*In Defense of Home: The Politics of Ecological Belonging*

Chapter 5: Ecological Populism—Politics in Defense of Home

For if the market economy was a threat to the human and natural components of the social fabric, as we insisted, what else would one expect than an urge on the part of a great variety of people to press for some sort of protection?

*—Karl Polanyi[[1]](#footnote-1)*

All of these people, who are fighting sometimes lonely battles to preserve things of value that they cannot bear to lose, are the conservation movement’s natural allies.

*—Wendell Berry* [[2]](#footnote-2)

We become fighters when something threatens our home.

—*An environmental activist*[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Abstract for WPSA Conference:**

I argue in earlier chapters of my dissertation that people come to value and protect the environment by way of a sense of being at home in one’s environs that I call *ecological belonging*. This sense has three modes (economic, epistemic, and affective), each of which corresponds to a different way of valuing one’s environs and of viewing them as intimately one’s own. In this chapter, I argue that these three modes of ecological belonging can—and often do—inspire a politics of self-defense in which everyday people act politically to defend their homes, broadly conceived, against the economic processes that threaten to degrade and destroy them. Inspired by the American farmer-labor populists of the late 19th century and by Karl Polanyi’s idea of the double movement of marketization and its opponents, I call this politics in defense of home *ecological populism*. Against those who would reject the label of populism in light of authoritarian and xenophobic varieties that have proliferated across the globe, I argue that what we need now more than ever is an anti-elitist democratic politics to counter economic policies that threaten to destroy the environs we call home.

In the preceding chapters I have named and described the main threat to ecological homes (developmentalism)[[4]](#footnote-4) and then investigated the three modes of ecological belonging that it obscures and undervalues (economic, epistemic, and affective).[[5]](#footnote-5) This chapter proposes a democratic politics in defense of home, one receptive to the particulars of place and the multiple values of home that defy developmentalist efforts to quantify and commodify them. For this politics I propose the name *ecological populism*. In it, everyday people take up grassroots political action in defense of the places they call home against developmentalism and the corporate, political, and intellectual elites who support and implement it. It is a popular politics of resistance against a model of progress and development that forces everyday people to sacrifice things they cannot bear to lose. As we have seen, a sine qua non of developmentalism is its tendency to value non-fungible things like houses, habitats, and cherished places only insofar as they might be made to produce future monetary value. A politics in defense of home must be populist because it must contest elite modes and techniques of value (cost-benefit analysis, land markets, and so on) and because those techniques of value must be contested from the grassroots—that is, at the many singular sites that particular people call home. It must, therefore, be a form of what Raymond Williams calls ‘militant particularism.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

It has become cliché for commentators on populism to point out that the term is both contested and ambiguous. My goal is not to identify the ‘true’ essence of populism, nor even to supply an analytically useful definition of populist politics as such—many political theorists have already covered that ground.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to alert the reader to why I use the term and what I mean by it. Contrary to recent influential accounts of populism according to which it is understood to be primarily anti-pluralist and only secondarily anti-elitist, I use the term to leverage its connotations of anti-elitism and grassroots democratic assertion. Rather than authoritarian left-wing populism in Latin America or the European right-wing ethno-nationalist populism on which many contemporary political theorists focus when they study and criticize populism, I have in mind the 19th-century American populists and more recent incarnations such as the grassroots environmental movement of the early 1970s and the contemporary environmental justice movement. Thus, the populism I have in mind has more in common with Williams’ militant particularism or Christopher Lasch’s and Harry Boyte’s visions of grassroots populism than with the anti-pluralist authoritarianism of Trump or Chavez.[[8]](#footnote-8) In light of my use of the term, Jan-Werner Müller’s claim that populism is “a degraded form of democracy” need not apply.[[9]](#footnote-9) Instead, it would be better to say that the populist demagogues and fringe parties that attract much of the attention of political theorists represent degraded, anti-pluralist forms of populism. Like other political movements or ideologies that we label, we ought to be willing to discuss good and bad (or at least better and worse) forms of populism. There is a difference between the politics of ethno-nationalist resentment and that of defending one’s physical home, regional habitats, and cherished homeplaces from destruction and degradation by economic doctrines supported primarily by economic elites. The former is among the worst possible forms of politics. The latter is sorely needed today, both for the populations who are suffering and for the states that are ill-equipped to remedy the ecological problems of the day in no small part because their hands are tied by developmentalist elites.[[10]](#footnote-10) To be sure, populism will always be flawed, it will always be uncomfortable to elites who prize civility and order, and it will always bring out the worst as well as the best in the people—and it is necessary nonetheless. So long as widespread grievances are left unaddressed by political, economic, and intellectual elites, it will remain necessary.

