Right-Wing Extremism and Ecology

Denial and Appropriation of the Climate Crisis by the Far Right

Daniela Gottschlich

Introduction[1]

The current mode of production and living standard causes existential ecological destruction. The current level of CO_2 emissions and release of synthetic substances set the stability of the Earth system at fundamental risk. Therefore, people all over the world are demanding political solution strategies for the serious environmental problems, especially for the climate crisis. The consequences of global warming such as droughts and extreme weather events are aggravating existing crises such as chronic and acute food and water shortages, species extinction, and climate-induced migration (IPCC 2007, 2021). People in the Global South bear the brunt of the climate crisis. The Movement for Climate Justice and Fridays for Future therefore call for a systems change instead of climate change (e.g., People's Demands for Climate Justice 2018; Thunberg 2018; Fridays for Future 2022). It is primarily young people who are taking to the streets and raising their voices against climate policies around the world that have been inadequate to date. Environmental issues are more politicized than they have been in a long time and

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are receiving increasing social attention (Klein 2015; Almeida 2019). At the same time, the extreme right has grown in recent years. Authoritarian regimes, far-right networks, groups, and parties are gaining popularity worldwide (e.g., Rydgren 2008; Norris/Inglehart 2019). Antidemocratic positions are shared by an increasing number of people. While violent right-wing actors incite aggressiveness, intimidate antagonists, and commit murders, right-wing intellectuals are trying to take root in civil society. Positions, demands, and rhetorical strategies of the extreme right are partly adopted by other parties and thus move into the center of society – also in Germany (Zick, Küpper and Berghan 2019).

In my paper, I address the intersections of these developments. The paper was written in the context of the research project "*Rechte Landnahme (ReLa)*", which was funded by the German Federal Environment Agency from July 2019 and carried out by the Institute for Diversity, Nature, Gender and Sustainability (diversu e.V.).[2] The starting point for the research project was the realization that ecological issues are increasingly taken up by the extreme right in times of social polarization. This happens in two ways: On the one hand, right-wing actors deny man-made climate change. On the other hand, environmental issues are used to spread *völkisch* (racial-nationalist) ideas. There now exist hardly any environmental and nature conservation issues that are not also occupied by anti-democratic forces. In particular, the climate crisis is being used to advance a *völkisch* project of protecting an imagined "white race" from the effects of that very crisis (Strobl 2022, 7). In my paper I will show that

2 Together with Christine Katz and Wiebke Schwandt, I investigated what experiences representatives of environmental and nature conservation associations have had so far with the exertion of influence by right-wing actors and how the associations have reacted to it so far. For this purpose, we conducted an online survey among the member associations of the Deutscher Naturschutzring DNR e.V. The results of this survey (Gottschlich, Katz & Schwandt 2020) as well as the strategy paper (Gottschlich & Katz 2020), which was prepared together with representatives from the environmental sector, are available at https://www.diversu.org/. In addition, we have prepared a handout "Right-wing populism/right-wing extremism and ecology" (diversu & FARN 2020), which also forms the background of my paper.

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neo-Malthusian narratives ("There are too many people on the planet," "Fewer people – less ecological destruction") not only play into the hands of the ecofascist[3] project but can also be found at the center of the environmental movement. However, to effectively combat right-wing extremist ideologies in nature conservation and environmental protection, it is necessary to learn to identify what distinguishes emancipatory environmental protection from right-wing extremist environmental protection. A precise analysis is needed. This is because the underlying antidemocratic, inhuman and *völkisch* positions are not always visible at first glance.

1. Simultaneous Developments: Denial and Appropriation of the Climate Crisis Denial

The scientific and political preoccupation with climate change is described by a part of the extreme right as mere hysteria or as a big lie.[4] Accordingly, counterstrategies are not considered necessary. Even more: for climate deniers there is no reason to deal with the prevailing crisis-causing economic system in which a few live at the expense of nature, future generations, and most people in the Global South (Brand/Wissen 2017). Climate deniers, on the contrary, have an interest in keeping things the way they are. The following examples show that climate deniers defend their privileges through, first, policies of denial, banalization and relativization of the climate crisis; second, disparagement of climate justice activists; and third, exclusion and seclusion towards people who flee, not least due to the consequences of climate change.

3 I use the term ecofascism in reference to Sam Moore and Alex Roberts (2022).

4 Representative of this position is Fred Singer, who died in 2020. In 2007, Singer was involved in the founding of the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC) – a climate skeptic response to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The AfD-affiliated association EIKE has published many of his works in German.

