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Volk utopia: Racial futures and ecological politics on the German far-right

Geoforum special issue contribution: Political ecologies of the future

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the resurgence of so-called *völkisch* (ethno-nationalist) settlements in northern Germany over the past three decades, this paper explores the emergent socio-spatial forms through which nativist and xenophobic responses to the ecological crisis are being expressed. It argues that political ecologies of the future cannot be understood, in the present conjuncture, without taking into account those actors which are working to manifest the future in explicitly racialised and immunitary forms. After providing an overview of the development of *völkisch* movements and ideologies since the 19th century, I introduce contemporary actors and organisations which are attempting to reconfigure the climate crisis as a matter of right-wing concern. These strategies position Nature as a signifier that stitches together far-right concerns about the infiltration of the German *Volk* and landscape by racialised threats, facilitating a form of ecological praxis through rural settlement projects that is heavily centred around a homogenous and naturalised notion of German identity. Rather than an outright denial of the impending urgency of the climate crisis, I argue that *völkisch* discourses represent a different, and arguably more dangerous response to the spectre of ecological disorder, and one which works in an immunological and anticipatory register. The affective intensity of these imaginaries and strategies also demonstrate that the terrains of hope, possibility, and even utopia increasingly hold the potential to be claimed by the violent and exclusivist ideologies of the far-right. No mere harbinger of ‘things to come’, *völkisch* strategies represent a mode of responding to the climate crisis in the present, and of prefiguring an ethno-nationalist ‘solution’ which must be taken seriously by activists and scholars.

1. Introduction

As the climate crisis deepens, and denialism becomes a more untenable political–ecological position, certain sections of the European far-right are formulating new articulations of ecology which are compatible with xenophobic and ethno-nationalist ideologies. An emerging literature is beginning to explore these political ecologies of the far-right (Daggett, 2018; Forchtner, 2020; Lubarda, 2020; Malm and the Zetkin Collective, 2021; Bosworth, 2022; Menga, 2022), accompanied by a growing awareness in popular media of the potential affinities between far-right and environmentalist thought (Ajl, 2019; NoiseCat, 2019; Milman, 2021). In this vein, this paper focuses on the recent resurgence of so-called *völkisch* movements in Germany as a way of empirically interrogating a political ecology of far-right ecological futures.

The term ‘*völkisch*’ has specific connotations within Romantic and radical nationalist thought in Germany, and derives from the noun *Volk*, which carries more ethno-centric and organicist connotations than the

English equivalents of ‘people’ or ‘folk’. The adjective is imperfectly translated into English as ‘ethno-nationalist’, or ‘ethno-populist’. In this context the term names a specific modality of far-right German-speaking politics for which the organic unity of the ‘*Volk*’ and its corresponding natural landscapes is a central motif. This politics is increasingly being actualised through an agrarian praxis of ‘*Landnahme*’ or colonisation, inspired by organicist principles of *Heimat* (habitat-homeland) and *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil), and which involves retreating to settlements in sparsely populated regions to pursue ‘racially-appropriate’ lifestyles closer to nature (von Schnurbein, 2016; Röpke and Speit, 2019). The *völkisch* organisations I explore here form part of a broader German far-right enjoying a resurgence in the past decade (Brennetot, 2020; Havertz, 2021), and which extends from right-populist parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to ‘defence leagues’ such as Pegida, to militant networks openly advocating violence and civil unrest. The ideological motif which unites these various groups is the immunological notion of a homogenous German identity which is under threat, either from cultural decline or biological extinction. Following

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Cas [Mudde \(2019\)](#), the term ‘far-right’ is understood to encompass both the ‘radical right’, which accepts the authority of the liberal-democratic state but works within it to pursue a right-wing agenda, and the ‘extreme right’, which rejects this institutional framework altogether. The *völkisch* movements explored here can broadly be characterised as extreme-right due to their militant xenophobia and rejection of democratic principles, though their diffuse nature and hostility to standard extreme-right political tactics makes them more difficult to classify than conventional political parties or action groups.

While emerging out of, and drawing upon a long history of extreme-right organising in Germany, these groups are also firmly oriented towards a racial futurity which animates and structures much of their present activism. The pursuit of ‘racially-appropriate’ lifestyles and ethno-nationalist organising in the here and now is always implicitly seen as an investment in the future health of the *Volk* community, while anxieties about future extinction or replacement are powerful affective engines for political action which immunises the population from this undesirable future state. The concrete strategies of *völkisch* activists thus allow us to interrogate how far-right attempts to prefigure a racially immunised socio-ecological configuration are currently unfolding, and how the present and future exist in a complex reciprocal relationship within this ideology. In conceptualising a *völkisch* political ecology of the future in this way, this paper avoids a division between ‘critical realism in the here and now’ versus ‘speculative explorations of the future’. Departing instead from the acknowledgement that imagined future geographies are constitutively constrained by their standpoint in the present, and that empirical analysis always contains assumptions about temporality and futurity ([Braun, 2015](#)), it seeks to explore how modes of future-making are being embedded within far-right ideologies and practices, and what this means for undesirable futures-to-come (see [Bluwstein and De Rosa, this issue](#)). Though the *völkisch* movements are a particular example, originating in German Romanticism and early 19th century nationalism, it is suggested that their discourses and strategies remain indicative of the broader manner in which nationalist and conservative thought may attempt to secure and immunise its target populations from the dislocations associated with the Anthropocene and the climate crisis.¹

The paper thus also draws upon and develops a burgeoning array of literature addressing the ‘political ecologies of the far-right’, work which explores both the tenacious attachment of many far-right formations to extractivist and fossil fuel infrastructural imaginaries, but also the (re)emerging alliances some actors are forging through ecological or ‘green’ nationalisms. The analysis of *völkisch* ecological politics presented here contributes more to the latter side of this debate (though drawing on some key insights from the former), while advocating for a greater attention to how discursive reconfigurations of ecology on the right are enabling a range of disconcerting forms of nationalist ecological practice. Connecting with the broader aims of the special issue, it seeks to understand how the biopolitical nature of many far-right ecological discourses galvanises a form of pre-figurative, future-oriented immunitary practice which is actively calling new exclusionary ecological formations into being in the form of *völkisch* settlement projects.²The affective

¹ The term ‘Anthropocene’ is used in a qualified sense throughout this paper, in light of extensive debates in and beyond political ecology about the politics of this term, including around periodisation ([Gergan et al., 2020](#)), implications of a common *Anthropos* universally affected by climate violence ([Tuana, 2019](#)), the period’s origins in colonisation and the rise of capitalism ([Malm and Hornborg, 2015](#)), and the search for alternative definitions ([Haraway, 2016](#); [Mendieta, 2019](#)). The term is thus used to index the multiple, overlapping and unevenly distributed socio-ecological crises that characterise the present moment.

² This case study draws upon indispensable work already long underway among German civil society organisations; see reports on *völkisch* activism by the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung ([Schmidt, 2019](#)), the Heinrich Böll Stiftung ([2012](#); [2020](#)), and [FARN \(2019; 2021\)](#).

appeal to racialised landscape imaginaries and an organic notion of the *Volk* as intimately interwoven with the health and purity of the natural world thus enables a narration of existential threats to the nation in expressly ecological terms, as well as a return to (symbolic and material) nature as a key strategy in underwriting future national immunity.

The following section provides an overview of recent debates on the relationship between the far-right and the natural environment, before introducing the conceptual literatures around race, futurity, and biopolitics which will be used to theorise some of the key processes at work in *völkisch* ideology and ecological practice. The paper then provides a historical overview of the emergence of *völkisch* politics in Germany, outlining how an ecological imaginary of the nation became embedded in its ideology, before examining contemporary far-right actors which continue to mobilise around this idea of the *Volk*. [Section 5](#) analyses this ideology through a selection of qualitative data from print and online sources associated with the *völkisch* settler movement in Germany, while the conclusion reflects on what these developments might portend for a future ecological politics in the Anthropocene.

2. Political ecologies of the far-right

The proliferation of alliances, appropriations, and reconfigurations at the intersection of ecology and the far-right has already begun to be closely analysed in a body of literature which I label ‘political ecologies of the far-right’. Though not an exhaustive review, this section outlines some of the key conceptual arguments made within this growing field. Recent attention to this specific relationship was preceded by a range of interdisciplinary scholarship exploring the more general use of ecological rationales to justify xenophobic and/or authoritarian ways of thinking: appeals to a pristine national environment under threat from flows of migrant bodies ([Subramaniam, 2001](#); [Neumayer, 2006](#)), the narration of ‘the border’ as an ecological principle ([Hultgren, 2015](#); [Turner and Bailey, 2021](#)), and the invocation of Malthusian arguments around resource scarcity and ecosystem stress to advocate for population controls on invariably racialised and geographically distanced others ([Robertson, 2012](#); [Ojeda et al., 2020](#); [Schultz, 2021](#)).

