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## ‘Ecobordering’: casting immigration control as environmental protection

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### ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of 22 European far-right parties, we identify an emergent discourse in environmental politics, which we conceptualise as ‘ecobordering’. This discourse seeks to blame immigration for national environmental degradation, which draws on colonial and racialised imaginaries of nature in order to rationalise further border restrictions and ‘protect’ the ‘nativist stewardship’ of national nature. As such, ecobordering seeks to obscure the primary driving causes of the ecological crisis in the entrenched production and consumption practices of Global North economies, whilst simultaneously shifting blame on to migration from the Global South where ecological degradation has been most profound. In an era of increasing climate migration, ecobordering thereby portrays *effects* as *causes* and further normalises racist border practices and colonial amnesia within Europe.

**KEYWORDS** Borders; anti-immigration; far right parties; environmental protection; climate denialism; climate migration

### Introduction

Competing political discourses seek to shape the public understanding of the environmental crisis and appropriate strategies for its resolution, with each discourse purveyed by distinctive but evolving political factions (McCright *et al.* 2016, Farstad 2018, Cann and Raymond 2018). Far-right parties, a longstanding force of anti-immigrationism and xenophobia in European politics, have traditionally sought to disavow the science of (or responsibility for) ecological degradation – presenting it as a conspiracy designed to benefit ‘globalist elites’ or undermine national sovereignty via multilateral agreements – or marginalise the issue entirely (Mudde 2007, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, Gemenis *et al.* 2012, Lockwood 2018, Schaller and Carius 2019). However, our inter-textual analysis (Der Derian and Shapiro 1989) of manifestos, press releases, websites, speeches, interviews, blogs and election pamphlets of 22 European far-right parties<sup>1</sup> (henceforth EFRPs) that sat in

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9 000 Millionen zusätzliche  
Strassenkilometer!**

Durch die masslose Zuwanderung sind in den letzten 13 Jahren rund 1 Million Einwanderer zusätzlich in unser kleines Land gekommen. Sie fahren mit ihren Autos jährlich rund 9 Milliarden zusätzliche Kilometer auf unseren Strassen. Das schadet der Umwelt in der Schweiz ganz direkt!

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muss die Masseneinwanderung bekämpfen!**

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**SVP**  
SCHWEIZER QUALITÄT  
Die Partei des Mittelstandes

Quelle: Bundesamt für Statistik, Leistungen im Personenverkehr

Figure 1.



Figure 2.

the European Parliament between May 2014 and September 2019 reveals a significant discursive shift. EFRPs have recently reified a distinctive new environmental discourse which we conceptualise as ‘ecobordering’.

Ecobordering casts immigration (of which migration from the Global South is made hyper-visible) as a threat to the local or national environment and consequently presents borders as forms of environmental protection. Ecobordering can take the form of stoking fears that immigration will

deplete national ecological resources (land, water, food, etc.) and exacerbate local environmental issues – which we term *migration as environmental plunder*. Or ecobordering can depict migrants as environmentally irresponsible ‘hordes’ with no aptitude for managing natural resources (unlike ‘native’ custodians) supposedly due to an absence of ‘belonging’ to or ‘investment’ in a local area – which we term *migrant as environmental vandal*. Relying on fallacious depictions of migrants, an ignorance of the material economic drivers of ecological degradation, and a narrow focus on ‘national’ nature, ecobordering seeks to encourage reactionary nationalistic responses to the environmental crisis. The purpose, ultimately, is to rationalise the securitisation of regional, national, and property borders in the name of environmental protection. The border practices subject to ‘greenwashing’ include visa restrictions, military operations in the Mediterranean Sea, refugee camps, reducing rights to asylum, and coercive integration strategies. As the spokesperson of Marine Le Pen’s *National Rally*, Jordan Bardella, declared in April 2019 ‘borders are the environment’s greatest ally . . . it is through them that we will save the planet’ (France24 2019).

The rising popularity and influence of the European far-right and the increasing valence of the environmental crisis to European electorates renders this a vital topic. Our identification and conceptualisation of ecobordering firstly serves as a corrective to the dominant perception that climate change denialism is the primary environmental discourse of EFRPs (Gemenis *et al.* 2012, Lockwood 2018, Schaller and Carius 2019, Forchtner 2019a). The turn to a selective and invidious approach to ecological issues by EFRPs is designed to weaponise environmental issues to bolster anti-immigration agendas, which demonstrates the renewed significance of ethno-nationalism and border security in environmental politics (De Genova 2018, Rodriguez 2018). Secondly, our analysis of ecobordering contributes to the limited recognition of the role played by environmental politics in border regimes, which is scarcely developed in the European context (Baldwin 2013, Hultgren 2015, Hultgren and Stevis 2020).