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adelphi, an independent think-and-do tank on climate, environment, and development, studied the attitudes toward climate and energy policy of twenty-one right-wing populist/ extreme right-wing European parties (Schaller/Carius 2019). Election programs, statements and voting behavior were analyzed. The results show that in the European Parliament, half of all votes against resolutions on climate and energy come from the right-wing populist party spectrum. Two out of three right-wing populist members of parliament regularly vote against climate and energy policy measures. Climate protection is presented by right-wing populist parties as an elite project to be fought. Seven of twenty-one right-wing populist parties explicitly deny climate change, its man-made causes, and devastating consequences. These include the Dutch PVV of Geert Wilders or the FPÖ from Austria (Schaller/Carius 2019, 11). In Germany, the strategy of climate change denial is primarily advocated by the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and by actors close to them in the far right scene.

For an example, I will discuss below statements made by the environmental policy spokesman of the AfD parliamentary group Karsten Hilse,[5] which were examined by Konstantin Kopfmüller (2019). During a parliamentary debate on the federal government's climate protection program on September 26, 2019, Hilse first intervened with the following comment: "Climate change is a natural phenomenon. Humans with their CO_2 emissions do not contribute significantly to this climate change" (Hilse 2019, qt. Kopfmüller 2019, n.p.). In this way, the AfD politician ignores generally accepted scientific facts. To "prove" the thesis that there is no man-made climate change, Hilse in a second step presents the position of man-made climate change as controversial – which it is not in climate research. In his speech, Hilse cites, among other things, a letter to UN Secretary General António Guterres entitled "There is no climate emergency." This letter is said to have been signed by more than 500 scientists, contradicting the thesis of man-made climate change (Kopfmüller 2019).

5 Hilse is also a member of the Committee on the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety.

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This letter does exist (Berkhout et al. 2019), but it does not deny the human influence on climate change. The signatories argue that science should be less political; climate policy, on the other hand, should be more science-based. Uncertainties and exaggerations in climate change predictions should be clearly stated. The strategy Hilse uses here is to twist statements by others in such a way that they supposedly support the AfD position (in this case, denial of man-made climate change). Usually, scientific studies are quoted selectively; or they are taken out of context; or correct and deliberately false statements are mixed.

Another example of such a mixture of correct and incorrect statements, which serves the purpose of denying or relativizing the human contribution to global warming, is also provided by the first basic program adopted by the AfD at its party conference in Stuttgart in spring 2016. The journalistic project klimafakten.de, which aims to contribute to a scientifically based debate on climate issues, fact-checked the AfD's program – based on the IPCC's publications. The authors of klimafakten.de conclude that the AfD's basic program contains almost no statement that is compatible with the state of research on climate and climate change. Instead, there are a considerable number of blatantly false and misleading statements.

One example: In chapter twelve on energy policy, the AfD's "climate protection policy" is presented on one page. It also contains the following paragraph: "In the 20th century, the global mean temperature rose by about 0.8 degrees. Since the end of the 1990s, however, there has been no further increase, in contradiction to IPCC forecasts, although CO_2 emissions have risen more than ever during this period" (AfD basic program, 2016, 79). Referring to the above quote, the authors of klimafakten.de conclude that only the first sentence correctly reflects the state of science: Between 1880 and 2012, the global mean temperature actually rose by about 0.85 °C, according to the IPCC report. However,

> the claim that the earth has not warmed further since the 1990s is false. It is only true that after 1998 there was a phase during which air temperatures apparently rose more slowly. However, this is easily explained by natural fluctuations in the climate system. (Incidentally,

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> in the oceans, which absorb much greater amounts of heat than the atmosphere, the temperature rise continued unabated.)
> The years 2014 and 2015 then also brought new record values for globally averaged atmospheric temperatures. Therefore, there can be no talk of the warming having ended; at most, one could say that short-term, natural fluctuations have overlaid and at times obscured the long-term upward trend that continues to be observed. (klimafakten.de, n.d., n.p.; my translation)