Exploring how these issues have emerged in the German context, [Biehl and Staudenmaier \(1995\)](#), [Geden \(1996\)](#) and [Olsen \(1999\)](#) have traced the shifting status of ecology as an electoral and social movement issue on the far-right through the second half of the 20th century, finding that it provided cover for the strategic reconfiguration of older fascist political objectives. In this vein, [Forchtner and Kølvrå \(2015, 2017](#); see also [Forchtner, 2019](#)) explore more recent environmental communication around nature by the German far-right, particularly how issues like rurality, food, animal rights, and biodiversity are narrated through a nationalist lens. In their study of far-right print cultures, and magazines such as *Umwelt&Aktiv* (Environment and Active), [Forchtner and Özvatan \(2020: 227\)](#) observe a ‘topos of naturalness’ which mobilises arguments from nature to endorse or discredit particular social arrangements. Forchtner’s edited volume *The Far Right and the Environment* brings together valuable international (though still global north-centred) perspectives on what [Lubarda \(2020\)](#) calls ‘far-right ecologism’, tackling ‘the non-uniformity of the far-right’s concerns over the natural environment’ ([Forchtner, 2020: 7](#)).

This literature covers an array of case studies which shed light on far-right appropriations of ecological themes through formal political institutions, including national and European-level parties, think tanks, parliamentary debates, and the communication around these fora. I argue that while this ‘discourse-historical approach’ ([Wodak, 2020](#)) yields useful comparative insights, it remains largely confined to a discursive and institutional analysis, neglecting how these discourses are enacted and territorialised through symbolically-charged ecological practices. It also risks overlooking how these ideas of nature can become re-constituted through political action – a new opposition articulated, a different element emphasised, a latent potential radicalised – in ways that prefigure new ecologies into being. This is not to discount the

importance of discourses, or to draw up a binary divide between ‘ideology’ and ‘practice’, but rather to direct attention to how these discourses become *performative* through their imbrication into particular modes of future-making. The question of how spaces of possibility for action are opened up by these shifts in political discourse hangs ominously over the current conjuncture, and it is precisely towards this question that the present paper hopes to contribute.

From a different theoretical angle, Daggett’s feminist historical-materialist reading of petro- and eco-modern masculinities places investments in gendered identity formation at the heart of modern energy regimes, and illuminates how the ‘authoritarian desires and anxieties aroused by the Anthropocene’ are central to diverse forms of ecological action (Daggett, 2018: 29; see also Daggett, 2022). Likewise, Hultman and Pulé (2018) draw out the function of masculinity in animating climate change denial (see also Krange et al., 2018), but also new forms of ‘solutionist’ eco-modernism. This reading of how ideal gendered forms are co-produced alongside energy regimes reveals how very different configurations of socio-ecological practice (ecological modernisation, fossil fuel worship, organic localism) can be animated by remarkably similar anxieties about shoring up masculinist identities. This paper embraces this emphasis on the importance of patriarchy in far-right discourses and practices around nature, whether these are denialist or pro-ecological, and these concerns bear particular relevance to the far-right ideas of racial reproduction and future-making later in the discussion.

Another optic used to explore the far-right-ecological interface is authoritarian populism, elaborated in McCarthy’s (2019) special issue. These papers explore the role of extractivist regimes in underpinning authoritarian forms of governance, and address the ‘dangerous links between ideas about the environment and ideas about governance in the authoritarian and populist turn’ (ibid: 306). Another forum convened by Menga (2022) explores the related question of ‘populist ecologies’, extending its scope to questions of housing, food, infrastructure, and digital media as they relate to right-wing populist positions. This paper differs from these perspectives in a number of respects: the specifically *völkisch* political logic explored here does not so much aim to stage a confrontation between a ‘people’ and an ‘elite’ (as in the liberal model of ‘populism’), but rather to re-ground this very notion of ‘the people’ through a biological and ecological idiom, and to embed this organicist imaginary into future-oriented modes of practice. Likewise, this ideology complicates conventional understandings of ‘authoritarianism’ (cf. Koch, 2019) by claiming to derive authority directly from a harmonious ideal of nature – what Olsen (1999: 35) terms ‘eco-authoritarianism’ – thus fusing ideas about social organisation with a conservative reading of ‘natural order’.

A growing number of popular interventions from within and beyond the academy (Ajl, 2019; Klein, 2019; Out of the Woods collective, 2020; Malm and the Zetkin Collective, 2021; Moore and Roberts, 2022), have also been crucial in bringing these issues to the attention of broader publics. The main focus of Malm and the Zetkin Collective is on what they term ‘fossil fascism’, the set of alliances between far-right actors and the fossil fuel industry, but their survey also offers thoughtful reflections on far-right ecologies beyond climate denialism, such as emerging forms of green nationalism or eco-fascism. However, their account regards such attempts to ground extreme-right arguments in nature with a degree of scepticism, due to the latter’s essentialisation of the natural world and their lack of ‘any perception of *social drivers of environmental degradation*’ (ibid: 462, original emphasis), thus failing to meet a minimum definition of true environmentalism. Indeed, critique is levelled at Forchtner and contributors for taking far-right ecological statements at face value, and for ‘alleging ... that ecology is *at the core of nationalism*’ (ibid: 469, original emphasis). This paper is more inclined to regard forms of ecological nationalism as one *potential* articulation of nature-society relations that anti-fascists must contend with; one which activates a particular intellectual genealogy and understanding of the natural world, but which is no less operative compelling for its adherents

as a result. Accepting as much does not mean having to make concessions to hoary right-libertarian arguments about an ‘authoritarian dark side’ lurking within the climate movement, but rather should remind us that political, cultural and social ideas are inextricable from any imagination of ‘the natural’ (a point long maintained by political ecologists; see Braun and Castree, 1998). Indeed, Swyngedouw (2011: 257) reminds us of nature’s function as an ‘empty signifier’, an idea which is ‘inherently slippery, show[ing] a stubborn refusal to fixate meaning consistently and durably’. Ecology possesses no *inherent* political meaning or orientation, but can be made to align with an exclusionary politics of blood-and-soil *völkisch* nationalism as much as a left-liberal ethics of cosmopolitan coexistence. This only underlines the importance for a progressive ecological politics to embed an emancipatory vision of social and intergenerational justice into the heart of its practice. This question of ecological futures and their political stakes is taken up further in the next section.

3. Race, biopolitics and futurity

This paper draws upon geographical understandings of biopolitics to understand *völkisch* nationalism not simply as a xenophobic racism invested in ‘othering’ distant populations, or an overzealous attachment to a fictitious national entity, but rather as a political ideology which establishes the *Volk* as a particular object of governance and affective investment. This population must have its wellbeing and security guaranteed by being immunised against both internal and external threats, whether these take the form of refugee movements, the volatilities of the global economy, multiculturalism, or the socio-ecological implications of climate change. This section also explores how notions of futurity underwrite these immunological drives, both as a speculative and imaginative terrain, and as an imperative towards anticipatory action in the present.

Geographers and political ecologists have critiqued the immunitary logics within the field of environmental governance by drawing on the work of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (1998; 2008), who understands ‘immunity’ as a core function of modern biopolitics. Campbell (2008: xi) interprets Esposito’s concept of *immunitas* as a condition of being ‘exonerated from reciprocal gift-giving’, and locates this as a central imperative directing the governance of (post)modern populations (see also Neocleous, 2022). Critiques of the ‘resilience paradigm’ (Kaïka, 2017; Gressgård, 2017; Ranganathan and Bratman, 2021), for example, have mobilised this strand of biopolitical thought to contest the shifting of responsibility for climate adaptation onto communities, and how this ‘elid[es] the structural inequalities that make particular groups vulnerable to climate threats in the first place’ (ibid: 116). Scholars have also explored the mechanisms and processes through which particular modes of risk management, uncertainty and ‘turbulence’ have come to govern the ways that states and corporations think about the future (Cooper, 2010; Amoore, 2013; Neyrat, 2015). In this context, individualised biopolitical subjects are formed, which are encouraged to think about their own health and wellbeing in these very same terms, to ‘invest’ in their own bodies in order to ward off future threats (Mansfield, 2012). In light of the increasing normalisation of logics of individual and community immunisation across numerous domains of environmental and political governance (Bird and Short, 2017; Harper, 2020; Cole and Dodds, 2021), the *völkisch* actors analysed below must be considered in relation to these broader biopolitical apparatuses and logics. Luger (2022: 2) highlights the importance of such a relational approach, arguing that geographers would benefit from ‘asking bigger and broader questions about the planetary transformations underway in the Anthropocene, and how these shifts relate to daily productions of space and life at the microscale’.