Ecobordering is not exclusively propounded by EFRPs, and has wider resonance with conservative and liberal projects.<sup>2</sup> However, as the far-right is both ascendant in Europe and has historically served the dangerous function of normalising far-right discourse into more mainstream public debates (Valluvan 2019), it remains worthy of particular scholarly attention. We provide a systematic analysis of EFRP rhetoric and electioneering which reveals the character and argumentative structure of ecobordering and its racialised, gendered, and classed logics. Tacitly repudiating the role of destructive economic forces in generating ecological degradation, ecobordering serves to rationalise border restrictions and violence in the midst of increasing climate migration. By analysing ecobordering as a discourse, we are attentive to the role played by discursive framings in rendering issues

intelligible, (re)producing forms of social meaning, and shaping political and material outcomes (Blyth 2002, Schmidt 2010, Hay 2011). However, we treat these discursive formations as produced through historical relations of power, constituted within broader colonial and capitalist ideologies and structures (Quijano 2007). In doing so, the empirical findings and conceptual development of ecobordering drew on existing work on postcolonial approaches to borders (Bhambra 2017, Rodriguez 2018, Mayblin and Turner 2020), materialist analyses of climate change (Koch 2012, Newell 2013, Moore 2016), and racialised environmentalism (Hultgren 2015, Pulido 2017).

We will firstly explore the historical genesis of ecobordering. Second, we offer an empirical account of ecobordering as an emerging discourse amongst EFRPs. Third, we analyse how ecobordering reworks and sanitises colonial and eco-fascist logics of race whilst obscuring the capitalist processes underpinning ecological degradation in order to formulate a discourse designed to engender fears around human mobility. In doing so, we interrogate the political implications of ecobordering for anti-immigration politics, European statecraft, and the ecological crisis.

### The origins of ecobordering

Ecobordering represents the consolidation and sanitisation of a constellation of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Malthusian, conservative, and eco-fascist ideas, as well as Romantic-era notions of nature and belonging, formed into a relatively coherent discourse and electoral strategy. Ecobordering reworks these imaginaries to present Global South migrants as active threats to environmental sustainability in order to 'greenwash' anti-immigration policies at a time of growing climate migration.

There is no culturally or politically objective idea of nature or environment. The imagined separation of nature and humanity since the Enlightenment has allowed the former to become seen as a site of extraction and exploitation for the 'progress' of the latter. Modern European conceptions of nature have become deeply entwined with the capitalist calculations of the earth's resources and conceptions of 'sound' resource management, as well as appeals to 'national essence' (Huggan and Tiffin 2007, Parasram and Tilley 2018). These understandings of nature has underpinned the erosion of communal land rights, the private property laws of the enclosure movement, and the emergence of capitalist class relations (Federici 2004). Central to these developments was contestation over which members of society could, or could not, be entrusted with efficiently using and managing natural resources.

One of the most explicit early fusion of environmental management and private property rights can be found in the writings of Edmund Burke, who

believed that only those who ‘belonged’ to, and were ‘invested’ in, a plot of land (or ‘little platoon’ to use his phrase) could be trusted to be stewards or custodians of it (Burke 2009 [1790], Scruton 2012). Notions of investment and belonging, conflated with private property rights and capitalist class relations, were seen as key to systems of localised environmental protection.

Conservative and emergent nationalist ideologies fetishised the fusion of nativism and nature, which cast pastoral labour and agrarianism as exemplary of ‘rooted’ national character (from the English Yeoman, to the Spanish Peasant). At its most extreme, these configurations have underpinned an embodied appeal to ‘blood and soil’ (Valluvan 2019). This fetishisation of ‘blood and soil’, private property, and the nuclear family would arguably reach its zenith in the Nazis’ appeal to the farmer as exemplary of white, Christian, Germanic ‘volk’.

The racialised, gendered, and class dynamics of colonialism were fundamental to shaping the construction of nature and environmental management. Projects of settler colonialism in North America, for example, propagated an imaginary of the ‘New World’ as a pristine and ‘empty’ wilderness, which was used to rationalise the dispossession of indigenous inhabitants by European settlers (Bhandar 2018). It was this romanticised construction of nature as pristine wilderness or ‘edens’ that became the focal points of early 20<sup>th</sup> century environmental movements in the USA, Canada and Europe, in which white settlers were perceived as the only appropriate stewards of the ‘new frontier’ (Grove 1996, Hultgren 2015). In contrast, non-European and indigenous peoples were depicted as poor custodians of their own land or ‘savages’ in a state of arrested development and thus too close to nature and animals (Vergara-Figueroa 2018). John Locke, for example, legitimised the dispossession of indigenous people from the English colony of Virginia because they, unlike the English, didn’t appear to domesticate the land and render it more ‘productive’ (Bhandar 2018, p. 48–49). The cultivation of nature in ‘civilised’ Europe was contrasted with the untamed, raw, and destructive nature of the colonies; this served to racialise and masculinise environmental management and notions of stewardship (Grove 1996), even as the imperial capitalist projects of European empire relied on extractivism and ecological degradation (Parasram and Tilley 2018, p. 304).