The AfD sometimes also bases its own statements on the pseudo-scientific statements of the Jena-based association "EIKE – Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie," which seeks to sow doubt about man-made climate change. Contrary to its name, EIKE is not a scientific institute, but a climate-denialist lobby association based in Jena. Its motto is: "It is not the climate that is threatened, but our freedom!" (https://eike-klima-energie.eu). EIKE exists mainly as a website on which false reports can be found such as the claim that "worldwide weather services do not find trends towards more extreme weather" (https://eike-klima-energie.eu/die-mission/grundsatzpapier-klima/). From time to time the association organizes conferences with representatives of the American "Heartland Institute". One of its best-known representatives is the already mentioned climate denier Fred Singer, who died in 2020. The US-American institute was and is paid by the oil industry to carry out campaigns against the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. There can be no question of an ideology-free presentation of EIKE's energy and climate policy.[6]

6 See also https://www.klimaretter.info/forschung/hintergrund/10591-die-finanzierung-der-zweifel-am-klimawandel

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2. New Alliances: Climate Deniers and Opponents of Corona Measures

With the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, EIKE also began to spread doubt about the danger of the virus (Götze and Joeres 2021). Among the "freedom fighters" at so-called hygiene demos of the *Querdenker* movement, protesting the government's Covid measures, are vaccination opponents, but also right-wing extremists and climate deniers (Speit 2021). The common narrative of climate deniers and Covid skeptics is that "government regulation interferes with personal freedom" (Götze and Joeres 2021, 135). In addition to their aversion to state intervention, climate deniers and Covid skeptics are also united by a skepticism toward established science. In a remarkable study, Susanne Götze and Annika Joeres have demonstrated that many well-known climate deniers also raise their voices in social media or at demonstrations against the restrictive Covid measures – for example, the aforementioned Karsten Hilse:

> In the Bundestag, shortly after the attempted "attack" on the Reichstag building by "Querdenken" activists in the summer of 2020, he [Hilse] gives a speech – wearing a T-shirt of the movement. Publicly, he is taken away at an anti-Corona demonstration. Later, the Berlin police even investigated him on suspicion of a forged certificate that was supposed to exempt him from the mask requirement. (Götze and Joeres 2021, 138; my translation)

Another example of the intersection of climate and Covid denial is Heartland Institute President James Taylor's claim that the computer models on Covid-19 were as wrong as those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on global warming (Götze and Joeres 2021, 140).

Götze and Joeres identify yet another group that is decisively active in the scene of *Querdenker*: market-radical finance scientists who are both critical of Covid measures and hold inhumane positions regarding climate policy. For example, they cite Werner Müller, professor of accounting and controlling at Mainz University of Applied Sciences, who

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in spring 2020 coordinated a letter entitled "The damage of a therapy must not be greater than the damage of the disease," which served the AfD in the Bundestag as a template for a request to the federal government on the Covid measures. On his website, he had also referred to government politicians as "cattle" driven before the Covid crisis. Müller is also the author of a racist text on climate policy, in which he considers the return to colonialism to be suitable to better implement "German climate goals" in other parts of the world (qt. Götze and Joeres 2021, 138).

3. Climate Denial and Group-Based Misanthropy

The extreme right's reporting on climate-related issues is often accompanied by group-based misanthropy (FARN 2019). The concept of group-based misanthropy describes derogatory and exclusionary attitudes toward people based on their origin, sexuality, religion, or gender. This misanthropic attitude can be found, for example, in new-right magazines such as *COMPACT*,[7] which since 2015 has presented itself as the mouthpiece of the AfD and the islamophobic Pegida movement. The November 2019 issue of *COMPACT* is dedicated to the supposed climate delusion and the authors agitate against the Fridays for Future movement, against politicians of the Green party, migrants, and climate scientists. Repeatedly, especially the young well-known women of the climate justice movement like Greta Thunberg and Luisa Neubauer are exposed to sexist and insulting comments (Hoppenstedt 2020). In Facebook groups like "Fridays for Hubraum" privileged white men live out their murder and abuse fantasies against young female climate activists with impunity. In posts concerning the autistic Greta Thunberg, misogyny is paired with ableism. Matthias N. posted: "They put too many pills in the children's cereal," to which Stef I. replied: "As if she would come up with such a number on her own in her stupid autistic head. She belongs in psychiatric ward and locked away, the CO_2 bitch" (screenshot of Nicolaisen 2020). In addition, stickers are circulating on right-wing

7 COMPACT is published monthly. The editor-in-chief is Jürgen Elsässer.

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websites showing Greta Thunberg being killed by a car. There is a call to place these stickers directly above the exhaust pipe. And on the Facebook page, Milan H. asks: "How much does a contract killing cost?" to which Maik W. responds: "We can put that together as a group, then it will be enough for the whole parliament" (screenshot of Nicolaisen 2020).