When discussing populist politics, much depends on how one defines “the elite.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Indeed, one can imagine a plethora of populisms based on how the elite is defined and what sort of grievances everyday people have against it. In the politics of ecological populism, the elite in question is made up of the experts and power-brokers that theorize developmentalist doctrines and support and enact developmentalist laws and policies—academic social scientists, government bureaucrats, politicians, political advisors, party operatives, corporate managers, stockholders, business-owners, and so on. While it would be absurd to suppose that elites are consciously loyal to an analytic neologism like developmentalism, it is fair to say that many people in positions of power act on the basis of theoretical assumptions, normative commitments, and economic interests that are unambiguously developmentalist. This is the primary issue for ecological populists. The threat that developmentalism poses to ecological homes is the grievance that animates ecological populism and is the political enemy against which it is defined.

Ecological populism performs two functions in relation to developmentalist elites. The first is more plainly political, and it is the more familiar function of anti-elitist populism. In it, populists seek to check the power of elites by bringing popular power to bear to enforce, reform, and unmake laws and norms as the moment requires. This function of populism is essential, and I do not mean to relegate it to secondary importance. However, the assertion of popular political power as such does not exhaust the function of ecological populism. Equally important is its epistemic function, which makes *known* to elites something that was unknown to them, making values and grievances visible to elites who had not been able to *see* them. Populist agitation makes elites aware that the people value some things more than elite models, economic theory, and the price mechanism suggest. Thus, ecological populism is at once a political and an epistemic corrective. It forces the hands of elite players while also revealing values, places, and homes to them that were hitherto invisible. The political corrective is necessary for those developmentalists who recognize the values of ecological belonging but remain bent on sacrificing those values for monetary growth, while the epistemic corrective is required for those who fail to see those values and thus know not what they do, so to speak. The previous three chapters have elaborated on what it is that developmentalism renders invisible to economic elites. Ecological populism is the democratic means of making those things visible, of expressing the non-fungible values of our homes, habitats, and habitations while defending them from destruction.

Present environmental discourse gives beleaguered inhabitants some rhetorical tools and principles with which to fight back in defense of their homes, but they are not enough. The specter of development hangs over every place that is dearly valued by the powerless, impoverished, or nonhuman. Money, after all, is doing the real talking. Those who lack it are out of luck. This is bound to permit unjust and destructive policies, leading us to sacrifice the most important and precious things for the promise—hardly guaranteed to be fulfilled—that our lives will be better for it. Even worse, those promises ask us to value potential (“future”) wealth more than the present and tangible well-being of an often humbler kind that I have discussed under the umbrella of ecological home—our habitations, our habitats, and our homeplaces. As Karl Polanyi asks in the first epigraph of this chapter, what else would we expect but that everyday people would seek protection of the things they need and love from destruction? Contrary to the functionalism that some find in Polanyi’s account of the double movement between marketization and its resistance, however, I recognize that a politics in defense of home is not guaranteed to succeed, or even to occur at all. My argument is simply that it is sorely needed, and that ecological *populism* is especially well-suited to making the particularities of places—of local habitations, habitats, and homeplaces—visible to the developmentalist elites who all-too-often fail to see and value them. Both our own homes and the common earthly home that we share depend on it.

**Why Populism?**

Readers who are conscious of the threats posed by the ascendant ethno-nationalist politics of right-wing populism may be skeptical of my adoption of the populist label. Especially in light of the inadequacy of alternative labels that are too vague (popular, democratic, egalitarian, radical) or too laden with distracting ideological baggage (socialist, communitarian, libertarian), the term is the best available to convey the grassroots contestation of elite economic power that I have in mind. Even better, the word taps into the venerable tradition of farmer-labor populism in America that is often neglected by political theorists.