It is within the milieu of imperial expansion, emergent conservationism, and rapid urbanisation that social Darwinian views of race and eugenics became highly influential. Eugenic fears over the reproduction of ‘inferior races’ were matched by an increasing preoccupation with Malthusian calculations regarding population growth and natural resource depletion (Ehrlich 1968, Sani 2018). This enabled environmental degradation and later climate change to be cast not as the result of industrialisation but overpopulation (Ehrlich 1968), which particularly took hold in North American environmental movements (Robertson 2012). This neo-Malthusianism combined with eugenic and



colonial racist logics, resulting in calls for population controls on peoples deemed less ‘worthy’ of reproduction. As Hultgren argues (Hultgren 2015):

The message being communicated by eugenic-minded greens was that non-white immigrants posed a biopolitical threat to national and natural purity and thus needed to be scrutinized, controlled, and—in some cases—deported through the use of sovereign power.

In Europe, these ideas were taken up by eco-fascists (Forchtner 2019b), who propagated the idea that indigenous ‘homelands’ were threatened by immigration (often from ex-colonies). This established the environmental imagery utilised by far-right movements to boost political programmes (Olsen 1999), and was complemented by the eugenicist principles of Garrett Hardin’s (1968) ‘Life Boat ethics’. With anti-immigrationism becoming a leitmotif of far-right electoral strategies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the environment has become increasingly viewed again as a rationale to justify immigration restrictions. This synthesis of eco-fascism and neo-Malthusian anxieties has resuscitated and remade many of these historical connections; bringing together nativist ideas of belonging and stewardship with the central facet of colonial racism, that Global South peoples are ‘inferior’ and do not have the same rights to land, custodianship, and resources.

Working with this history in mind, we argue that far-right European parties have assembled colonial and neo-Malthusian forms of knowledge in a relatively novel and cohesive (if variegated) discourse of ecobordering. Amidst ecological breakdown and the growing electoral salience of environmental issues, far-right parties are forcefully articulating a ‘green’ case for insular political communities, anti-immigration, nationalism, and restrictive border regimes as mitigation strategies. But ecobordering has not emerged in a vacuum. Instead, it synthesises political practices and imaginaries with long lineages. Today, the reality of ‘fortress Europe’ is that those attempting to move from the Global South to Europe face highly restrictive visa regimes and border policies frequently contravening international law; resulting in the deaths of thousands of people crossing the Mediterranean every year (De Genova 2018). In this context, the far-right has been rejuvenated by anti-immigrationism (Mudde 2007), which liberal and left-of-centre parties and governments have often been complicit in legitimating, or apathetic in contesting (Valluvan 2019). The rise of anti-immigrationism, alongside the political salience of environmental catastrophe, has set the political conditions for the contemporary ‘greenwashing’ of border violence.

### **Emergent ecobordering: conservation through borders**

Outlining these assorted logics allows us to contextualise and historicise the construction of ecobordering. The emergent discourse of ecobordering



which we identify in our study of European far-right parties draws upon the aforementioned pre-existing logics of colonial, neo-Malthusian, and racialised environmentalism in the context of rising environmental concern and a growing appetite for state action, in order to present migration as an ‘environmental threat’ and securitised national and regional borders as ‘solutions’. In this section, we empirically outline the variegated character of environmental discourses across the European far-right, disentangle the two distinctive strands of the ecobordering discourse, and analyse how these parties resuscitate and rework racialised logics of nature and environmental protection to justify and ‘naturalise’ border violence.

Our empirical research into the contemporary environmental discourses of EFRPs is documented in the below table. The manifestos, press releases, websites, speeches, interviews, blogs and election pamphlets of the 22 far-right parties (listed in the table) were examined, and translation software was used where English language versions were unavailable. The discourses are characterised in terms of four analytical categories: the denialism of ecological degradation, the denialism of national or political responsibility for action on the environmental crisis, and two discernible forms of ecobordering that seek to blame either migrants or immigration for various forms of environmental degradation. The degree to which these four discourses were deployed in each party’s overall rhetoric and the consistency with which they were used differed significantly across parties and so classifications were given to denote discursive prominence. The classifications, in order of magnitude, were as follows: (1) strong, (2) intermediate and (3) limited.

	Environmental crisis denialism		Ecobordering	
	Denial of evidence	Denial of national or political responsibility	Migration as environmental plunder	Migrant as environmental vandal
Alternative for Germany (Germany)	Intermediate	Strong	Strong	Limited
British National Party (UK)	Limited	Limited	Strong	Strong
Conservative People’s Party (Estonia)	Strong	Strong	Limited	Limited
Danish People’s Party (Denmark)	Intermediate	Limited	Limited	Intermediate
ELAM (Cyprus)	Intermediate	Intermediate	Limited	Intermediate
Fidesz (Hungary)	Limited	Strong	Limited	Limited
Freedom & Direct Democracy (Czech Rep)	Intermediate	Strong	Limited	Limited
Freedom Party (Austria)	Limited	Strong	Limited	Intermediate
Freedom Party (Netherlands)	Strong	Strong	Limited	Limited