Geographers have also drawn on the theorisations of Fanon (1963) and Mbembe (2003) to highlight how the immunisation and optimisation of life *within* a given polis is necessarily premised upon the increasing exposure to death *outside* of its borders, thus incorporating an

attentiveness to the 'necro' or the 'thanato' as necessary counterpoints to the 'bio' (Katz, 2015). This is particularly relevant in relation to ecological issues, where 'smart' and sustainable governance in one place is often directly premised on ongoing extraction and exposure to harm throughout other geographies (Braun, 2007). Geographers have explored this uneven production of life and exposure to death in a range of empirical sites from uranium mines (DeBoom, 2021) to conservation zones (Cavanagh and Himmelfarb, 2015; Bluwstein et al., this issue), advancing an understanding of hegemonic eco-modernist solutions as being premised on 'a generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations' (Mbembe, 2003: 14). Its analysis of the ways in which declarations of the Anthropocene are used to legitimise this kind of violence against racialised populations is summarised by DeBoom's (2021) theorisation of 'climate necropolitics'. In the context of climate change, this framework seeks to disrupt an implicit scaling of the Anthropocene as a global process/phenomenon, and redirect attention to the specific socio-spatialities of violence which constitute its emergence (Silver, 2018). This article remains aligned with DeBoom's (2021: 901) intention of 'analyzing the implications of Anthropocenic imaginaries for the distribution of climate change-related violence'. Specifically, it seeks to bring this bio-necro-political lens to bear on the ways in which particular effects of climate change can become perceived and filtered through ethno-national terms. It uses this literature to understand the racialised construction of 'crisis' and threat (Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2018), as well as the constitutive absences and 'outsides' of those racial futurities so widely informing present-day action.

In this vein, Smith and Vasudevan (2017: 211) assert that political life is currently 'figured as a battle for a particular kind of future; in fact, the future is the term of the battle itself'. Given the centrality of preservation and reproduction within state-sanctioned security discourses (Neocleous, 2008), futurity must thus be regarded as lying at the heart of biopolitical practice, as its *raison d'être*. This holds also at the subjective level, as portrayals of future threats function extremely efficiently as disciplinary devices, where 'the future is mobilised as making urgent and pressing demands on the present, often based in anticipatory fear' (Smith and Vasudevan, 2017: 214). Indeed, the notion of anticipation has been one of the ways in which these biopolitical modes of relating to the future can be understood. Anderson (2010: 777-8) provides a strikingly simple definition of anticipatory action as 'acting in advance of the future', entailing a 'paradoxical process whereby the future becomes cause and justification for some form of action in the here and now'. Under this rubric of anticipatory action, a range of imagined future states-to-come become enrolled within securitising logics which aim to ensure the maintenance of certain forms of life at the expense of others; in Wang's (2017: 264) terms, 'temporality itself [becomes] constitutive of politics in the present, and it is precisely the collapsing of the past and the future that distinguishes the contemporary mode of biopolitics'. This aligns with the ontological shift scholars have observed within governance and security apparatuses from linear, equilibrium-based ways of thinking about time, to ones oriented around complexity, emergence, and non-linearity (Cooper, 2010; Bluwstein et al., this issue). Rather than a linear time, with history lying in one direction and the future in another, this anticipatory temporality represents a way of thinking about time as a 'folding of futures and pasts into a present where, in turn, futures are constantly being produced' (Anderson and Adey, 2012: 1530).

In turn, and of particular relevance for the present discussion, scholars have also noted that these anticipatory and future-oriented biopolitical logics are deeply dependent on and constitutive of racialised ways of thinking and governing. In this context, for Smith and Vasudevan, race and the future are inseparable: 'framings of race are crucially about shaping the future, and likewise, future imaginaries are central to present biopolitical operations' (2017: 211). Moreover, Anderson et al. (2020: 630) note that anticipatory and emergency governance are fundamentally concerned with securing some forms of

life at the expense of others, allowing 'some (white) subjects to claim protections from the state ... and withhold[ing] the possibility of this claim from other (Black/Indigenous) subjects' (see also Hartman, 1997; Povinelli, 2011). Baldwin (2012: 174, original emphasis) therefore argues for an understanding of geographies of whiteness as 'a function not just of the past but of the future', regarding the former approach as disregarding 'the ways in which the future is very often *already present* in the present not as a discrete ontological time-space, but as an absent or virtual presence that constitutes the very meaning of the present'. This becomes starkly clear in the later analysis as modes of articulating a German ethnic identity in the present are fundamentally grounded in a constructed threat located in and deferred to the future; they make the future 'present' through an imagination of racial extinction-to-come.

Baldwin also draws attention to how the underlying construction of white racial identity exists as a function of time. Drawing upon Hall's (2000) differentiation between biological and cultural racism, we can critique the essentialist idea of 'difference' being regarded as an outcome of natural and cultural history respectively, of development trajectories beyond the sphere of politics. Within this schema, whiteness disavows its very connectedness with other identities, 'account[ing] for its existence not through any constitutive relation with an Other, but through genetics, common ancestry and/or national history' (Baldwin, 2012: 179). Building on Kobayashi and Peake's (2000: 399) call to 'recognize racialization as fundamental to social formation', Dwyer and Jones (2000) deploy the term 'white socio-spatial epistemology' to critique how whiteness is removed from the entanglements of space and society, to be seen instead as deriving its essence from a historical continuity whose future preservation it is imperative to guarantee. Indeed, this is a trope which cuts across numerous domains of white nationalist rhetoric and drives a pervasive fear of 'ethnic extinction' (Bhatt, 2020). This preoccupation with preservation also forms the basis of Edelman's (2004: 11) problematisation of the 'futurism' of western liberal societies, which is animated by a 'fantasmatic... figure of the Child' and produces a kind of conservative ethics which secures the future at the expense of the present. The child as 'universalising subject' of liberal political discourse finds its parallel in far-right figurations of youth as the horizon of political struggle (and seen in this light, it is no coincidence that two of the 'fourteen words' of the infamous white nationalist credo are 'future' and 'children'). In this way, close attention needs to be paid to the continuities in forms of white-nationalist and liberal modes of future-making, and the extent to which a shared vocabulary of (ethno)preservation can cut across seemingly disparate forms of political thought and action.

Alongside this temporal dimension through which the safeguarding of the future is 'always purchased at our expense' in the present (ibid: 4), it is also important to consider how the ability to imagine, perform and lay claim to the future is unevenly distributed in global space. Thinking with Anderson et al. (2020: 623), and echoing the bio-necro-political vocabulary elaborated above, we can understand biopolitical governance apparatuses as producing and shoring up a '(white) liberal subject that anticipates a future of growth, change, development and becoming', while simultaneously constructing racially marked subjects held in states of suspension, exception, stagnation, or decline. As Hannah (2011: 1048) argues in this vein, 'the luxury of individual life-engineering is premised on sovereign interventions in poorer parts of the world aimed at prophylactically altering futures'. The case study explored here illustrates how these biopolitical rationalities, far from being the preserve of sovereign power, are increasingly becoming 'democratised' and decentralised beyond formal state structures through racialised modes of being among the general population (Rose, 2001; Goldberg, 2008). Furthermore, these movements do not figure the relationship between the present racial community and its future incarnation in a purely instrumental way, as a desired end-state to be invested in now, but rather as a transhistorical essence, and each particular manifestation of this essence must play its part in nurturing and sustaining it. The political valence of this imaginary is highlighted

by Christopher Clark's (2019: 199) comments on the Nazis' conception of time, that 'a temporality centred on the *Volk* – not as a population, but as a transhistorical racial essence – was likely by nature to be non-progressive and non-developmental'. The next section seeks to ground these conceptual ideas about race, nature and temporality in a historical narrative which contextualises their emergence in 19th century *völkisch* nationalism, and their relation to environmentalist politics.

4. Historical geographies of the *völkisch* movement

4.1. The emergence of *völkisch* ecologies

What has become known as the *völkisch* movement by historians (Puschner et al., 1996) was a collection of romantic nationalist ideas and organisations originating in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. In some ways, this movement represented a romantic backlash to an understanding of urban and industrial modernity that they perceived to be erosive of German national and cultural identity. But they also worked concertedly to produce images, representations, ideals, and narratives of that identity through a range of channels and strategies (Leerssen, 2013).