Political scientists have long been anxious about populism as an analytic category because of the term’s ambiguity.[[12]](#footnote-12) Theorists and commentators, the argument goes, label such a wide variety of political actors as populists that the term lacks theoretical purchase. Thus Müller bemoans our lack of “anything like a *theory* of populism,” implying that we need such a theory to use the term meaningfully as scholars of politics.[[13]](#footnote-13) Unlike Müller, I am satisfied to treat the label of populism as a broad tendency in political life, one that does not need a rigorous and concrete definition across all of its uses. We fruitfully use words like democracy, liberalism, and socialism in this way all the time, and it is telling that we can easily augment their specificity by attaching qualifiers to convey more theoretically and contextually specific meanings—*liberal* democracy, *classical* liberalism, *agrarian* socialism. I propose doing something similar with *ecological* populism. To qualify as an ecological populist, a candidate or movement would need to make broad appeals to everyday people to assert themselves against developmentalist elite actors, institutions, and theories that threaten their environs with destruction. This is by no means the only kind of populism we might recognize as political theorists, nor is it even an exemplar of populism as an analytic category. It is simply the sort of populism that is best suited to addressing the environmental grievances of everyday people.

In light of historian Michael Kazin’s argument that populism is best understood as a political “persuasion,” the ambiguity of the term should not surprise us. For Kazin, populism is a language of politics “whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter,” one that has been taken up by political actors across the ideological spectrum making it “more an impulse than an ideology.”[[14]](#footnote-14) While the populist persuasion has served right-wing and left-wing radicals alike, Kazin insists that “[i]t is only when leftists and liberals talked in populist ways—hopeful, expansive, even romantic—that they were able to lend their politics a majoritarian cast and help markedly to improve the common welfare.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed, before the Cold War, the vocabularies of populism were employed almost exclusively by advocates of social justice—farmers seeking debt relief and regulation of railroads, workers demanding fair wages, and Prohibitionists combating political corruption. The association of populism with the political right is largely a post-war phenomenon.[[16]](#footnote-16) As many commentators have pointed out, the negative appraisal of populism by liberal intellectuals shortly after World War II—including scholars like David Bell, Edward Shils, and especially Richard Hofstadter—stemmed in large part from their fearful rejection of Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare. While their dismay was hardly unjustified, their social analysis often went beyond critiquing anti-communist hysteria to the adoption of a general distrust of popular democracy which led them to conflate left-wing with right-wing populism.[[17]](#footnote-17) A swift and sustained correction by historians such as Norman Pollack, Lawrence Goodwyn, and Kazin has recognized the 19th century populists as a grassroots movement of democratic empowerment of indebted farmers and urban laborers with legitimate political and economic grievances against corporate and partisan elites of the day, and Charles Postel has more recently added that populism was even animated by attention to notions of progress and rational expertise, further dismantling the post-war caricature of the American Populists as an anti-modern, xenophobic and anti-Semitic rural revolt against pluralist democracy.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Yet, in the wake of the historiographic dismantling of the liberal pluralist critique of the American Populists, contemporary political theorists studying populism often focus their attention on more recent movements in Europe and Latin America that seem to reconfirm what Hofstadter and Bell feared about grassroots democratic assertion. In their fixation with the parties of Hugo Chavez, Geert Wilders, and Donald Trump, contemporary political theorists have made populism synonymous with democratic threats to pluralist liberalism.[[19]](#footnote-19) Müller’s treatment of populism is a case in point. While I am more than willing to join Müller in his rejection of the anti-pluralist parties of the post-war period, I reject his argument that the term ‘populism’ ought to refer *exclusively* to parties that are anti-elitist *and* anti-pluralist.[[20]](#footnote-20) Indeed, Müller’s narrow definition of populism leads him to the awkward conclusion that the late 19th century’s American People’s Party cannot be labeled as “populist” according to his theory—despite the fact that the term first emerged to describe them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In light of the fact that a variety of thinkers use the term “populism” to mean a variety of things, I aim to defend an important and longstanding meaning of the term to refer to a particular mode or persuasion of politics that mobilizes widely-shared popular grievances against an entrenched elite that proves deaf and blind to those grievances.[[22]](#footnote-22) As we will see, this understanding of populism is especially useful in the context of environmental politics in which there is a long-standing tension between grassroots democracy and expertise.

So far I have argued for retaining the populist label to describe anti-elitist politics that are not necessarily anti-pluralist (contra Müller) but are rather typified by people’s willingness to critique and resist economic development and elitist technocracy in defense of the places they call home. As I will show next, populism, understood in this way, has a special relevance to environmental politics with its long history of tension between grassroots democracy and expertise—and between environmental preservation and economic development.