(Continued)

	Environmental crisis denialism		Ecobordering	
	Denial of evidence	Denial of national or political responsibility	Migration as environmental plunder	Migrant as environmental vandal
Golden Dawn (Greece)	Intermediate	Intermediate	Limited	Strong
Greek Solution (Greece)	Limited	Intermediate	Limited	Strong
Law and Justice Party (Poland)	Limited	Intermediate	Limited	Intermediate
National Rally (France)	Limited	Limited	Strong	Strong
Our Slovakia (Slovakia)	Limited	Intermediate	Limited	Limited
Sweden Democrats (Sweden)	Limited	Intermediate	Limited	Limited
Swiss People's Party (Switzerland)	Intermediate	Intermediate	Strong	Strong
The Finns Party (Finland)	Limited	Strong	Limited	Intermediate
The League (Italy)	Strong	Strong	Limited	Intermediate
Vlaams Belang (Belgium)	Limited	Strong	Strong	Limited
Vox (Spain)	Limited	Strong	Limited	Strong
United Kingdom Independence Party (UK)	Intermediate	Strong	Strong	Intermediate
United Patriots (Bulgaria)	Strong	Strong	Limited	Limited

Denialism is, of course, traditionally associated with the far-right (Lockwood 2018, Schaller and Carius 2019), and it remains a prominent characteristic of EFRP rhetoric. This is particularly the case amongst the far-right parties of Eastern Europe, where denialism or neglect continue to be the prevailing discursive tendencies. However, several parties in Western Europe in particular turned to an alternative communicative strategy in the build up to the 2019 European Parliament elections, which displaced (although occasionally co-existed with) discourses of denialism. Nine EFRPs demonstrated strong versions of what we term ecobordering, with a further six EFRPs displaying its logics in less prominent or consistent forms. These 15 parties, out of the 22 in our study, expressed at least one of the two distinctive rhetorical strains of ecobordering. Three EFRPs strongly conveyed both of these rhetorical strains and, as such, can be considered the exemplars of ecobordering. These three parties are the Swiss People's Party (SVP), the British National Party (BNP), and the National Rally in France.

The construction of ecobordering is thus geographically uneven. Iterations of the discourse were identified in the electioneering of Vox, Vlaams Belang, Alternativ für Deutschland and the United Kingdom Independence Party amongst other, and it is notable that National Rally and Golden Dawn have founded 'green' movements called 'New Ecology'

and ‘Green Wing’ respectively to enshrine nativist ideas of environmental protection (Schaller and Carius 2019, p. 83). Yet the discourse is most consistently and prominently utilised in the far-right parties of three Western European countries. With environmental issues becoming increasingly prominent on the political agenda in certain European countries (and becoming particularly salient when appealing to younger voters), the incentive to pivot to an alternative strategy which displays ‘green’ credentials in these areas is strong. The SVP and BNP now claim to have adopted an ‘ideology-free’ approach to environmental protection which ‘exposes’ immigration as the true danger to the environment (SVP [Swiss People’s Party] 2019a, BNP 2019). The focus on mass immigration and migration renders them the only authentically ‘green’ political parties in their respective countries according to their campaign material. This represents a significant and rapid discursive shift on environmental issues in the European far-right movement.

Two expressions of the ecobordering discourse propagated by the European far-right are evident and require closer inspection. The first form of ecobordering highlights the impacts of migration on national environmental resources and emphasises the link between immigration and population growth, in order to stoke fears of depleting resources and the exacerbation of local environmental issues. The second depicts ‘the migrant’ as a culprit of environmental degradation, due to a negligence of the local environment owing, ostensibly, to a lack of knowledge, ‘belonging’, or (emotional or financial) ‘investment’ in the local area. This is juxtaposed by the representation of white Europeans, or what some RFPs refer to as ‘natives’, as responsible custodians predisposed to the careful management of natural resources.

### ***Migration as environmental plunder***

The first expression of ecobordering – which we call *migration as environmental plunder* – highlights the environmental impacts of migration from the Global South. In this imaginary, Global South migration is depleting scarce natural resources and exacerbating environmental degradation within Europe. As with previous neo-Malthusian narratives, the expansion of populations through migration represents the untenable plunder of *national* nature. This represents the politicisation of the environmental impacts of Global South migration and the simultaneous depoliticisation of the environmental impacts of ‘native’ Global North populations.

Links between ‘mass immigration’, ‘overpopulation, and environmental damage have been forged by numerous EFRPs. The BNP’s claim to be Britain’s ‘only true Green party’ rests on the neo-Malthusian logic they alone ‘recognise that overpopulation – whose primary driver is

immigration ... is the cause of the destruction of our environment' (BNP 2019). The SVP's (contestable) calculations that Switzerland's one million migrants over 13 years had added 543,000 cars and 789 buses on the roads, 9,000 million extra miles driven, increased power consumption of 2 billion kilowatt hours, 59 billion litres of water and the usage of 454,000 apartments are disseminated to stoke neo-Malthusian fears of 'mass migration' resulting in the consumption or plunder of natural resource on a large scale (SVP [Swiss People's Party] 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). These claims remobilise longstanding colonial and eugenic-influenced ideas of overpopulation and environmental protection but are here linked to contemporary issues such as greenhouse gas emissions. There is also a professed fear, however, that migration will lead to an increased strain on finite natural resources and the threat posed to existing green spaces or agricultural land (UKIP 2019, AfD 2019), as well as undermine the cultural homogeneity upon which green action will depend (France24 2019).