The *völkisch* organisations in question were diverse in character and are not easily assimilable under a single banner, though all of them coalesced around a desire to preserve and celebrate the imagined entity of the German *Volk*. They included relatively organised political structures such as the Pan-German League (Jackisch, 2012), small newspapers and circulars such as *Heimdall* and *Hammer* (Puschner, 1999), agrarian associations such as the Artaman League and the Association for the Eastern Marches (Eley, 1991), and a variety of other voluntary associations or *Vereine* (a key institution of bourgeois life in Wilhelmine Germany, see Nipperdey, 1976). Historian of the *völkisch* movement Uwe Puschner notes its character as an 'umbrella movement', coordinating a number of social and political currents towards a common objective of ethno-national preservation and renewal. Furthermore, the outbreak of the First World War created a sharp break between the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras of *völkisch* organisation, the latter more fragmented but militarised by the terms of the war's conclusion, leading Puschner to speak not of a unified *völkisch* movement, but of movements in the plural.

Advocates of *völkisch* nationalism stemmed largely from the so-called *Mittelstand* classes - educated professionals, teachers, jurists, and Protestant members of the petit bourgeoisie (Chickering, 1984; Puschner, 1999: 379). The movement therefore displayed overlaps with other bourgeois cultural currents and lifestyle practices, such as outdoors groups, hikers, *Lebensreform* clubs that embraced nudity and fitness culture, birdwatchers, local environmentalists, and youth movements (Linse, 1983; Gordon, 2000; Wedemeyer-Kolwe, 2004). These activities attracted people of a wide range of political orientations, and were by no means predestined for association with a nationalist politics; a case first had to be made that advocates of these heterogeneous pastimes had something in common. This attempt to craft a wide-ranging national-cultural mission is epitomised by an appeal made by the writer Ernst Hunkel in the *völkisch* journal *Heimdall* in 1904. Appealing to what he termed an '*allddeutsch-völkisch*' (pan-German *völkisch*) mentality, the article called upon:

'Agricultural, artistic, social, economic reformers, Bismarck-, Wagner-, Gobineau- and Chamberlain-followers, naval advocates, pope opponents, Antisemites, Heimat protectors, language purifiers, morality protectors, spirit warriors, Volk educators and whichever names they take; we can use all these people, and they must turn to us' (Puschner et al., 1996: xi)

This attempt to hegemonise the interests of environmentalists, teachers and Wagner enthusiasts under a single banner points to a particular type of integrative ideology. In contrast to the instrumentalism, rationalism, and materialism perceived to characterise secular modern thought, *völkisch* ideologies sought a much more holistic

ontology, desiring 'an inward correspondence between the individual, the native soil, the *Volk*, and the universe' (Mosse, 1964: 6). Adherents of this ideology often mobilised a vitalist language of soil and the earth, where a deep embeddedness in regional landscapes was figured as an antidote to the disenchantment of modern life, and served as a gateway to participation in the authentic spiritual life of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Many literary and intellectual representatives of the movement valorised a (bourgeois) construction of 'peasant values', characterised by authenticity, integrity, and possession of practical ecological knowledge (Dohnke, 1996). A distinct genre of peasant literature emerged in this vein in the later 19th century, culminating in Hermann Löns's emblematic work in this tradition, *Der Wehrwolf*, which presents the Thirty Years War as a period of rupture when peasants re-discovered their primal instincts through war, breaking free from the shackles of early modern civilisation (Mosse, 1964: 25). This blend of romantic, localist and organicist beliefs created a seemingly natural basis for defining membership in the national community; in a circular logic, those who lived in the countryside and understood its rhythms were true Germans, while only true Germans could connect with the landscape in this way in the first place. This also provided a pretext for the exclusion of groups considered to be less 'rooted' in place, or who were attached to different (inferior) natural environments.

Predictably, this feverish preoccupation with the purity and authenticity of the ethnic community came to be channelled outwards against racialised 'others' who threatened to infiltrate the ranks of this *Volksgemeinschaft* (or, it was feared, had already done so). This tendency was most visibly manifest through antisemitism, with the figure of the Jew coming to stand in for modern industrial society as such, but also through animosity towards eastern European ethnic groups and so-called 'Asiatic' peoples threatening to 'inundate' the Reich from the East (Puschner, 1999; Nelson, 2010). Though vernacular antisemitism was always a latent force within the movement, *völkisch* organisations took a distinctly antisemitic turn towards the turn of the century. This was inspired by key thinkers such as Theodor Fritsch's (1907) reading of Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, as well as by broader socio-political changes such as the relaxing of the anti-socialist laws in 1890 and the success of the Marxist Social Democratic Party, providing fuel for nationalist anxieties about a 'Jewish-Bolshevik' strategy. The influence of Gobineau and Chamberlain in particular gave the *völkisch* groups the conceptual vocabulary to speak about race and identity in biological terms, marking a break with previous ways of defining identity that foregrounded language, history, or culture. In a context of perceived social homogenisation, and the assimilation of Jews into German public life, a new essentialist schema for differentiating 'true Germans' from other *Völker* was deemed necessary (Blackbourn, 2006). The spread of biological metaphors for understanding human identity and difference thus created a strong potential for slippage between the idea of an unpolluted *Heimatland* and a pure and essentialised body politic – traditional nationalist claims now became articulatable through a language of invasion, extinction, and contamination.

Blackbourn (2006) explains that the decades after Germany's unification in 1871 were characterised by a marked ambiguity around the idea of progress and modernisation. Artisans and tradespeople felt threatened by the growth of urban industry, while conservative and educated Germans fretted about the forces of modernity ushering in an age of materialism and moral malaise. Symbols of technological development, from the railway to the city, became conduits for moral and aesthetic critique, portrayed as spaces and infrastructures anathema to the notion of a *Volk* rooted in place and enjoying close connections with its natural landscapes (Mosse, 1964). A sense of *Großstadtfeindschaft*, or anti-urbanism, became a common trope in art and literature (Bergmann, 1970), embodied by Wilhelm Raabe's *Der Hungerpastor* (1864), a novel about a provincial pastor repulsed by the moral degeneration of Berlin, or Wilhelm von Polenz's *Der Büttnerbauer* (1895), a peasant tragedy whose protagonist becomes indebted to a wealthy Jewish industrialist and forecloses on his land, before hanging himself from a tree

overlooking his old homestead.³ Genuine critiques of alienation, environmental exploitation and other socio-ecological consequences of urban modernity become captured and combined here with racialised paranoia and a pervasive cultural pessimism.

It is against this context that the notion of *Heimat*, meaning ‘habitat’ or ‘homeland’, became a central cultural signifier in Wilhelmine Germany (Applegate, 1990), and one which the *völkisch* right attempted to claim as part of their ideology of national purity. While historical geographers such as Rollins (1997) have positioned *Heimat* protection (*Heimatschutz*) as a potentially progressive alternative to nationalism, there is strong evidence that the two frequently overlapped in practice (Uekötter, 2006; Frohn, 2015). The idea of protecting a symbolically and historically charged national landscape from an unspecified ‘urban’ ‘industrial’ threat - a largely aesthetic critique detached from any theory of urbanisation - allowed significant inroads to be made by *völkisch* thinkers into this nascent conservationist movement. As Tourlamain (2014: 36) concludes of the literary currents that sprung up around the idea of *Heimat*, these ‘took the sentiments of regional romanticism and used them as the basis for a nationalist discourse based on the relationship of the *Volk* with its native landscape’. Historical precedents for this style of thinking were clearly provided, again, by the Romantic forerunners to the *völkisch* movements. The writer Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, as early as 1857, wove together ideas of romanticism, environmentalism, and nationalism in his declaration that ‘[w]e must save the forest...so that the pulse of life of the people continues to beat warm and joyfully, so that Germany remains German’ (cited in Lekan, 2004: 7). This belief, in turn, easily morphed into a form of environmental determinism in which the laws of nature became concrete limits on social life, and where the criteria for being able to appreciate nature-as-*Heimat* were implicitly regarded in racial terms (Wolf, 2016). In a contrast with the landscape tradition running through North American settler colonial environmentalism (Cronon, 1996), premised on the idea of a pristine wilderness free from human contamination, the landscape ecologies animating early German *Heimatschützer* embraced the interaction between *Land* and *Leute*, figuring this instead as ‘an organic link between a people and its landscape’ (Lekan, 2004: 1). Crucially, both of these landscape traditions are capable of harbouring ideological ammunition for an exclusionary and expansionist nationalism (see Kakel, 2011; Guettel, 2013).⁴

Despite their heterogeneity, these *völkisch* movements provided a number of elements that pertain strongly to the present-day discussion: a nascent biopolitical vocabulary used to articulate radical measures to preserve the integrity of a population imagined as pure and harmonious; an attempt to portray rural and close-to-nature lifestyles as antidotes to modernity which would immunise the *Volk* against internal decay and external perils; a crude dystopian/utopian imaginary which imagined ‘German nature’ as a source of spiritual and racial renewal, while demonising urban spaces as cesspools of miscegenation and degeneracy; and a desire to ‘transcend’ politics and gain unmediated access to an organic *Volk*-community. The next section tracks how these characteristics have influenced the contemporary wave of *völkisch* politics sitting at the heart of this paper.

