Acad. Quest. (2014) 27:18–27
DOI 10.1007/s12129-013-9402-3

INEQUALITIES

Ecologism: The Campus Cult of Victimhood

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Published online: 19 January 2014

Campus egalitarians doth protest too much. They seek not equality but the superiority conferred by victimhood. They yearn to be oppressed—or rather, to be perceived as sufferers—so as to take command of the university, the state, and through them, of you. Radical campus egalitarians are the new elect, the chosen, the saved. They are, in short, the new religious, however much, in conventional terms, they may appear to be unchurched.

This applies not simply to victimization's usual suspects—certain approved minorities—but also to campus climate crusaders, who may at first seem remote from the victim-group model. From the wretched of the earth to Wretched Earth, the planet itself is now the downtrodden. And beneath this delicious descent into climate chaos lurks the urge to dominate—to cleanse the globe, not of carbon dioxide, but of heretics, of deniers, of the new unchurched. Faith, salvation, and superiority, not equality, are at play on campus today.

The notion that ecology crusaders are faithful followers of a novel secular religion may not be new, yet rarely has it been deployed with such penetration and gusto as in Pascal Bruckner's newly translated 2011 book, *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse: Save the Earth, Punish Human Beings*.[1]

[1]Pascal Bruckner, *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse: Save the Earth, Punish Human Beings* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013). Originally published as *La fanaticisme de l'Apocalypse* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fascelle, 2011). Further references to the translation of this work are cited parenthetically within the text.

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Bruckner is a French intellectual who, while no conservative, is a dedicated critic of leftist excess. What *Fanaticism* lacks in systematicness and sociological grounding it more than makes up for in insight and suggestiveness. Bruckner helps take us where we ought to want to go, toward a religious theory of the secular leftist present. Unpacking Bruckner's gift of a book and building on what it has to teach us repays the effort.

What is our carbon footprint, asks Bruckner, but "the gaseous equivalent of Original Sin"? (2). Raised in Jesuit schools, where spiritual exercises and persistent self-scrutiny under priestly supervision were the order of the day, Bruckner knows whereof he speaks. Modern secularism disparages traditional moral disciplines, yet Bruckner understands their nobility and appeal. That is how he has glimpsed the exertions of his pious Catholic boyhood incarnated anew in green neo-asceticism.

Thanks to this new green faith, our smallest acts have incalculable repercussions. The world seems literally to hang on whether we leave the water running as we brush our teeth, take the subway rather than drive, or flick off the switch as we exit a room. The humblest objects are alive with meaning. Bruckner calls it "post-technological animism" (33). Environmentalist discourse, he suggests, is a variation on the Fall of Genesis: eating of the fruit of the tree of scientific knowledge has driven us from God-given Paradise. "At the same time that Europe denies its Christian roots," writes Bruckner, "it manifests them in its slightest references" (41).

The slyly Christian character of the new environmentalism emerges most clearly in climate apocalypticism, says Bruckner. I would correct Bruckner here—the new environmentalism is more like a deformed imitation of Christianity than a faithful reproduction. Thus, the "Doomsday Clock" that has famously graced the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* since 1947 once calculated our alleged proximity to nuclear holocaust. Bruckner points out that propinquity to a world-ending climate catastrophe has now been added to the magazine's reckoning, reviving "the Christian terrors of the Last Days" (17).

Bruckner calls our yearning to insert ourselves into a historical narrative of ultimate significance "the seductive attraction of disaster" (title, chap. 5). He compares environmentalism's apocalyptic narrative to the technique of a fire-and-brimstone sermon, with horrors of sin and punishment accumulating until congregants grasp desperately for the slim hope of salvation held out at the close. Since the end is near, we must drop all we're doing to prepare. For

fanatical climate activists, writes Bruckner, Earth has become a veritable "mineral and vegetable Christ" (16).

Not only has the West's disavowed Christianity returned in a new green guise, argues Bruckner, so has a despised and disowned capitalism. Waste nothing. Calculate everything. "The commercial spirit," says Bruckner, "has contaminated even its most bitter enemies, who speak its language even as they seek to demolish it" (151). Although Bruckner doesn't invoke it by name, green neo-asceticism is obviously a mutant offspring of Max Weber's Protestant Ethic. Bruckner dubs it the "rehabilitation of meanness and stinginess" (151).

The religious character of modern ecological activism drives the movement's fanaticism. Religions need not be fanatical, of course. Yet a belief system that supplies an otherwise absent purpose in life to young secular activists—while masquerading as "settled science"—seems particularly liable to zealotry. Climate activism has had neither the time nor the self-awareness to negotiate the sort of settlement with civil society long ago struck by older faiths. Surely this is part of its charm for adherents.

