fleming relied on previously unavailable archival material to identify three main influences, two of which came out of left field. Fleming concluded that the "Manifesto is a synthesis of ideas from three well known academics: French philosopher Jacques Ellul, British zoologist Desmond Morris, and American psychologist Martin Seligman." Ellul was the least surprising, and Staudenmaier did consider him as a possible influence, writing that wrote that his arguments were a "clear precursor" to Kaczynski. (However, Staudenmaier concluded that the differences between the two made the relationship inconclusive.)

Nonetheless, the evidence Staudenmaier marshaled to support his argument about the influence of reactionary politics remains important. Although Kaczynski occasionally called himself an anarchist, Staudenmaier foregrounds the right-wing nature of much of his thought, based on his own statements. This is especially important as Kaczynski has gained a following in the last few years among ecofascists, despite his own denunciation of them. According to Graham Macklin and Joshua Farrell-Molloy, ecofascists are drawn to him because his ideas reflect their interest in an anti-tech, völkisch worldview; a rejection of a modern decadent society through the use of violence; and anti-leftist views. He is frequently praised in writings and made into memes.

Staudenmaier foregrounds how Kaczynski sounds every bit like today's Republicans who denounce an illusory notion of 'antifa,' using it as a catch-all to include everything from Nancy Pelosi to (post) insurrectionist anarchists. Kaczynski denounces the Left as a whole, a label which he says encompasses "socialists, collectivists, 'politically correct' types, feminists, gay and disabil-

ity activists, animal rights activists, and the like." Staudenmaier points out that he also condemns "sexual perversion" and reserves "a special animosity for feminism."

Staudenmaier also takes this opportunity to tie Kaczynski to three strands of anarchist thought he opposes: Stirnerite individualism, anti-leftism, and primitivism. Supporters and sympathizers who are named and shamed include *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed (AJODA)*, Bob Black, and of course John Zerzan, who championed Kaczynski after his arrest.

So while Staudenmaier's speculative piece does not stand as intellectual history, it explains much about why Kaczynski's thought has been embraced by a new wave of very online fascists. Here, Staudenmaier is convincing that, at least on social issues, Kaczynski easily has more in common with the ecofascist crowd then, say, anarcho-primitivists like Zerzan, who—and this is a good thing!—show their leftist origins by embracing feminism, sexual liberation, and anti-racism.

The book's most contentious piece is undoubtedly "The Ambiguity of Animal Rights," a critique of animal rights/animal liberation (he uses the two terms interchangeably), which received pushback even inside the ISE. The heyday of these politics among anarchists was in the 1990s, soon before the essay's original publication in 2003. Staudenmaier recognizes this, and starts by taking great care to separate his intellectual critique from his respect for his comrades, including fellow social ecologists.

The piece is hampered by an uneven kitchen sink approach. Staudenmaier is critical of animal-rights narratives, describing them as politically confused. He condemns elements within the milieu for being liberal, self-righteous, anti-humanist, colonialist, racist, classist, Western elitist, parochial, and—perhaps the ultimate insult—phylumist (the privileging of animals with a central nervous system).

The essay would have been a much stronger if he had left most of these out and concentrated on two approaches. The first, as with the other essays, is his marshaling of historical examples of how fascists, including the Nazis but also latter day groups, embraced animal rights.

(My personal "favorite" of these was his recounting of the "hardline" subgenre of straight-edge hardcore; it brought back a flood of repressed memories of the Dayton, Ohio scene in 1993 and 1994. Hardline insisted on veganism, abstaining from drugs and alcohol, homophobia, and opposition to abortion; those in the scene also played terrible music and sported even worse fashion. It was rumored that hardline kids would roll drunk people leaving Dayton bars. True or not, it was definitely in the spirit of their approach.)

The second of approach which I found the most compelling was that animal rights draws a problematic line by attributing rights to certain animals while ignoring smaller living creatures like micro-organisms, as well as things that are commonly seen as 'non-sentient,' like trees, rocks, rivers, and ecosystems. From an ecological perspective, Staudenmaier rightfully points out the interconnection of all animals and organisms, a pillar of social ecology. Yet his answer falls short because he doesn't present how social ecology would theorize or resolve the concerns of animal rights activists.

Overall, this short book—I read it in about five hours—is strongest as a warning about fascism's environmental wing and its appeal to those outside its ideological quarters. It conclusively provides numerous examples for the unconvinced, and contains important warnings for activists who are not right-wingers but are enamored by figures such as Kaczynski. In particular, Staudenmaier's careful discussion of the similarity between Kaczynski's ideas and far-Right thought is illuminating, and even the animal rights essay raises a few good points. Last, *Ecology Contested*

shows that Bookchin's influence today is not solely limited to Rojava and direct democracy. As Staudenmaier so clearly illustrates, it extends into the realm of antifascism as well.

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