4.2. Blood and Soil redux: *Völkisch* politics from 1945 to the present

Building on periodisations of the historical *völkisch* movement from 1871 to the Nazi period in 1933 (Puschner et al., 1996; Breuer, 2009),

³ For the ongoing ambivalence of urban imaginaries in German far-right thought, see Braun, 2021; Burkhardt and Feustel, 2021.

⁴ This opens on to the oft-neglected history of the legacy of far-right ecologies in the development of (especially in this context, German) imperialism, a genealogy of which is regrettably beyond the scope of this paper. For valuable insights on this connection, see Grove, 1995; Zimmerer, 2005; Olusoga and Erichsen, 2011; Michael, 2013).

this section explores how this political tendency persisted after the defeat of Nazism through a series of continuities in ideology, organisations, points of reference, personnel, and discursive and symbolic frameworks. It also illustrates how *völkisch* thought has been adapted and reconfigured since its original manifestation, and particularly how concerns and strategies around ecology were central to its persistence in a ‘post-fascist’ era.

The relationship between *völkisch* ideologies, National Socialism, and ecological thought is a complex one to untangle (Brüggemeier et al., 2006). There were clear attempts by Nazi thinkers to construct an ecological nationalism as a propaganda narrative (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1995) and as a justification for geopolitical objectives such as imperial expansion and forcible population movements (Driessen and Lorimer, 2016; Giaccaria and Minca, 2016). Likewise, the Social Darwinism and biocentrism of the *völkisch* movements’ leading advocates clearly contributed to an intellectual climate fascinated with ideas of *Lebensraum*, *Geopolitik*, and the organic *Volk* community, ideas which were transmitted into Nazi circles through central figures such as Karl Haushofer (Herwig, 2016) and Friedrich Ratzel (Klinke and Bassin, 2019). As Barua (2018) has demonstrated, many of these ideas stood on the foundations of the holistic ontology of society and nature developed in Ratzel’s biogeography, with the notion of *Land und Leute* as an organic whole proving central to German continental ambitions in the 1940s. On a more pragmatic level, the *völkisch* milieu of the 1920s provided the networks through which many future Nazi functionaries would first become acquainted. Heinrich Himmler, Rudolf Höss and Richard Walther Darré all met through their membership of the *völkisch* ‘Artaman League’, which founded a number of homesteads and settlement colonies dedicated to exploring the links between agriculture, peasant life, and racial purity (Kater, 2014: 182), ideas which would go on to inspire Darré in particular (Bramwell, 1985).

The potent blend of agrarian romanticism, anti-urbanism and nature mysticism created an ideology of a stable Nature as blueprint for a wayward society, which remained attractive for the nationalist right beyond the Nazi period. Though the nationalistic taint of words like *Volk* and *Heimat* dampened their mainstream usage in East and West Germany, covert organisations continued the legacy of the pre-war *völkisch* organisations in a far less diluted form. The Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community (AG) presents a striking example, bearing a number of ideological and organisational resemblances with its interwar predecessor, the Artaman League, both of which derive their name from the *völkisch* ideologue Willibald Hentschel’s neologism meaning ‘agricultural man’. Founded in 1951 by former SS member Wilhelm Kusserow, the AG exhibited a consistent dedication to an antisemitic, esoteric, *völkisch* ideology. Many of its functionaries regard themselves as ‘Neo-Artamans’, torchbearers of a *völkisch* national opposition, and they draw on the Artamans’ use of rural farms and homesteads as sites of right-wing socialisation and community-building. At the same time, these ideals have been updated for a new age, and are shaped as much by opposition to globalisation and American cultural influence as by a revolt against bourgeois life and Weimar republicanism (Schenderlein, 2013: 107). The AG and associated groups kept alive a language of organic and ethno-nationalist localism in these post-war decades, until *völkisch*-adjacent ideas began to experience a resurgence of popularity in the 1970s and 80s (Olsen, 1999). The conservative politician Herbert Gruhl contributed significantly to this revival of nationalist-ecological thought. Instrumental in the founding of *Die Grünen*, Gruhl broke with them in 1981 to found his own Ecological Democratic Party (ÖDP), a vehicle for the conservative environmental politics he had originally envisaged for the Greens (Jachnow, 2013). Following internal disagreement about a statement distancing the ÖDP from xenophobic rhetoric, Gruhl departed in 1988, taking several of his close colleagues with him, including Baldur Springmann, who would go on to become a central influence within the contemporary *völkisch* scene (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2012). Gruhl’s third ‘green’ project, the Independent Ecologists of Germany (UÖD), was the furthest-right of all, positing environmental

protection as co-constitutive of *Heimat* protection, and networking closely with parties and organisations on the radical and extreme right. As will be elaborated in section 5.1, Gruhl's work attempts to naturalise social inequality and hierarchies, and to channel ecological anxieties around nuclear energy, over-population, and technology towards an authoritarian politics based on a respect for supposedly natural laws. It thus represents an important intellectual parallel to the social movement actors considered here, and sits parallel to, if not firmly inside the *völkisch* tradition.

Reunification in 1990 was an important period in the development of *völkisch* politics, and figures like the lawyer Jürgen Rieger, leader of the AG from 1989, were important in re-animating the movement and forging new connections between east and west. Rieger was involved with *völkisch* youth groups like the *Wiking-Jugend* and *Heimattreue Deutsche Jugend* (modelled after the Hitler Youth and both now banned by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution), as well as far-right parties like the *Freiheitliche Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* and the NPD. The idea of rekindling a simpler and nobler existence on the land was central to the rural praxis of these groups, who used summer camps, hiking groups, folk music festivals and other outdoor activities to advance a brand of far-right networking with a vision of the close-to-nature *Volk* at its heart. The success of this style of organising after 1990 resonates with a certain idea of the political opportunities that the German far-right perceived in the project of reunification, which for some symbolised the organic reunion of the *Volkskörper* ('people's body') after four decades of artificial separation (Pates and Leser, 2021). Localism remains a key strategic element for the *völkisch* right, with groups the NPD organising 'local litter picks' in some chapters, presenting a vision of environmental engagement rooted in place, as well as a wish to build acceptability for right-wing ideas within local community structures (Hurd and Werther, 2013). The relationship of contemporary far-right and *völkisch* organisations with organic agriculture also blends the ideological and the pragmatic together, and re-activates an enduring fascination with biodynamic farming on the German right (see Staudenmaier, 2013). Many such organisations grow organic produce in order to finance their political projects, and perform a right-wing environmentalist lifestyle 'in touch' with the rhythms of nature (Röpke and Speit, 2019; Schmidt, 2019).

More recently, the AfD has been the central vehicle in the mainstreaming of *völkisch* ideas in German party politics. Many of its leaders have attempted to pigeon-hole the Nazi period as historically insignificant, and re-position the party as the inheritors of a long and untainted German nationalist tradition. In 2018, then-chairman Alexander Gauland characterised the Third Reich as mere 'bird shit' upon German history, while Frauke Petry, also a one-time chair, complained in 2016 of the negative connotations unjustly associated with the word '*völkisch*', arguing that it is merely an 'associative attribute' corresponding to the political category of the '*Volk*' (Biermann, 2016). Many writers have hinted at the *völkisch*, or even openly fascist elements within the AfD and its broader movement, from natalist policies with eugenicist undertones to an extreme stance against immigration on the grounds of *Heimatschutz* (Amann, 2017; Hövel, 2018). The attempts of party hardliners Andreas Kalbitz and Björn Höcke to explicitly institutionalise a *völkisch* fraction within the party (*Der Flügel*) from 2015 were unsuccessful, but ultimately succeeded in injecting a more ethno-centric conception of the *Volk* into the party's vocabulary, especially in its eastern branches (Bernhard, 2019). In any case, the above context demonstrates that the fusion of ecological and nationalist thought has a long history on the German right, and that *völkisch* ideas and arguments can be reconfigured to serve a range of political contexts. What remains constant, however, is the dual concept of an imminently looming existential threat to the integrity of the *Volksgemeinschaft* from without, and the spectre of decay and subversion from within. This is an ideological trope which transcends any particular (geo)political event, and serves more as a constitutive feature of the *völkisch* mode of speaking about the nation. To explicate how this ideology is currently being materialised to

bring about a racially and environmentally secure future (in *völkisch* terms), the following section pursues a critical analysis of contemporary *völkisch* rhetoric and strategy around the political stakes of environmentalism.