Bruckner never directly engages with the details of climate science. Implicitly, he accepts the notion that human beings have made some significant contribution to global warming. Yet he is also clearly skeptical of the most apocalyptic climate forecasts, while far more open than hardline climate activists to deploying geo-engineering and capitalism to address whatever challenges the world may face from warming. For Bruckner, in any case, such truth as inheres in ecological warnings does little to explain the rise of the movement itself: "We always choose the misfortune against which we want to protect ourselves" (25).

At a moment when Western young people face peril from a burgeoning social welfare state balanced treacherously on ever-fewer shoulders, Bruckner's point hits home. Millennials could just as well be demanding federal spending cutbacks, or rushing to marry and have children as a way of saving the world. That they have embraced a competing apocalypse requires explanation.

Bruckner aims to distinguish prudent measures designed to mitigate clearly defined and proximate environmental risks, from sweeping transformations wrought in fear of an alleged climate apocalypse generations hence. This, he writes, is the difference between "reasonable warning and sterile panic" (62). It is also meant to unmask catastrophism as an "infantile disease"

eroding and discrediting environmentalism (3). Bruckner, in other words, hopes to save the movement from itself by distinguishing between reasonable environmentalism and the fanatical religion-in-disguise he names "ecologism" (2).

The germ of tyranny lies in religious ecologism. Bruckner reminds us that political absolutism and ideological fanaticism are seldom more than a few steps apart. Given the extent to which energy use is now implicated in the details of our lives, the potential for green activism to devolve into dictatorship is nearly limitless. The great lesson of the twentieth century, Bruckner recalls, is that, "in the wrong hands, the best of causes can degenerate into an abomination" (159).

The specter of a new green tyranny points us back to the Marxist precedent. Ecologism, for Bruckner, descends directly from Marxist as well as Christian roots. For the past fifty years, he observes, we've been sliding from scapegoat to scapegoat. Socialism identified capitalism as the author of human misery. Third Worldism held the West responsible for mankind's pain. Now ecologism fingers humanity itself as the villain, while including and encompassing those earlier formulations.

The globe, says Bruckner, has become the climactic capstone to a long list of emblematic victims: Jews, blacks, slaves, proletarians, colonized peoples. The planet itself is now "the paragon of all the wretched" (16). The planet, so to speak, is the new proletariat. Thus is all the foolishness of bolshevism, Maoism, and Trotskyism recapitulated in an ecological frame. The greens, warns Bruckner, are a ruling elect in waiting, believing that they alone "have emerged from the cave of ignorance," while the rest of us languish, blind (19).

The strength of *Fanaticism* lies in Bruckner's arresting formulations and penetrating analogies. Yet here lies a weakness as well. Bruckner elevates style over systematic analysis. In precisely what measure and manner have a transformed Christianity and Marxism been yoked together and reborn in ecologism? What drives the process? What makes it change? Bruckner devotes relatively little systematic effort to answering such questions. In fairness, such inquiries may be, at least in part, beside the point. Perhaps ecologism is intrinsically fragmentary, drawing haphazardly from the grab bag of Western ideological history. French literary panache may at points be better suited than Weber's magisterial sociology to sifting through a pseudo-religious postmodern stew.

Yet surely the social origins of ecologism are worth probing. Bruckner himself addresses the question at points, if less rigorously then one might like. So let us begin with his reflections.

Bruckner roots the triumph of ecologism in the collapse of the Cold War. "Give Me Back My Enemy" is the title of his first chapter. In other words: find me a world-threatening substitute for the Soviet menace. Although Bruckner doesn't explicitly cite Freudian social thought, he seems to have it in mind here. For Bruckner, all societies accumulate a certain quantum of collective aggression that needs to be directed onto something. The post-Cold War West lacks an external enemy, while prosperity has rendered us soft. Collective psychic relief under such circumstances requires a trumped-up enemy as well as lurid and violent spectacles.

In the absence of the Soviet opponent, the enemy is us, or rather, a disavowed and hated aspect of ourselves: an allegedly globe-destroying capitalism, of course. "Left alone on the field," says Bruckner, "capitalism now weighs on the planet's fate like a *fatum*: it is not credited with any good deed, but is held responsible for all harms" (9).

Those harms, in turn, are lovingly imagined via ecological disaster scenarios that function like horror movies. Perhaps Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* is best understood as an updated 1950s horror film for adults, with undertones of quasi-religious seriousness. As with all horror films, fear is tamed and kept at a distance (the future) for purposes of amusement. In the placid and prosperous world-at-the-end-of-history, climate horror stories are all that remain to thrill us. Climate catastrophism, says Bruckner, is little more than "the contented sigh of big cats purring in comfort" (51).