**Populism and Environmentalism**

One of the advantages of identifying an *ecological* populism is that it allows us to distinguish between different dearly-held things that populists might seek to defend. Much is made today of the question of whether populist grievance in the United States and Europe is primarily motivated by economic or ethnic anxiety. Using ecologicalpopulism as an analytic category allows us to single out *ecological* grievances for populist politics—namely, the threat posed to habitations, habitats, and homeplaces—for analysis and, at least in my assessment, normative praise. The ecological populist can appeal to an Appalachian coal miner on the basis of grievances related to ecological degradation without validating any racial anxieties. At its worst, the broader politics of populism certainly *can* devolve into ethno-nationalist fear-mongering—but, at its best, *ecological* populism stands in defense of all of our ecological homes. Antipluralist populists might say: protect our homeland from immigrants. Ecological populists say instead: protect our homes from developmentalism. A “we” defined by ethno-nationalism is inherently exclusionary, a “we” defined by shared attachment to ecological home is not—its only enemy is the defenders of economic policies that threaten their lives and livelihoods through environmental destruction.

The idea that populism might be relevant to environmental politics has not escaped environmental political theorists. For example, John Meyer traces a longstanding divide between “paternalist” and “populist” approaches to environmental politics.[[23]](#footnote-23) For the environmental paternalist, enlightened advocates of environmental policies face a paradox: their proposals are in the interest of the people, and yet the people are—at least on their telling—the primary cause of the problem and the greatest obstacle to solutions. The masses are responsible for ecological degradation through their consumer behavior and are too addicted to convenience and consumption to alter course, at least not without a benevolent guiding hand. Thus the paternalist views the people not as source of democratic change but as the beneficiaries of the environmentalist’s higher vision and expertise. Enlightened environmentalists can value nature properly and act rationally. The masses cannot—or at least they cannot be trusted to do so on their own. Meyer pithily summarizes the paternalist view in this way:

*We*—the informed, engaged, public spirited—wish to protect *you*—the uninformed, apathetic, or egoistic—from the consequences of your environmentally destructive ways.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Meyer points out that “[t]hose who exhibit this sort of paternalistic tendency do not necessarily do so self-consciously,” but a paternalistic message is nonetheless received by the public that it is the will of the enlightened, not their own, that matters. Against the paternalist impulse, Meyer identifies a populist alternative in which the problem to be solved is not popular apathy or deficient values but rather the power of “remote decision-makers unable or unwilling to account for local knowledge and everyday experience.”[[25]](#footnote-25) What is at stake in the paternalist-populist divide “is whether, on balance, people’s everyday lives and experiences are the foundation for the requisite movement for change or [,]conversely, popular ignorance, apathy, or egoism are the obstacles to be overcome.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The ecological populist tends decidedly toward the former, the paternalist to the latter.

The clash between the populist and paternalist persuasions in environmental politics points to a class cleavage that has become increasingly salient in America since the late 19th century between the information class and the working class, with the information class controlling the levers of power while the working class obeys or resists the will of the informed elite. Timothy Luke emphasizes this divide as the primary political cleavage defining what he too calls “ecological populism.” Recognizing populism to be a “very problematic [term],” Luke nonetheless adopts it to highlight what he views as the necessary resistance by the victims of “rationalization without representation” propagated by the ruling class of elite experts who direct the modern political economy to ends they deem worthwhile—especially irresponsible economic growth.[[27]](#footnote-27) For Luke, the primary political conflicts of our time revolve around the divide “between those who know and those who do not, those who can and do participate in elitist managerial decision taking and those who cannot, or those who intervene in the personal spheres of others and those who cannot.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In the face of global multinational corporations and the state policies that enable them, Luke argues, ecological activists “ranging from NIMBY site-defense groups to multicultural environmental justice fronts […] are now asking the same questions raised by the populists a century ago.”[[29]](#footnote-29) While Luke recognizes that the ruling class of expert managers is of course internally diverse and full of many people who would consider themselves environmentally-conscious, he insists that their monopoly on political power has largely proven to be an impediment to protecting the ecologies occupied by those out of power—namely, the non-experts who have only their own testimonies with which to make visible their claims to ecological belonging and the various threats to their homes.