Vlaams Belang link 'mass immigration' to the excessive use of resources and energy consumption in order to argue that 'an immigration stop is the best remedy for the further deterioration of our open spaces' (VB 2019, p. 88). The SVP's conclusion mirrors that of Vlaams Belang when they state that limiting immigration is needed to 'curb overpopulation', which is the 'greatest environmental killer' (SVP [Swiss People's Party] 2019a, 2019b, 2019d). The stark conclusion of the SVP's 2019 manifesto is that 'if you want to effectively protect the environment in Switzerland, you must fight mass immigration' (SVP [Swiss People's Party] 2019b). Through the narrow focus on overpopulation and immigration as the cause of environmental problems, the blame is shifted onto the movement and reproduction of racialised 'others'.

The youth wing of AfD have openly urged the party leadership to refrain from climate change denialism in order to adopt a comparable focus on the relationships between immigration, population growth, and ecological degradation (Eckert 2019). Cognisant of the importance of climate issues to younger generations of voters and the success of the German Greens, youth leaders of the AfD fear that a potential electoral advantage will be forfeited unless they present a 'green' message (Eckert 2019). The group later suggested the national AfD back a one-child policy in developing countries (Aronoff 2019), which reflected the Malthusian focus on Global South populations and their reproduction rather than Global North modes of production. In a similar vein, the AfD's Rainer Kraft has accused Social Democratic and Green politicians of endangering the environment by 'promoting mass migration to Europe, even though the CO2 footprint of the average European is ten times that of someone from Africa' (Ecowatch 2019). Here 'Africa' is used as a racialised proxy for all Global South migration;

stirring up colonial imaginaries of darkness and poverty and links this to environmental disaster.

This rendering of ecobordering tacitly accepts the significance of European lifestyles but ignores the specific economic drivers of ecological degradation, in order to accentuate and politicise the impacts of migration. The environmental crisis is framed as a problem of ‘the other’ seeking to enjoy the same carbon-intensive lifestyles as those in the Global North. Simultaneously, however, there is no explicit critique of unsustainable Global North lifestyles, which are tacitly accepted as suitable for ‘native’ populations’ and are thus actively depoliticised within this discourse. Through appealing to a racialised neo-Malthusian logic, immigration restrictions (in which mobility from the Global South is made highly visible) are rationalised as solutions to degradation. Meanwhile, this works to preserve the privileges of Global North populations (nationalised as ‘Swiss’, ‘British’, etc.) to continue to exploit and unsustainably consume natural resources. This reinforces the eugenicist and colonial rationale that certain populations are more legitimate and deserving holders of lifestyles that degrade the global commons. Here the threat to the natural world is not posed by Global North citizens but by the movement of ‘others’.

### ***Migrant as environmental vandal***

The second form of the ecobordering, which we call *migrant as environmental vandal*, actively disparages the character of ‘migrants’. Racialised Global South migrants are cast as ‘uncivilised’ threats to the local environment due to their character. They are depicted as inherently incapable or unwilling to manage natural resources or protect the natural world. National citizens, in contrast, are cast as inherently responsible custodians or stewards of nature. Natives have, in this form of imaginary, long ensured the sound management and sustainability of the environment within national borders, until the commencement of mass immigration.

Key to operationalising this imagery is the importance of belonging to an area in the nativist imaginary, with European citizens depicted as ‘rooted’ and ‘invested’ in the local area and migrants depicted as ‘rootless’ and ‘uninvested’. Marine Le Pen of the National Rally in France made this brand of nativist environmentalism a key element of her rhetoric ahead of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections (France24 2019). Le Pen argued: ‘environmentalism [is] the natural child of patriotism, because it’s the natural child of rootedness . . . if you’re a nomad, you’re not an environmentalist . . . Those who are nomadic . . . do not care about the environment; they have no homeland’ (cited in Adler 2019). Taking her lead from close ally and National Rally MEP Hervé Juvin (2019), who has long advocated ‘nationalistic green localism’, she claimed that concern for the immediate

environment is inherently national and that Global South migrants constitute a threat to national homogeneity, belonging, and native custodianship.