It's striking that Bruckner's brief historical sociology begins with the collapse of communism in 1989, nearly two decades after the first Earth Day in 1970. One can argue that the end of the Cold War accelerated an ideological movement that theretofore lacked significance. Yet that is to underplay the impact of environmentalism's early decades, while omitting a central part of the social puzzle. Ecologism is unquestionably a creature of the sixties, one of the distinctive cultural movements launched in that era. A satisfying account of it must connect the conditions of the 1960s, when the modern movement emerged, to its current world-spanning incarnation. Let us therefore supplement and extend Bruckner's account with our own historical sociology of ecologism.

The 1960s was a time of heightened individualism. Post-World War II America had seen a decline in small towns and tight-knit urban ethnic

neighborhoods, and a corresponding growth in the suburbs. The automobiles that came with our new prosperity spirited us away from nosy neighbors and relatives to homes with a yard and privacy. Gone were the days of neighborhood gatherings on front stoops. Now families assembled indoors around the television. Increasingly, we chose our friends, driving past neighbors to meet them. Autonomy replaced community. And with the invention of the pill and the subsequent sexual revolution, the process accelerated. Not only were families more autonomous within neighborhoods, but individual independence was both highlighted and enabled, while the family itself entered its steep decline.

Religion, the great French sociologist Émile Durkheim argued, is largely a reflection and extension of community and family. Weaken those institutions, and religion itself declines. The heightened individualism of postwar America undercut traditional faiths, while introducing a substitute secular religion in the form of new political and cultural movements available to the children of the suburbs then pouring into colleges and universities in unprecedented numbers.

Insofar as the movements of the sixties answered big questions about how the world was constructed, while providing a template for moral action, they functioned as religions of a sort. Yet they were also secular, not simply for want of a discourse about God or spiritual beings, but because the ethical templates they differed in fundamental ways from traditional religious morality. To understand how, consider Bruckner's list of emblematic modern victim groups. It begins with the Jews. Here lies a lesson.

The image of the Holocaust stands at the center of our modern secular religion. Bruckner cites the use of Holocaust imagery by eco-activists, as when they compare skeptics of catastrophic global warming scenarios with Holocaust deniers. Trains carrying coal have been likened to trains carrying victims to Hitler's death camps, while critics of eco-overreach like Bjørn Lomborg have been directly equated to Hitler. While Bruckner rightly takes these comparisons as evidence of the movement's fanaticism, there is something deeper at work.

Traditional religious morality dignifies and elevates self-restraint and sacrifice in the service of community and God. Our modern secular faiths, in contrast, sanctify "liberation" from such restraints. Now we are "free," although how we make use of that freedom is less clear. Without a larger community or cause for which to sacrifice, meaning dissipates. Yet there is a

way for anomic modern individuals to recapture a higher purpose. A crusade to safeguard the liberty of others and ourselves is the pathway to meaning in an otherwise isolating individualist world. A great crusade requires a sweeping threat to liberty, and nothing surpasses the threat of mass death.

There is something thin and unsatisfying about preoccupation with "mere life," when religion in the fullest sense provides a template for life well lived. Yet if the task at hand is the defense of mere life on a massive scale, this failing of liberationist secularism would be lost in the urgency of the moment. Durkheim argued that periods of war and revolution confer collective meaning on otherwise alienating modern life. Oddly, then, recapturing a sense of crisis in ordinary times becomes the path to a salvation of sorts.

To avert a Holocaust is inarguably good. So long as we face such emergencies, the existential deficits of liberationist individualism can be safely held at bay. What greater moral emergency could there be than a global warming apocalypse? It's a permanent Holocaust, a permanent simulacrum of religion, and an ultimate collectivist crusade for the individualist life.

Thus was the image of the Jewish Holocaust appropriated and adapted by the modern secular Left to serve as the centerpiece of a new political religion. In a world bereft of moral certainty, the Holocaust is an argument-ender. Maneuver your opponent into the position of appearing to accept or facilitate a holocaust, and you've won. The last moral leg left to stand on has become, by default, the font of meaning in our cold, individualist world.

In the decades before the emergence of global warming as a cause, there were plenty of ecological holocausts to go around. Back then, eco-activists would release penned-up minks being farmed for their pelts, or fight to save entire species from extinction, each an imagined genocide. The Holocaust metaphor was avidly deployed, yet something was missing.

The advantage of early eco-activism was that its crusades were fought on behalf of plants or animals who were utterly unencumbered by our political quarrels. If the messy moral calculus of movements for affirmative action, feminism, or a Palestinian state seemed off-putting, innocent plants and animals represented pure metaphorical instantiations of the Holocaust. Here was perfect evil to be forestalled, perfect innocence to be defended, a perfect crusade for life and liberty. Every man could be a Schindler, free from doubt.