While the disregard for democracy and human rights is found among the actors of the extreme right who deny climate change and ecological limits, construct climate policy as a threat to freedom, and want to maintain the fossilistic system of capitalism, it also pervades the publications of those who, in the face of the climate crisis, now argue that existing security systems should be geared toward controlling the problems resulting from environmental degradation (for U.S. policy, see Moore and Roberts 2022, 65ff.). A solidarity-based management of the climate crisis is not envisaged by the extreme right. As a strategy, far-right ecologism pursues, among other things, a racialization of ecological problems: it is the "others" who are to blame for the crisis, an argument to be found in the demagogic discourse on population growth.

4. Appropriation of the Climate Crisis

Already at the end of the 1990s, Oliver Geden (1999) warned against right-wing ecology and pointed out that it is often overlooked that a section of scientific ecology and the precursors of today's environmental movement have been historically entangled with a political strand that must be classified as right-wing. It may come as a surprise to many democratic, more left-wing nature conservationists and environmentalists that there is a connection between nature conservation and National Socialism, that antisemitic and *völkisch* ideologies have been used to enforce nature conservation goals, that racist continuities can be found in nature conservation and environmental protection, and that right-wing extremist actors are active against species extinction and for landscape and animal protection.

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At present, there are hardly any environmental and nature conservation issues that are not also nominally occupied by anti-democratic forces. Right-wing extremists protest for example against genetic engineering, practice organic farming, are interested in sustainable energy and mobility concepts, vegan nutrition and demand regional economic cycles. To investigate the historical and current linkages of German nature conservation and environmental protection with extreme right-wing and current *völkisch* movements, the Fachstelle Radikalisierungsprävention und Engagement im Naturschutz – FARN for short – was founded in October 2017 by NaturFreunde Deutschlands and Naturfreundejugend Deutschlands.

Nature conservation as a discourse and field of action, then, is not being newly discovered by right-wing agitators but is rather being rediscovered by them. Right-wing extremist actors refer to the beginnings of nature conservation, which go back to the time of German Romanticism and have democratic as well as authoritarian-*völkisch* lines of tradition (Heinrich, Kaiser and Wiersbinski 2015, 7). In addition, environmental and nature conservation issues are interesting for right-wing groups because they promise an image gain. With them, right-wing extremist actors can gain sympathy and appear to be able to connect with important societal matters. Strategically, right-wing actors use nature and environmental protection issues to bring their racist and *völkisch* ideologies to the center of society. Through concrete engagement in local nature conservation initiatives and protest campaigns, right-wing actors can approach potential electoral groups through joint action.

Finally, *völkisch* settlers and right-wing ecologists "also want to practically live their *völkisch*-nationalist worldview with their families, educate their children in nature and in their spirit, reawaken customs and folklore, and often practice natural religiosity" (Röpke and Speit 2019, 7). Neo-Nazis in Wendland, for example, not only breed old animal breeds, but are also convinced that there are also human races, each of which is assigned to a specific habitat. For adherents of this ethnopluralist "blood and soil" ideology, who assume an organic unity between a racially defined body with its settlement area, it seems to be a compelling thought "that a healthy people [*Volk*] also needs a healthy nature"

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(Melchert, qt. Staud 2015, n.p.; my translation). Nature conservation is thus seen as an instrument for preserving "the biological substance of the people [*Volk*]"; the slogan "nature conservation is homeland security" stands for the fight against everything supposedly foreign and fits into central right-wing narratives such as the "great population exchange" or "ethnopluralism".[8] In other words, when the extreme right advocates nature conservation and environmental protection out of conviction, it always conveys an image of society and mankind that is racist, anti-feminist and saturated with *völkisch* ideas. This far-right ecologism has been defined by Sam Moore and Alex Roberts as the "production and maintenance of racially defined hierarchies in and through nature" (Moore and Roberts 2022, 178).

In the following section, I will show how the debate around the climate crisis in the topic area of population growth is permeated by positions of such far right ecologism.