Even so, it is worth remembering that not all experts are paternalists, nor do they all favor rationalization without representation. Indeed, rooting ecological populism in a critique of *developmentalism* helps us differentiate between, on the one hand, experts who legitimize and execute developmentalist projects that produce pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change, and, on the other, those experts that give citizens the knowledge about ecology and environmental protection necessary to understand the threats to their ecological homes. Rachel Carson serves as a famous and poignant example of how someone with scientific insight and expertise—and who was even a government bureaucrat—can nonetheless be something of an ecological populist. *Silent Spring* is a thorough and eloquent indictment of the careless use of pesticides by governments and corporations despite mounting evidence of the dangers they posed not just to wildlife but also to members of our own species.[[30]](#footnote-30) While Carson’s credentials as an accomplished educated elite were not insignificant—she earned a masters from Johns Hopkins University, served as Editor-in-Chief for the Fish and Wildlife Service, was a government scientist in her own right, and became an acclaimed author years before the publication of *Silent Spring*—Carson also remained an outsider in the male-dominated scientific establishment on account of her gender. Her findings in *Silent Spring* were challenged from the beginning by corporate scientists—predominantly male—who sought to discredit her and her findings in no small part because they posed a direct challenge to corporate impunity in pursuit of profit. Like many environmental scientists, Carson was at once an educated elite and a passionate critic of ecologically destructive practices. Carson’s writings serve as but one example of a long tradition of scientific, intellectual, and government experts who have used their knowledge and authority to call attention to the plight of what I am calling our ecological homes.

This suggests that ecological populists ought to be more suspicious of economic developers and private extractive corporations than of scientists at the EPA and rangers stewarding our National Parks. Indeed, those experts who make an effort to be responsive to popular goals and concerns should be lauded for minimizing the paternalism of their positions in favor of responsiveness to the needs of the citizens they serve. To be sure, government agencies like the EPA are hardly immune to elitism and even outright neglect of the most vulnerable citizens, as evidenced by the EPA’s performance leading up to and during the lead crisis in Flint, Michigan.[[31]](#footnote-31) Ecological populists ought to castigate elites only insofar as those elites condone or pursue developmentalist destruction of habitations, habitats, and homeplaces. In and of itself, expertise is not the problem—indeed, as we saw in Chapter 3, scientific knowledge and the scientists who cultivate it can be integral to making our environs intelligible to us—Carson’s writings are a case in point. The problem is when expertise transcends democratic accountability and begins to corrode habitations, habitats, and homeplaces. With this in mind, the reflective ecological populist will resist conflating expertise with authoritarianism even while remaining on guard for abuses.

Recognizing the importance of both grassroots populist pressure and top-down expert management in environmental policy, Dewitt John proposes a third model of environmental governance he calls “civic environmentalism.” In contrast to the “top-down, comprehensive approach” to environmental policy practiced by the environmental regulatory state and the “bottom-up, fragmented orientation” of the “populist environmentalism” practiced by the Earth Day mass movement of the early 1970s and in NIMBY protests, John praises the “bottom-up, comprehensive approach” of civic environmentalism. This way of making environmental policy, which favors “dealing with problems at state and local levels and involves a political process in which divergent values are recognized and many individuals and organizations work collaboratively to forge balanced, comprehensive solutions,” is especially useful because new environmental challenges, such as non-point pollution from dispersed emission sources, require comprehensive cooperation and the coordination of divergent interests. For John, the decay of bi-partisan support for the EPA and other environmental bureaucracies also makes civic environmentalism more viable in the long run.[[32]](#footnote-32) In a world of complex and diffuse environmental problems involving equally complex and diffuse interests, civic environmentalism has much to offer.

Yet even as he recognizes that ecological populism “provides the conscience or emotional heart of environmentalism,” John downplays its importance by insisting that “populist protests are inherently antigovernmental” and that “their major impact on policy is usually to stimulate the creation of new interest groups and new top-down, fragmented legislation.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Yet John undersells the role a grassroots populist base might play in supporting a robust civic environmentalism, helping to force the hands of intransigent political and economic elites and make democratic policy outcomes possible. For civic environmentalism to be truly democratic, it needs to have an engaged, vocal, and assertive popular base. For it to be truly anti-developmentalist, it needs to register the values of ecological belonging that cost-benefit analysis and market metrics fail to make visible. Without ecological populism, civic environmentalism risks being little more than the devolution of policy-making power from federal to state and local elites whose interests in developmentalism may be just as strong, if not stronger.