The price paid was in the stakes—not human lives, but dumb animals and unconscious plants. What was gained in innocence was lost in consequence.

Preventing a *human* holocaust is the ultimate modern moral crusade. To raise the stakes still higher, prevent a holocaust in which you yourself are a potential victim. This is what global warming accomplishes. As the planet fries and the oceans rise, everyone dies. A perfect human holocaust, green-activists included.

As the crusade against fossil fuels swept across America's college campuses this past year, a fascinating change has taken place. The early stages of the climate movement were focused on preventing harm to tiny island nations threatened by sea-level rise, or impoverished Third World countries subject to agricultural disruptions from rising temperatures. Increasingly, however, young climate activists now argue that they themselves are under threat. Harvard students calling on their university endowment to divest its holdings in fossil-fuel companies, for example, have warned that Harvard, hard by the Charles River and coast, may someday be engulfed by the sea. Leading climate activists now voice fears that they too may die of climate change.

This is heady stuff, placing otherwise prosperous and successful young people poised to inherit the world in the position of a persecuted minority about to be slaughtered by uncaring forces beyond their control.

Perfect.

Last academic year, the National Association of Scholars released a widely-discussed report, *What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students*.[2] The first truly in-depth study of the curriculum at a prestigious liberal arts college, the report revealed the reach of the so-called "studies" programs (women's studies, African American studies, gay and lesbian studies, environmental studies, etc.). Founded as home bases for the quasi-religious cultural movements of the 1960s, these programs analyze social life as a succession of battles between oppressors and victim groups. The Bowdoin study showed the victim-oppressor template spreading well beyond the studies programs proper, colonizing traditional departments as well.

On such a campus, membership in an approved victim group confers power and prestige. What is an impeccably middle-class, nonminority student to do? The answer is playing out at schools nationwide. College

[2]Peter Wood and Michael Toscano, *What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2013), http://www.nas.org/articles/what_does_bowdoin_teach_how_a_contemporary_liberal_arts_college_shapes_stud.

students—relatively few of them minorities, since these have their own activist centers of gravity on campus—imagine themselves as members of a generation at risk of a holocaust. Global warming, they stress, puts *their* lives at risk, not their elders. Climate change is their generational crusade, their personal encounter with the tragedy (or opportunity?) of victimhood.

We are now in a position to supplement and comment upon some of Bruckner's formulations.

The fragmentary and contradictory character of ecologism stems from the fact that a broadly Christian moral architecture has been grafted onto a fundamentally incompatible moral foundation. The Holocaust metaphor at the center of modern secular religion is about survival—mere life—rather than a life well-lived. Tiny gestures of sacrifice—minimizations of the carbon footprint—may symbolically enroll the devotee in a political crusade, with all the fellow-feeling and high moral purpose that implies. Yet nothing in this challenges our radically individualist mores, and thus the gestures never quite satisfy or cohere as a guide to the daily challenges of a life in family or society.

The craving for an enemy is real. And surely the end of the Cold War has removed an important option on that score. By the same token, as Bruckner maintains, a fat and happy West requires large-scale dangers to combat (if only imaginary), for the sake of meaning and amusement. The phenomenon of otherwise happy and prosperous nonminority young people reimagining themselves as a generation of Holocaust victims doesn't contradict Bruckner's argument. It completes it, while deepening our understanding of the distinction between the pseudo-religion of ecologism and the richer traditions that preceded it.

In a campus cultural setting where victimhood yields superior power, the global warming apocalypse is a way for frustratingly "privileged" students to cash in on academia's upside-down market in prestige. To say, as Bruckner does, that the planet is the new proletariat, is to argue, on further reflection, that the upper-middle class is the new proletariat. With the world about to end, everyone can be a victim, everyone lower-class. Thus the old Marxist model is surpassed and preserved all at once.

As much as the end of the Cold War, the advent of global warming has made this transition possible. (Interestingly, global warming first entered public debate under the name "the greenhouse effect" in 1989, the year of communism's fall.) Prior to that, the symbolic stakes of the ecology

movement had limited reach. With empathy and imagination, little holocausts in the nonhuman world could be identified and opposed easily enough. It took the prospect of a full-on world-destroying apocalypse (however distant or exaggerated) to energize a new generation. Global warming turned what had up to then been a consequential yet limited cultural movement into a general solution (however partial and unsatisfactory) to the hollowness of modern secular life.

The potential cost to the rest of us of so questionable a crusade is substantial, as Bruckner has explained. America's prosperity, liberty, and equality are all at risk from a faithful flock whose victimhood may be imaginary, but whose thirst to rule is not.