5. Population Growth and Climate Crisis

Currently, 8 billion people live on earth (DSW 2022). In 1999, the figure was still 6 billion. Thus, the world population is still growing. According to the latest studies (Vollset et al. 2020), the population will continue to grow until the middle of the century. In 2064, due to the forecast, it will probably peak at around 9.7 billion people in the world. Globally, the number will start to decline again from the middle of the century, falling to around 8.8 billion people by 2100. That would be about two billion people fewer than some earlier UN estimates had suggested. Nevertheless, the growth of the world population is considered a central crisis factor in the discourse about the carrying capacity of the earth – at least since the book *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich (1968) and the report of the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972) on the *Limits to Growth* famously made this argument. The scenarios of imminent collapse outlined therein are based on the thesis that, without population control, the population is

8 See the essay by Enrico Schlickeisen in this volume.

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growing too fast or even exponentially and thus exceeding the limit of the carrying capacity of the earth. This had already been claimed by the British theologian and national economist Thomas R. Malthus at the end of the eighteenth century regarding the limits of food production. In his *An Essay on The Principle of Population*, published in 1798, Malthus argued that the fundamental scarcity of nature conflicted with a growing human population. He assumed that people reproduce in geometric series (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, …), while food could only be increased in arithmetic series (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 …). This would lead to a growing disparity between food supply and demand. Malthus used this "population law" to justify poverty, disease, slums, and the resulting social unrest in the major English cities of his time. To avert the imminent catastrophe of overpopulation, he recommended, among other things, sexual abstinence, late marriage, investment in education and the abolition of state welfare for the poor. Because of their "predisposed libidinousness", the poor were themselves to blame if they reproduce beyond their means. Wars, epidemics, famines, to which the poorest of the poor fall victim because they are unable to take care of themselves, would help regulate the population. "Referring to Malthus' thought", Moore and Roberts write,

> some argued against aid measures for the population of colonial Ireland during the Great Famine (1845–1852). Nassau William Senior, a contemporary Oxford economist, opposed government famine relief on the grounds that the root cause of the famine was an overly large rural population that the soil simply could not feed. The only solution, therefore, was a sharp drop in population and birth rates – which is what the famine eventually led to. (Moore and Roberts 2022, 34)

In the current debate about the deteriorating climate crisis, neo-Malthusian arguments are increasingly reinterated: population growth is blamed for climate change (see, e.g., Ripple et al. 2017). Anti-natalist measures are demanded to lower the birth rate of the poor so that it is lower than the death rate thus leading to population decrease. One of the arguments put forth is that savings in CO_2 emission can be achieved

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more cost-effectively by investing in family planning than by promoting renewable technologies (e.g., Müller-Jung 2018).[9]

6. The Violence of Population Policy

Ignored in this debate about climate policy cost effectiveness is the fact that the history of population policy, especially anti-natalist policy, is full of examples of repressive measures; in the past fifty years critics have repeatedly pointed out the sexist, racist, and eugenic implications of anti-natalist population policy (e.g., Lindsay 1988; Wichterich 1988; Gottschlich 2000; Wilton 2013; Hartmann 2015; Murphy 2017). Examples can be found not only in China during the 35-year-long one-child policy, which relied on measures such as forced abortions up to the 7th and 8th month of pregnancy, forced adoptions abroad, sterilization, and fines, leading to infants abandoned out of desperation. Systematic forced sterilizations in India in the 1970s also became known. However, there were and are multiple other examples and a long history of forced sterilizations of Black, Indigenous, disabled, imprisoned or HIV-positive people in the Gobal North as well, as Susanne Schultz and I have pointed out elsewhere (Gottschlich and Schultz 2019). As recently as the late 1990s, a sterilization program in Peru sterilized about 300,000 people, the majority poor and indigenous women, within a few years. This often happened without their knowledge or consent. Some women were threatened that they would no longer receive food aid if they refused. Employees of the health system had to fulfill a certain number of sterilizations per month in order not to risk dismissal. Such quotas are typical of repressive population programs, as are "economic" incentive systems: in Bangladesh in the 1980s, women received boni for sterilizations that ensured the survival of the entire family for a few weeks. In

9 Joachim Müller-Jung refers to a study co-authored by John Bongaarts, a major representative of the U.S. population lobby. In it, the authors declare family planning to be one of the "most cost-effective" climate protection measures.

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India, women in some regions still receive cash or non-cash boni if they undergo sterilization (Gottschlich and Schultz 2019).