The concepts of belonging and investment are used to conflate nativism with environmental protection here; an inherent connection between the land and the heritage of belonging, ownership and bloodline (Valluvan 2019). The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) 2019 portrays their voters as unassuming cultivators and custodians of natural beauty in their ‘homeland’, which can be traced back to ‘ancient civilisations’. Meanwhile, the SVP take great pride in claim it ‘is not the party of environmental theorists, but the party of environmental practitioners; the farmer, the forester, the tradesman. You do not have to tell them about the careful use of natural resources’ (SVP [Swiss People’s Party] 2019a). Santiago Abascal proclaimed the green credentials of Vox by declaring an intention to ‘sensibly protect the environment’, which amounted to ‘protecting the rural community and farmers, who are the real people who take care of the natural environment. To defend our culture, our traditions and our roots’ (Vox 2019). Here the ‘true’ nation is presented in rural communities and farmers, which are imagined to be free of migration and multiculturalism that ‘blemish’ urban spaces (although in reality agriculture in much of Europe relies heavily on the exploitation of migrant labour). In this way, far-right parties address, and present, their constituents as the superior protectors of European nature. They posit that belonging to an area is a vital component of effective environmental stewardship, and that belonging is shaped by racialised and patriarchal imaginaries of the ‘farmer’ or ‘forester’ figure, akin to Burke’s ‘little platoons’.

This serves to fetishise ‘ancient’ connections of blood and soil in ways which echo eco-fascist notions of environmentalism. This remains evident in Golden Dawn’s assertion that ‘the environment is the cradle of our race, it mirrors our culture and civilisation, and it is therefore our duty to protect it’ (Golden Dawn 2020). ‘Blood and soil’ imagery can be seen even more explicitly in the infamous white supremacist Richard Spencer’s manifesto inaugurating the 2017 ‘Unite the Right’ rally (Forchtner 2019b). This links to, and takes inspiration from, many of the conservative and eco-fascist debates in the US in the 1960s, but is renewed by the anti-immigrationism that saturates European politics and presents migration as a threat to culture, ‘social cohesion’, and national security (Baldwin 2013).

This focus on ‘natives as custodians’ relies on a naturalised hierarchy of belonging reflective of colonial logics of European white supremacy. An aptitude for sustainably managing nature (or ‘homeland’) is supposedly an inherent feature of ‘native’ Europeans, whether that be due to tireless pastoral labour, a superior sense of consideration, or the superior regulations limiting industrial emissions (Danish People’s Party 2019, Freedom Party of Austria [FPÖ] 2019, Vox 2019, The Finns Party 2019, SVP [Swiss People’s Party] 2019a). This corollary is that natives bear no responsibility for

ecological degradation; indeed, they are unequivocally committed to their defending and cultivating their 'roots'. In contrast, Global South migrants are viewed as uncivilised, irresponsible, reckless or un-invested in the local area. As such, they are understood to be active threats to conservation efforts. As a result, regions with high levels of immigration are supposedly more likely to experience a range of local environmental issues, including littering, animal cruelty or killing protected species, illegal settlements in green spaces, forest fires, over-fishing, the loss of 'indigenous' plants, and the destruction of 'national beauty' (Golden Dawn 2020, The Sun 2016, Greek Solution 2019, Vox 2019, BNP 2019). The parallels with how (former) colonised peoples are depicted as 'dirty' and 'uncivilised' (McClintock 1995), irrevocable threats due to the inability to assimilate to national 'cultural practices', helps render this imagery intelligible. Racialised metaphors of migrants from the Global South as an invasive 'species' ('hordes' or 'swarms'), used by EFRPs and tabloid newspapers alike (Jones 2015, BBC 2015), accentuate the sense of imminent environmental danger.

Migrant camps, such as the 'Calais Jungle', are frequently weaponised by the far-right to insinuate that migrants are a threat to nature, through presenting a misleading binary framing of a harmonious and sustainable environment 'before' followed by squalor 'after' (Jolly 2018). The French far-right movement present informal migrant camps in Northern France as an environmental catastrophe, focussing on the prevalence of tents and mattresses, litter, trampled crops, and traffic volumes as the transformation of 'Europe's cultural centre' into a 'third world migrant jungle' (BBC 2016, Voice of Europe 2018). Calls to turn existing migrant camps into 'environmental protection' areas, which would legally facilitate the expulsion of migrants from the land, have followed these claims. To reinforce this binary between migrants and nature in the minds of voters, the National Rally have begun transforming Hénin-Beaumont into a 'sustainable city', mimicking acclaimed Green Party initiatives in Loos-en-Gohelle and Grande-Synthe (Onishi 2019). These appeals to conservation tend to both dehumanise migrants as 'litter' and aid their racialised expulsion through restrictive immigration policies, violent policing methods, and deportation (Dhesi *et al.* 2018).