5. Racialised territories and temporal anxieties: Understanding *völkisch* bio-geo-politics

This paper now turns to a discussion of *völkisch* settlement-formation (in German: *Landnahme*, or colonisation), which I conceptualise as a two-stage process of racial future-making. First comes a discursive contestation of hegemonic ideas around nature, enabling movement actors to rally around a nationalist reading of ecological politics based on signifiers such as purity, organicism, balance, and rootedness. Second, this ideological process opens space for practical steps to retreat to rural enclaves in pursuit of a 'racially appropriate' settlement lifestyle, which is protected against external (social or ecological) threats and which prefigures an immunised notion of community-to-come (Fielitz and Wallmeier, 2019; Dannemann, 2023). To facilitate the analysis, I focus on arguments expressed through *völkisch* websites, journals, blogs and transcribed speeches, as well as statements from groups and individuals currently engaged in territorialising this *völkisch* imaginary through settlement-formation. This is not a systematic sample of far-right discourses around nature – which is already well underway in the literature reviewed above – but a symptomatic reading of materials from the *völkisch* press and activist scene which, when viewed against the historical trajectories outlined above, are most emblematic of *völkisch* modes of responding to socio-ecological uncertainty in future-oriented and racialised terms.

5.1. 'The Turn': Reconfiguring ecology as a right-wing priority

Central to an understanding of the authoritarian futures the *völkisch* movement is working to prefigure is an analysis of how these actors are striving to reconfigure the very meaning of Nature. These efforts begin from an underlying resentment and hostility towards the 'cosmopolitan nature' of left-liberal environmentalism, associated with the peace movement, civil rights, queer emancipation, feminism, and other progressive social movements emerging since the 1960s in Germany. *Völkisch*-nationalist arguments maintain that this form of environmental politics is a perversion and aberration from the 'true' political meaning of nature, and seek to mobilise their supporters around a radically different vision of ecology. Illustrative of this argument is the late *völkisch* philosopher Jost Bauch's (2018) essay on the question: 'Is there a conservative ecology?'. Bauch answers in the affirmative, stating indeed that not only is such an ecology possible, but that 'conservatism, ultimately, is the only political orientation that makes ecology possible, and from which it originates'. Bauch offers an explanation for the current left-liberal emphasis of green politics by arguing that when these debates gathered steam in Germany during the 1970s, the conservative CDU party underestimated how explosive an issue environmentalism would become, and thus 'abandoned this field for the Left to exploit for their own ends'. This notion of having erroneously ceded ground to the Left in the domain of ecological politics emerges repeatedly across *völkisch* journalistic outlets; another article by Philip Stein (2014) in the journal *Sezession* maintains that 'The ecological concepts that have been instrumentalised by the political left since 1968 as a vehicle for Marxist social ideas are to be located originally and genuinely on the right, because of their unconditional and indispensable connection with the value of the homeland, and with biological-*völkisch* heritage'. This narrative of leftist ideas filling the discursive vacuum formed by the CDU's disengagement from nascent ecological issues performs several useful functions: firstly it distances the *völkisch* right from more conventional conservatives who are deemed to have an insufficiently deep (and ecological) understanding of German national identity, but it also names an originary moment when nature 'fell' from its noble position at

the heart of German nationalism and became tarnished by progressivism. It provides a baseline for action, and crucially, a state of political affairs to return to.

Returning to Herbert Gruhl's works helps contextualise this desired discursive shift on the right; his 1982 text *The Earthly Balance* (still widely cited on the *völkisch* right), clearly lays out his case against left-wing ecological politics:

'The younger generation labours under the misguided notion that nature operates with complete freedom, love, support. Thus many have thought that they were close to nature when they acted spontaneously and chaotically. In reality the opposite is true... Nature knows no charity. In contrast, the system of organised human charity that is referred to today as 'the social safety net' covers precisely those who are responsible for their own situation. That is our own greatest mistake: we are all cradled in a system of security that is totally unnatural. If young people want to be 'natural', they should do this through hard work and discipline. Nature demands a disciplined adherence to her laws' (Gruhl, 1982: 234)

This discursive strategy relies, then, on a portrayal of the Greens as misguided and irresponsible stewards of the earth's resources, naming both a party and personality type whose commitment to petty concerns like gender equality or antiracism blinds them from acknowledging Nature's indifferent and immutable laws. On the one hand, this points to a separation of the political from the ecological, in that a concern with social justice is portrayed as incompatible with 'true' ecological responsibility. On the other, the tacit environmental determinism in Gruhl's assertion that 'Nature demands a disciplined adherence to her laws' seems to elide the distinction between the natural and the social altogether, subsuming questions of social organisation to the uncompromising strictures of the earth (see Bassin, 2003).

The ways in which this ecological politics speaks to a certain conservative-nationalist political identity becomes clear further on in Stein's article, where he argues that 'degrowth, a return to origins, indeed an ecological-*völkisch* Renaissance, is exactly what is needed for we who have become too bourgeois. Anyone for whom giving up meat once a week is too big a sacrifice is useless for the political right anyway'. In contrast to a more populist right which revels in the excessive enjoyment of fossil fuels or rails against the abstemious 'prohibition parties' of the left, in a *völkisch* context a concern with degrowth and ecological restraint became compatible with an individualised narrative of discipline and self-improvement, one which extends from masculinist spaces of recreation and leisure (Luger, 2022) to the cult of the purified body animating many far-right subcultures and lifestyle movements (Forchtner and Tominc, 2017).

This strand of anti-progressive ecological thought is informed by the intersections of some *völkisch* intellectuals with philosophy and critical theory. The explicitly Heidegger-inspired *völkisch* outlet *Die Kehre: Zeitschrift für Naturschutz* clearly sits within this trend. The 'Kehre' in the journal's title refers revealingly to Heidegger's influential work *Die Technik und die Kehre*, and the philosopher's idea of a 'turn' away from technological modernity back towards 'that which endures from the early beginnings' (1962: 32). This phrase is interpreted by the journal in civilisational terms as referring to 'a route from the end of European history right back to its inception'. This idea of a philosophical and practical (re)turn largely sets the tone for the *völkisch* movement as a whole, dovetailing with its impulses to 'exit' or 'drop out' (*aussteigen*, in movement terms) of unsustainable social configurations and enact a return to ways of living in and with nature which are more rational, harmonious, and organic (Fielitz and Wallmeier, 2019). What unfolds in this reading is both a temporal and spatial 'return', going 'back to nature' and back to more harmonious - presumably pre-modern and pre-industrial - socio-ecological configurations. The political implications of this 'turn' become even clearer in *Die Kehre*'s mission statement, which expresses its intent to 'consider ecology from a holistic perspective', and therefore to contest its 'restriction to questions of "climate protection"'. Indeed, the magazine's rationale is to advocate for a

'broadening of ecology back to its original meaning, that is, a theory of the whole environment, cultural landscapes, rites and customs, including the home and the farmstead (*Oikos*), which is after all, its namesake'. Drawing also on the ontological holism of the Social Darwinist Ernst Haeckel (Gasman, 1971), this signifies an ecological paradigm which is simultaneously universal, in its appeal to Nature as a set of foundational planetary limits which humans ignore at their peril, while being deeply rooted in a sense of regional landscape or *Heimat*. It rejects one style of universalist thinking, that associated historically with Enlightenment thought and currently with the 'climate camp' who advocate for a global ecological politics detached from the specificity of place, in favour of a more romantic idea of the universal in which all components of a system are naturally ordered and work with each other in service of the Whole (Mosse, 1964). This represents a resignification of Nature, away from 'climate' and towards 'homeland', towards 'Nature-as-balance', an ideal of a stable and unchanging equilibrium ecology. Crucially for this discussion, the attempt to eschew binarised ideas of Nature and Society in favour of more holistic ontologies proves itself to be eminently compatible with a misanthropic, and indeed Malthusian and exclusivist, vision of socio-ecological futures. This resignification of nature as a holistic, organic system guaranteeing the future wellbeing and racial integrity of the population is a key condition of possibility for the immunological practices explored in the upcoming sections.