7. Entanglements of Climate Change and Population Growth Between Environmentalist and Far Right Discourses

In the discourse on sustainability in general and on the climate crisis in particular, feminist scholars have been warning for years against a revival of neo-Malthusian positions (see, for example, Gottschlich 2006; Hartmann and Barajas-Román 2009; Hendrixson and Hartmann 2018). The neo-Malthusian position that "population growth must be stopped" or that "a population decline is needed" and that "population policies are therefore necessary" can be found both among actors of the extreme right and in numerous scientific mainstream publications on the theme of sustainability, in positions of environmental associations, and among students of so-called green professions. This is what surveys and studies by diversu and FARN have shown. In the following section, I would like to discuss some of the results of this research in which I was involved and show that there are numerous interfaces in climate change policy for right-wing extremist strategies of appropriation.

Population growth is constructed in mainstream scientific discourse as one of the central environmental problems (see e.g. Ripple et al. 2017, 1026). It is claimed that it grew "uncontrolled" (Gesang 2014a, 13) like a "cancer cell" (Gesang 2014b, 19). We also find this construction among actors of the new right: for example, Felix Menzel[10] formulated the fol-

10 Journalist Felix Menzel is close to the far-right Institute for State Policy in Schnellroda, founded by Götz Kubitschek. He publishes in the Antaios Verlag, among others. He also founded the youth portal/magazine *Blaue Narzisse* in Chemnitz. *Blaue Narzisse* has been published since 2004 and has been supplemented by an Internet presence since 2006. The magazine is dedicated to youth topics as well as political content. According to its own statement, it takes a conservative stance. Political scientists regard *Blaue Narzisse* as belonging to the New Right.

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lowing as the first of his seven theses for a conservative-ecological turn, published in the right-wing business magazine *Recherche Dresden*:

> Overpopulation is the mother of all environmental problems. The world population is heading for twelve billion people in the 22nd century. Against the gigantic increase in energy demand, renewable energies are therefore only a drop in the bucket. The ecosystem will hardly be able to cope with hundreds of millions of new meat eaters, hygiene product users, car drivers and smartphone owners. The world's population must therefore be stabilized at a lower level – otherwise there is a threat of irreversible eco-collapse (Menzel 2019, n.p.; my translation).

As a "solution" Menzel suggests linking German development aid to population reduction measures, especially in states that have "extreme youth surpluses" (Menzel 2019, n.p.; my translation). It is no coincidence that Menzel uses the term "overpopulation". Those who speak of "overpopulation" thereby claim that there are already too many people. But who are the supernumeraries at present? The speach of "overpopulation" pursues a purposeful *Othering*: it is the others who are redundant; it is the poor, the Black, the Indigenous, the migrant populations who are construed as "too many." However, the term "overpopulation" is also used in various contributions in the mainstream media. Representative here is the publication *Far too many people. How overpopulation could be slowed down* by the online news and knowledge portal Quarks.de directed especially at a young audience (Quarks.de 2021, n.p.). According to its own information, Quarks provides its readers and viewers with the "scientific classification, explanations and facts on current debates." The controversial and highly problematic thesis of "overpopulation" is presented as an indisputable fact. Even more: the term is constructed as "scientifically serious" by using it in the headline of an article of a widely circulated public science platform. Readers' comments below the article suggest active euthanasia, a one-child policy for the next thirty years, a reduction of child benefits, and a restriction of medical care – demanded also in the name of the environment. In the presence of such pervasive interfaces

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between environmentalist and demographic arguments, right-wing actors whose population policy follows a *völkisch* agenda have an easy time manipulating mainstream views.

The thesis that population growth is responsible for environmental problems is also reproduced to some extent in the environmental association scene und environmental movement (Gottschlich et al. 2020). It is shared by a majority of students of so-called "green professions", according to the results of a university survey conducted by the Fachstelle Radikalisierungsprävention und Engagement im Naturschutz (FARN 2022), in which 804 students across Germany participated from March to May 2021 and which was conducted in cooperation with the Institute for Diversity, Nature, Gender and Sustainability (diversu e.V.). The aim of the survey was to collect data on the current situation at universities concerning the historical and current linkages of German nature and environmental protection with nationalist, *völkisch* and racist currents in teaching, as well as students' knowledge of these topics. The evaluation of the survey shows that the crossovers between "nature conservation, environmental protection and right-wing extremism" have hardly been critically examined in university teaching to date. The vast majority of students support the democratic system, advocate the protection of minorities and reject authoritarian structures. Nevertheless, there is an openness to right-wing positions and models of thought in the surveyed group regarding their ecological stance. This applies not least to the issue of population policy. 55 percent of respondents agree with the statement that the causes of many environmental problems are to be seen in population development. In this context, almost one third of the students are in favor of anti-natalist measures in the Global South (FARN 2022). It can be assumed that most students are not aware of the neo-colonial thought patterns involved. Here, decolonial educational work is needed to make clear the consequences of a call for population policies. The call for population control policies in the Global South interferes with its inhabitants' rights for self-determination.