In this way, the language of responsible stewardship, which was so central to settler colonial projects, is deployed to justify virulent anti-immigrationism. Just as colonised peoples were presented as 'poor stewards' of their lands to justify conquest in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in imperial projects of conservation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ecobordering constructs a looming threat to European nature posed by an influx of migrants. Both forms of ecobordering explored above (plunder and vandalism) imply an irreconcilable conflict between human mobility and environmental protection. This marks an important shift in terms of how EFRPs are mobilising long-



standing ideas, but with a greater emphasis on the contemporary ‘domestic’ environmental risks of immigration in which Global South migration is made hyper-visible. Immigration purportedly threatens to disrupt the sound and previously sustainable management of nature by native populations (Valluvan 2019, p. 100–101). Conservation in these terms becomes the bedfellow of anti-immigration policies, restrictive and violent border policies. Exclusionary border policies are presented as a strategy of conservation; impeding the plunder and vandalism of nature. Whilst purporting to be about protecting nature, the schema justifies violent border practices that in the context of the European migrant crisis are largely focussed on people moving from the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, at the same time as it feeds nationalist claims to superior ‘civilisation’.

These ideas are variegated across the nations and regions of Europe and fed through localised struggles and ethno-nationalist projects, but they share broadly familiar logics. Whilst the discourse of ecobordering is tied to the histories of colonialism, conservative environmentalism, and eco-fascism, what we also reveal is that rather than merely part of the wider milieu of far-right ideology, environmentalism has become a more explicit rationale of border and anti-immigration restrictions. One key change is that the figure of the Global South migrant is not only treated as an ‘inferior’ custodian of nature, but an explicit threat to European ecologies (or what some parties refer to as ‘homeland’). The broad discursive shift towards ecobordering threatens to alter perceptions of environmental degradation and ‘greenwash’ violent forms of statecraft centring on border control.

### **Camouflaging capitalism: disguising the engines of ecological degradation**

The economic dynamics ignored, and thus obscured, by the ecobordering discourse are just as important as the imaginaries revived. It is important to note that the ecobordering framing of ecological degradation entirely fails to locate its primary causes in capitalist systems of production and consumption that span the global economy (Newell and Paterson 2010, Koch 2012, Newell 2013, Moore 2016). It is these systems of production and consumption that generate high levels of greenhouse gas emissions and/or require the continual extraction of natural resources, whilst simultaneously reproducing inequalities between Global North and South.

The causal link between industrialisation and the rise of global greenhouse gases can be traced back as far as the industrial revolution (Jarvis *et al.* 2012). The primary industry culpable for greenhouse gas emissions and climate change is the fossil fuel industry, with one study claiming that 70% of global emissions since 1988 can be traced back to the extraction and commodification of fossil fuel energy by only 100 companies (Carbon Disclosure Project

2017). Complicit in generating these emissions, however, are the other industries dependent upon cheap energy for production practices (including the aviation and automotive industries) and the public policies enabling or facilitating this production. A series of other pressing environmental issues also have their roots in various practices of production and consumption in the global economy, including deforestation, air and water pollution, ocean acidification, and biodiversity loss, which are strongly linked to the operations of construction, agriculture, mining, and chemical industries (Newell 2013, Klein 2014, Moore 2016). Progress on tackling the ecological crisis has proven to be so elusive largely because the short-term profitability that accompanies extractive capitalism has been consistently prioritised (politically and culturally) over the protection of 'the global commons' in the Global North (Brand and Wissen 2012). This is manifest, for example, in governments shielding business practices from burdensome environmental regulations, subsidising companies responsible for ecological degradation, and financing the infrastructure which further facilitates environmentally deleterious forms of economic growth. These patterns of production, finance, trade, and policy, and who profits from them, are key to understanding the ecological crisis.

The ecobordering diagnosis of the ecological crisis entirely disregards this structural relationship between the ecological crisis and the operations of the global economy. In neglecting this relationship, ecobordering serves to 'camouflage' capitalism in an attempt to politically sustain the economic status quo; a *de facto* concealment and defence of Global North economies, whose wealth was accumulated through the violence of colonialism, this is sustained by artificial illusions to nature and the spectre of militarised protection if necessary.

The proponents of ecobordering seek to obscure and politically sustain the economic status quo in a context of grotesquely uneven distributions of capital accumulation and ecological risk. Oxfam's calculations show that the poorest half of the global population are only responsible for 10% of annual GHGs, with the richest 10% responsible for 50% (Oxfam 2015). Yet it is those in the Global North who benefit most from the global economy that are least exposed to ecological degradation, whilst the populations that remain peripheralised in the global economy are set to be the geo-political inheritors of displaced ecological risk. This is compounded by the knowledge that the 'winners' and 'losers' of the global economy are structural legacies of European colonialism and industrialisation, made possible by resource extraction, dispossession, slavery, exploitation, and dispossession of colonised people (Blackburn 2011, Sealey-Huggins 2017)

Existing imperial global power relations continue to structure political apathy to and policy inaction on climate issues in the Global North. As Ghosh notes, the close relation between differentials of power and GHGs

should lead us to conclude that ‘the distribution of power . . . lies at the core of the climate crisis’ (Ghosh 2016, p. 146). The relations of production – often imposed by force on countries during the colonial period – have resulted not only in expropriation, extractivism, and plunder (Robinson 1983), but also in the production of – and the exposure of the Global South to – the extreme risks presented by this century’s climate crisis (Oxfam 2015, Piketty and Chancel 2015). This geo-political division of financial enrichment and ecological risk represents a double injustice.