5.2. Biopolitical anxieties and the retreat to nature

Building on these attempts to unsettle the dominant liberal connotations of ecological politics, contemporary *völkisch* movements are increasingly embedding these convictions within forms of practice which aim to create durable ethno-nationalist social structures, away from unwanted scrutiny from the press or civil society groups. Though the connection between rural settlements and the 'future of the race' was pioneered already in the 1920s by groups like the Artaman League (Schenderlein, 2013), these *völkisch* settlement projects (*Siedlungsprojekte*) re-emerged in earnest in the 1990s, with West German far-right activists attempting to capitalise on reunification and the availability of cheap real estate in the new eastern *Bundesländer* (Pates and Leser, 2021). The prospect of cheap land and the opportunity to live in a white nationalist milieu relatively undisturbed by state bodies or antifascists, as well as the intersections with existing *völkisch* organisations such as the *Heimatreue Deutsche Jugend*, quickly gave these activities a strong *völkisch* emphasis. The Amadeu Antonio Stiftung (2017) now estimate that such settlements exist in almost every federal state, with total membership in the thousands. Some of these projects are associated with a particular organisation, such as the *Freibund*, the *Artgemeinschaft* or the *Anastasia-Bewegung*, while some are comprised of networks of right-wing individuals and families. Their overall aim is to pursue a 'racially appropriate' (*artgemäß*) way of life, grounded in self-sufficiency, simplicity, and ethnic homogeneity. Many of the settlements grow their own food and organic produce, which helps to support them financially. News outlets have reported attempts by members of *völkisch* settlements to embed themselves within local community structures and establish themselves as 'friendly neighbours', in an effort to gain trust and deflect suspicion from their political activities (McGrane, 2013; Podjavorsek, 2017). With their strong emphasis on the importance of harmonious relationships with nature and the virtues of living off the land, these clandestine efforts are often successful.

These settlements perform a much more significant role within a *völkisch* and ethno-nationalist worldview, however. In the eyes of their members, the settlements form part of a mission to build a parallel society, a network of ethno-communities which will serve as a bulwark immunising the *Volk* against future demographic and social change. Many settlers narrate their motivations for joining such communities in terms of a duty to defend the *Volk* against foreign incursions (and it is here that the spectre of climate change-induced dislocation looms large over the otherwise climate-sceptical orientation of the *völkisch* right).

Iris Krause for instance, one of the leaders of the *Anastasia-Bewegung*, expresses the *völkisch* conception of the relationship between migration and socio-ecological upheaval. At an annual meeting in 2015 she summarised the movement's goals as follows:

'We stand united, our villages will remain free of the illegal immigrants who are currently flooding across our landscape. If the worst comes to the worst, we will form a local militia, for it is now a matter of standing up for our Heimat, our self-determination and the protection of our borders. Otherwise we allow ourselves to be pushed out, replaced - we let lawlessness, chaos, and the loss of our Heimat, our culture and identity prevail!' (cited in Vogel and Sadovnikova, 2021)

The centrality of *Heimat* within this discourse points to the potential for xenophobic arguments about migration to be articulated through categories with a strong ecological resonance, in a way that invites emotive identifications with the nation as well as place-based responses to pre-empt these imagined threats. Iris's husband Markus further emphasised the intention of the *Anastasia* communities in his subsequent speech, stating that 'Should our politicians, civil servants, and soldiers no longer want to serve us, we will build up our own parallel structures'. The statements of the Krauses demonstrate a distinctly *völkisch* way of expressing anxiety about potential future threats, which weave naturalistic themes into a broader narrative of 'white extinction' (Bhatt, 2020). The *Heimat* and the cultural traditions it is seen to embody are a major object of concern, and objections are raised not so much to specific impacts of immigration as to the idea of the *Volk* community as a whole being tainted, contaminated or infiltrated. This hyperbolic fear of racial extinction resonates across the *völkisch* communities, and re-affirms its members' belief that the settlements, in their reactivation of racial consciousness, will help to mitigate threats that imagined social unrest and population movements will pose to the *Volk*. Jurgen Elsässer, editor of the *völkisch* outlet *Compact*, writes in this vein in a special issue of the magazine: 'The *Volk* is bleeding, today as it was then. But it fights. We know our heroes from the legends and books... They were neither left nor right, they were simply for the *Volk*, for us down here against them up there' (Elsässer, 2016: 54). In typical depoliticising fashion, the biopolitically framed question of species survival is placed 'beyond' left or right, the *Volk* community being imagined as undivided by class or any other social tensions, but rather sutured by the eternal bond of racial descent (Swyngedouw, 2013).

In line with this obsessive focus on the future health of the 'ethnic German' population, the family emerges as a vitally important social institution within which *völkisch* dreams of a immunised future are invested. Examples abound from across the movement literature of the *völkisch* settlements; Helge Hilse of the *völkisch*-adjacent organisation 'One Percent for our Land' argues that it is crucially necessary to build up 'child-rich' family structures, 'in which the spirit of our *Volk* is cultivated in a dignified, wise and well-ordered manner, in the home' (Röpke and Speit, 2019: 66). The idea of large, close-knit nuclear families is of course a unifying motif across the spectrum of far-right thought in Germany, from the Nazis' fixation on natalism and eugenics (Catrine and Leapman, 1995) to the infamous 'New Germans? We'll make them ourselves!' posters briefly run by the AfD in the 2017 federal elections (Kamann, 2017). Among the *völkisch* communities, the child thus figures as a potent symbol of racial futurism, which helps transmute negative fears about the extinction of the *Volk* community into an affirmative programme for the future of their race. Pinpointing the biopolitical implications of this phenomenon, the *Out of the Woods* collective (2020: 152) write of 'reproductive futurism', in which the child serves as a metonym for the world which must be saved. As noted by Schmidt (2019), this dovetails with the deeply patriarchal nature of *völkisch* gender norms, whose emphasis on large families amounts to a reproductive biopolitics which posits heterosexuality as central to the health of the racially pure community (see Lewis, 2019: 11-12). This immunological framing of social reproduction also signals a much more collective understanding of ethno-national organisation, premised not on

'lone-wolf' voluntarism, but on a deeply collective and communal performance of place-based racial solidarity (see also Darwish, 2021).

Evidently, the symbols of land, the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and the patriarchal nuclear family are all different figurations of that 'Nature' being 'returned to' within these settlement communities. Each manoeuvre represents the disavowal of a different kind of tension - whether the historically produced character of the German landscape, the internal conflicts which always divide national communities, or the deeply uneven power relations within the nuclear family - and yet all follow the immunitarian logic of being imagined as coherent and harmonious identities to be protected and cordoned off from contaminating external influences. As we will see, however, these threats are also narrated via a distinct spatio-temporality, which constructs a particular apocalyptic imagination of ethnic extinction while heralding a *völkisch* utopia to be enacted and performed in the here and now. The final section of this analysis turns to focus more specifically on the role of temporality and the future in animating this activity.

5.3. From *Lebensraum* to 'Lebenstraum': *Völkisch* futures between denial and anticipation

By now it is clear that the *völkisch* settlement projects represent a form of ethno-nationalist practice whose political vocabulary allows a number of imagined future states to be perceived as existentially threatening to the body politic. However, their alarmist assessment of the implications of social, ecological and demographic change for European ethnic majorities exists alongside a positive, future-oriented imaginary, which aims to conjure a utopian vision of the destiny of the *Volk*. This rhetoric seeks to elaborate a set of future states to be strived for, generating images in which activists can invest emotion, hopes and energies. An article by Bastienne Erdmann in the *völkisch* magazine *Umwelt&Aktiv* suffices to illustrate the tone of these efforts:

'That which captivated our forefathers in Wotan's sacred oak trees, in the medieval sagas, in the figure of the sleeping beauty Melusine, that which sounds in the songs of Walther von der Vogelweide, and then bursts forth in the lyrics of Goethe: it is always the same keynote, the same deep pull of the soul towards the wonderful and impenetrable secrets of nature, which speaks through these expressions of Volk sentiment' (Erdmann, 2016: 32)

This rhetoric is most visible within groups at the more esoteric end of the *völkisch* spectrum (see von Schnurbein, 2016), mainly the *Artgemeinschaft* (AG) and the *Anastasia* movement. The AG website states its aim of 'the realisation of a species-appropriate mode of existence [*Daseinsgestaltung*], and of ethnically appropriate lifestyles' and 'the promotion of our culture and customs through speech and writing, but also through practical living', evidencing a commitment towards the construction of durable ethno-national structures to bequeath to future generations. The AG's newspaper, the *Nordische Zeitung* (subtitle: 'The voice of racial belief'), also performs an important role as a touchstone for these 'positive' nationalist imaginaries, publishing sheet music for traditional Germanic songs and ideas for self-made clothes, alongside updates about the wider *völkisch* and far-right movement in the north of the country. Like the literature and journals of the 20th century *völkisch* organisations, magazines like this are crucial vectors for producing an imagined community of like-minded activists pursuing the same ethno-preservationist goals.