The fact that statements of the extreme right in the field of population policy cannot easily be distinguished from statements coming from the center of society or from the field of environmental protection has

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yet another effect. It leads to the fact that students who critically deal with population policy usually attribute racist statements to right-wing extremist actors – but not to actors from the environmental field. Asked to consider the political origins of the following quote, students in my seminars almost always assume that its author belongs to the far right:

> In view of the dramatic increase in population, we are faced with the dilemma that all nature conservation must inevitably end where the human avalanche overruns everything. [...] Only if this main concern of mankind, the stemming of the overpopulation flow, is ensured, will there be any meaningful prospect of building a thoroughly improvable environment, of shaping our civilized landscapes so that they remain worthy of being called "home," of continuing to cultivate our ancestral cultural values, and of surviving peacefully.

The astonishment is great when they learn that the sentences were written in 1964 by Helmut Weinzierl (1964/1993, quoted from Oliver Geden 1999, 228; my translation). Weinzierl was the federal chairman of the German section of Friends of the Earth (BUND) from 1983 to 1998. The fact that anti-humanist positions can also be found in nature conservation organizations baffles many of the younger environmentalists in particular, who associate environmental protection with emancipatory positions. Oliver Geden has examined Weinzierl's writings in detail and worked out the central importance that the assumed "population explosion" had for Weinzierl's view of the world and of nature (Geden 1999, 224ff.). Again and again, Weinzierl stirred up fears of people from the Global South with catastrophic images of "human avalanches" and of the "overpopulation current". Although Weinzierl is of the opinion that all world problems can be traced back to "overpopulation", he does not limit the problem to the Global South. Even Central Europe seems too densely populated to him as early as the mid-1980s, prompting him to ask, "Is nature conservation worthwhile here at all?" (Weinzierl 1985, 222; qt. Geden 1999, 227; my translation).

Right-wing extremists, on the other hand, apply double standards: on the one hand, they declare population growth in "emerging and

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developing countries" or in the Global South to be the biggest problem for environmental protection, warning of "refugee floods" and wanting to link "development aid" to strict population control policies. On the other hand, they demand for Germany "the consistent promotion of families with many children" in order to counteract the alleged "foreign infiltration" and to avert the "imminent death of the people." These voices, then, advocate anti-natalist measures for countries of the Global South and pro-natalist policies in Germany. Part of the AfD's pro-natalist policy, moreover, is decidedly against abortions in the domestic context but couples this campaign with anti-migration demands: election posters show pregnancy bellies with the slogan "New Germans? Let's do it ourselves!". On one of its latest posters, the AfD combines population policy demands with the rejection of anti-Covid measures in the form of slogans such as: "Lieber ohne Gummi als mit Maske. Yes to real family policy" (qt. Schäffer, 2021). Such racist and xenophobic statements are just as much part of ecofascist discourse as the obsession with "racial purity" as an indicator of an imagined "natural order" (Moore and Roberts 2022, 156).

Conclusion

Whereas man-made climate change was denied for years by large parts of the far right, the far right now also racializes the climate crisis and its effects by constructing population growth as the main cause of the global environmental problem. Right-wing propaganda displaces the serious issues of a global food crisis, fossil-based mobility and energy consumption, and the growing disparity between the propertied few and the dispossessed many on to a freak discussion about population distribution in which, bluntly speaking, the fertility and birth-rate of non-white women needs to be controlled. The intersectional critique of the underlying racist and social Darwinist assumptions of such a neo-colonial and neo-Malthusian perspective, as well as the inhumane implications of anti-natalist population policies, would have to be taken much more notice of in nature conservation and environmental protection de-

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bates. For neo-Malthusian positions are not only held by the extreme right but also by some environmentalists and climate scientists. What is needed is a general change of perspective in the debate on population development and the climate crisis, one that clearly abandons concepts of the planet's carrying capacity and that shifts attention from the individual to the structural level and thus to the real environmentally destructive consequences of the current global economic system (see also Hendrixson 2019).

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