These global injustices would only be compounded by what ecobordering seeks to rationalise; the imposition of climate apartheid. The racialised interpretation of the Anthropocene framing of the ecological crisis disingenuously places Global South migration, rather than extractivist capitalism, at the centre of the crisis. Eschewing structural causes of degradation, both ‘migrant as vandal’ and ‘migration as plunder’ variants of ecobordering seek to justify border securitisation in order to contain and restrict Global South migration at a time of heightening ecological risk that is likely to cause and necessitate more human mobility.

The recognition of economic–ecological relationships belies the racialised neo-Malthusian supposition that migration drives environmental depletion via supporting population growth (Moore 2016). The corollary of empirical political economy analyses of ecological degradation is that we require a contemplation of the economic transformations necessary to preserve the natural world, and the forms of statecraft which can help steer these economic transformations in the context of colonial legacies of dispossession and global inequalities of wealth (Scoones *et al.* 2015, Sealey-Huggins 2017, Parasram and Tilley 2018, Klein 2019, Bailey 2020, 2021). Crucially, if the ecological crisis is to be successfully mitigated then this will only be achieved through policies that target the very same economic and societal actors, which ecobordering seeks to insulate from criticism. As such, the exponents of ecobordering offer no genuine programme of mitigation but works to conceal alternatives and shield already privileged populations from the ravages of the crisis.

Through disingenuously framing borders as climate solutions, ecobordering serves as a justification for the further securitisation of regional, national, and private property borders. They do so despite borders constituting significant political barriers to the provision of refuge to climate migrants fleeing decreasingly habitable regions and the transformation of the industries propelling numerous forms of degradation (Baldwin 2013). The imagery of local custodians sustaining local areas may resonate with privileged Global North electorates, but its veracity as a route to conservation is belied by the ways in which territorial borders are being utilised by states, corporations, and landholders to exacerbate degradation, and the violence those borders enact on people moving for refuge, asylum, or better life chances.

## Conclusion

An empirical analysis of 22 EFRPs reveals an emergent and distinctive discourse we have conceptualised as ecobordering. Whilst denialism previously dominated the environmental discourses of European far-right political parties, ecobordering responds to the rising environmental concerns of European electorates by engendering fears about the supposedly active threat of immigration to previously ‘pure’ and ‘sustainable’ spaces of national nature, and thus presents borders as forms of environmental protection. Through normalising ethno-nationalist, neo-Malthusian, and eco-fascist logics, this emerging electoral strategy directs attention away from the systemic and socio-economic drivers of contemporary ecological degradation and channels anxieties into anti-immigrationism. As a corollary, it prescribes a form of statecraft concentrated on border security rather than systemic economic transformation; an apocryphal programme of environmental protection.

Furthermore, ecobordering mendaciously seeks to diagnose the *symptoms* of ecological degradation as *cause*. The depiction of border securitisation as forms of environmental protection emerges at a time when immigration is rising *because* of climate change. The injustice of this *de facto* attempt to rationalise ‘climate apartheid’ is only compounded by the systematic exploitation of the Global South’s natural resources and labour in the global economy which has primarily benefitted Global North populations and brought the planet to the point of ecological collapse. Ecobordering thus ultimately threatens to rationalise the duality of Global North populations enjoying the spoils of an environmentally deleterious global economy whilst poorer populations, predominantly but not solely in the Global South, become restricted to precarious livelihoods in decreasingly inhabitable areas.

The potential electoral potency of fusing border security and climate issues – however fallaciously – underlines the importance of academic engagement with ecobordering. The concept extends our understandings of contemporary environmental politics in Europe, postcolonial approaches to borders, and the politics of the ascendant far-right. Further research is needed on the evolution and adoption of ecobordering, its influence on public understandings of potential policy responses, the underlying motivations of its exponents, and the statecraft it successfully rationalises.

## Notes

1. We draw our definition of far-right parties from Forchtner (2019a) who argues that the far-right is defined by ‘linking membership in the nation to biological/racial and/or cultural traits’ as well as varying tendencies toward ‘ethnopluralism, anti-socialism, proclivity for scapegoating “others”, and an uncritical view on the community’s historical past’ (Forchtner 2019a, p. 3). The 22 far-

right parties in this study have varied political histories and issues of contestation, and are situated in nations with varied economic circumstances, political systems, linguistic tendencies, and environmental issues. However, they share the aforementioned political attributes whilst occupying analogous political positions in the EU legislature.

2. Iterations of this discourse may also be found disseminated by political parties (and indeed by social media accounts) from elsewhere on the political spectrum or planet. As Hultgren (2015) notes, the contemporary fusion of environmentalism, anti-immigrationism, and far-right politics should not be thought of as an aberration of an otherwise 'progressive' environmental movement, but instead emerges out of a historical construction of nature which is already deeply classed, gendered, and racialised.

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