This imaginative and future-oriented dimension of the *völkisch* projects is encapsulated unintentionally elegantly by a phrase on the *Anastasia Bewegung* website. In a blog post entitled 'What is a family homestead?', the author references the 'Anastasia' novel series by Russian author Vladimir Megre, whose eponymous protagonist possesses magical powers, including an ability to communicate with animals and sense the future (Hellwig, 2019). These books have inspired a number of esoteric neo-pagan movements in Russia (Aitamurto, 2016), and more recently in Germany as existing *völkisch* activists uncover

resonances with their own mystical and organic beliefs. The *Anastasia Bewegung* webpage recommends the novel series for ‘all those who want to work on the model of their own Lebens(t)raum’, an endeavour which ‘combines the tender touch of Mother Earth, the honour of your ancestors and the joy of your descendants to come’. This passage turns quite deliberately on the wordplay between *Lebensraum* (the Nazi-affiliated term for ‘living space’, see Bluwstein et al., this issue) and *Lebenstraum* (‘living dream’) in a way which jars with the supposedly innocuous spiritual facade of the movement. The use of this alarming neologism is indeed indicative of a notable shift - certainly in the esoteric-spiritual movements but also across the *völkisch* and nationalist right more generally - away from classically ‘geopolitical’ objectives (conquering territory and establishing colonial power in and beyond Europe) associated with the ideology of *Lebensraum*, and towards a reimagined form of biopolitical practice *in situ*. This takes the domestic landscape as its target, and aims to cultivate a deeper, more intense and emotional set of attachments with the land, dovetailing once again with the calls of some early *völkisch* ideologues towards ‘internal colonisation’ rather than external conquest (Danilina, 2019).

In the mode of *Lebenstraum*, plumbing the emotional and historical depths of the *Heimat* ideal proves just as ideologically productive as dreams of empire or military glory. This shift in emphasis also results in a form of far-right practice where pragmatism and action are blended with escapism and utopia in novel ways. In contrast to other extreme-right strategies, which aim to provoke conflict or civil unrest, and push perceived societal contradictions to their limits in an accelerationist fashion (see Tait, 2019), the family homesteads and settlement projects pursue a mentality of negation, where undesirable present states are rejected (‘Exited’) altogether, and new nationalist utopias forged in their place. This move embodies a contradictory relationship to the future in which apocalyptically-rendered scenarios about ethnic extinction are used to galvanise a form of anticipatory action which will call a brighter, alternative future (in *völkisch* terms) into being. This is a temporal dynamic which resonates significantly with the New Right philosopher Nick Land’s concept of ‘hyperstition’ (Smith and Burrows, 2021). A neologism of ‘hyper’ and ‘superstition’, this idea holds that forms of action in the present - stories, theories, settlements, homesteads, ‘dreams’ - are themselves constitutive and *generative* of the future. Smith and Burrows explain that within this understanding of temporality, ‘it is as if the tentacles of future entities reach back through time in order to bring into being the very elements necessary for their own materialization’ (ibid: 9). With this in mind, the *völkisch* movements’ performance of a ‘retreat’ or a ‘turn’ backwards should not be taken at face value as simply a nostalgic return to an imagined past; viewed as forms of hyperstitional activism which aim to conjure desired futures into being, all such attempts at ‘going back’ are also ways of going *forward* in particular ways. Romanticised imaginations of the feudal, pre-industrial and pre-capitalist past become intertwined here with an immunised and securitised white German future in a complex and contradictory fashion which resists simple designations of ‘nostalgia’ or ‘mitigation’.

What can be stated for certain is that these *völkisch* strategies exhibit an interesting tension between the politics of denial and anticipation. In contrast to forms of climate ‘denihilism’ commonly observed on the far-right (Seymour, 2022: 156), the *völkisch* movements enthusiastically endorse the untenability of contemporary socio-ecological metabolisms. The condition which they reject is not the severity of ecological degradation in the Anthropocene, which is narrated in pessimistic and Heideggerian terms, but rather a refusal to engage with its social implications or its historical and political origins. The result is a movement psychology which purports to fully accept the necessity of urgent action in the face of socio-ecological destruction, but which channels this urgency into forms of acting which utterly fail to engage with the stakes of that destruction. The contradiction is that the ‘heaviness’ (Sultana, 2022) and significance of racial capitalism and coloniality in forming the conditions of ecological breakdown (Malm, 2016; Saldanha,

2019) are disavowed by these movements, while they simultaneously embrace racialised political logics and identities as the solution to the resultant geographies of turbulence and instability. The result is a palpable ambivalence and tension running throughout the various movement discourses, whose celebration of a timeless ethno-national identity is premised upon disavowing the complicity of that identity in creating the very conditions by which they feel threatened. There is clearly a form of political subjectivity emerging here which responds to a sense of humans’ geological re-ordering of time and space, but which is captured by a violent ethnic essentialism and which remains wholly denialist in its refusal to theorise or confront the drivers and implications of this condition. In sum, these preliminary theorisations of *völkisch* claims upon race and futurity point to a more complex spatio-temporal politics than notions of ‘uneven geographies to come’ or ‘looming climate apartheid’, pointing instead to instances where attempts to manifest these exclusionary and securitised futures are already underway through prefigurative practices in the present.

6. Conclusion

The *völkisch* political projects explored in this paper are exceptional cases in many respects; they encompass sites, behaviours and ideologies which appear eccentric and unique. This analysis has attempted to demonstrate, however, that their ways of speaking and acting also stand as distilled expressions of fully normalised and institutionalised ways of thinking about nations and peoples, security and population, heritage and environment, stripping these of their institutional restraints and extrapolating them to their ‘logical conclusions’. As other papers in this special issue emphasise, these intersections are in no way disconnected or discontinuous with the capitalist and colonial dimensions of the political ecologies of the future, and Moore and Roberts (2022: 12) remind us of the importance of ‘clear-eyed opposition to the forms of racialized power that are wielded over and through the environment, be they ‘fascist’ or not’. The mutual dependence of a range of political actors on an increasingly racialised and immunological biopolitics creates the potential for substantial overlap between the rationales, philosophies, and geographical expressions of far-right ecological fantasies, on the one hand, and ‘mainstream’ environmental governance on the other. The exclusionary racial rationales of the *völkisch* settlements thus point to the ways in which imagined future states of threat, contamination, and extinction come to be pre-emptively acted upon through an immunitary reflex. This immunological rationale can be expressed as fortress-style immigration policy, ‘invasion’-centred xenophobia, colonial conservation practices, a militant defence of the heteronormative nuclear family, and is far from unique to the *völkisch* desire for ethnically-defined nature-based living.

In combatting this immuno-biopolitical impulse across so many forms of ecological governance and practice, its antifascist opponents need not necessarily focus on finding the ‘correct’, ‘critical’ interpretation of nature - urban ecology as a safeguard against reactionary ruralism, Gaia-centred philosophy as a corrective against mechanistic Enlightenment views of nature, holism and relationality as against Nature/Society dualisms. The search for a ‘palatable liberal and ecological political ontology’ (Lorimer, 2020: 13) can overlook how almost any ecological configuration can ultimately be ‘co-opted’ or articulated alongside an infinite number of political claims and positions. As Povinelli reminds us, ‘the axioms on which a segment of critical common sense is now built—especially claims that existence is entangled—have no political content in and of themselves’ (2021: ix). We must regard far-right ecologies as arising from a particular *articulation* between xenophobia, nationalism and ecological signifiers, and which themselves need to be politicised and contested by movements with an alternative vision of a socio-ecological future, not simply demonstrated to be false (for their affective allure does not necessarily derive from a correspondence with an ‘ecological reality’). In the context of the *völkisch* strategies explored in this paper, a number of anti-fascist organisations have

already emerged to educate people about the far-right's interests in ecology, and to build up local ecological civil society structures which militate against far-right entryism from the bottom up (FARN, 2019). I interpret these efforts as part of an anti-fascist geography which critiques those broader structures and relations of late capitalist societies with which far-right movements are co-extensive, and which envisions 'alternatives to the contemporary societal conditions that give succour to far-right movements' (Ince, 2019: 6).

As an attempt to herald a racially exclusive social model as the response to socio-ecological breakdown, and to manifest this blueprint within the interstices of the present, these far-right (ab)uses of ecology must be taken seriously as constitutive elements of the political ecologies of emerging undesirable futures. This is the case not just because of how extreme and eccentric their practices appear, but because of how generalisable their political logics may prove to be.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Matt Varco: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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