John is also wrong to argue that ecological populism is inherently hostile to government. On the contrary, populists often demand robust enforcement of existing policies as well as the creation of new state interventions in defense of habitations, habitats, and homeplaces. Indeed, the People’s Party proved remarkably willing to call for robust state intervention in the industrial economy to protect farmers and laborers from exploitation, and it is no accident that some of the most important achievements in environmental legislation and state-building came in the backdrop of the cross-partisan mass mobilization of the 1970s environmental movement. This key ingredient is arguably what was missing in the succeeding decades of environmental politics as the Sagebrush Rebellion against Federal land management in the American West and repeated Republican attempts to curb the EPA have often put environmental policymakers on the defensive. The foundational role played by citizen groups and mass mobilization in the making of the environmental regulatory state suggests that an effective civic environmentalism require a robust populist environmentalism to give it popular support and democratic legitimacy.[[34]](#footnote-34) Environmental elites seeking environmental protection cannot do their work without ecological populism—environmental experts need the people. Indeed, things could hardly be otherwise in a democratic political system.

To be sure, there is a danger of populist theory and rhetoric to oversimplify the motivations and interests of elites. The populist imaginary supposes that there is a single, monolithic elite (“the” elite) that is unequivocally opposed to the will of the people. Of course, this is descriptively wrong. But it might also be a self-inflicted wound and strategic mistake for ecological populism. By eliding the divisions between various elites, populists risk neglecting potential allies as well as institutions—often bureaucracies—that might afford them with a powerful vehicle for effecting their vision. A populist politics too wedded to a divide between ‘the’ elites and ‘the’ people might ignore bureaucratic agencies and civic institutions, or specific actors therein, that may be on their side and might afford their ecological homes with protection and greater visibility. Taken too far, anti-elitism can undermine the very goals espoused by ecological populists.

What, then, does ecological populism have to offer to environmentalists and to a world in need of decisive shifts in policy to protect our ecological homes? First, a populist persuasion allows people at the grassroots to contest elite pronouncements about science, economics, and the good life *when and if* they threaten their homes with degradation, destruction, and dispossession—and it puts elites and experts on notice that they should and will be challenged when their power is used toward ecologically destructive ends.[[35]](#footnote-35) Second, it emphasizes the plight of the most ecologically vulnerable, from indigenous communities, impoverished neighborhoods of color, and rural bust towns in the Global North to poor farmers, ocean islanders, and ecological refugees in the Global South. This is why, as Meyer and Luke both recognize, the diverse array of activists in the environmental justice movement display strong tendencies toward ecological populism in their willingness to challenge elites in defense of those who suffer the full brunt of pollution, habitat destruction, and dispossession.[[36]](#footnote-36) Third, and perhaps most important for my argument, ecological populism serves not just as a corrective with regard to *who* is being defended but also *what* is being defended against developmentalism. As a grassroots expression of local places under assault, ecological populism makes ecological homes—habitations, habitats, and homeplaces—visible to experts and elites who may fail to see them or take their value *as homes* into account. Whereas top-down managers and elite experts often have a distant, abstract, and technical perspective on environmental problems and local controversies, the inhabitants of a place have experiential knowledge of value and attachment that distant elites can discover only if they bother to ask—or, barring that, if they are told, loudly. As Steve Lerner argues, while scientific expertise is indispensable, it is the inhabitants of a place “who [are] the real experts and [are] best positioned to describe the conditions near their homes.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This is why grassroots experiential knowledge is better suited to making ecological homes visible than the kind of abstract knowledge offered by the ecologist, the policy analyst, the partisan advisor, and the economist. This attention to place and the nonhuman elements of justice is perhaps the distinctive characteristic of ecological populism compared to other social justice movements. It makes visible not just people but also the things in the world that they care about, the environs that belong to them and in which they experience ecological belonging. In line with the political theories of visibility proposed by James Scott and Jacques Rancière, ecological populism radically alters the regime of visibility so that ecological homes become visible *as homes* rather than as sites of economic development and wealth creation.[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus, as we will see next, ecological populism serves to make visible the true costs of development as ecological homes become sacrifice zones for economic growth and fungible wealth.

**Resisting the Sacrifice of Home**

So far I have defended a grassroots, anti-elitist conception of populism politics and demonstrated its relevance to environmental politics. My next task is to show that ecological populism can be undertaken in defense of home, with home understood in the broad and explicitly ecological way I have theorized it in previous chapters—as the particular habitations, habitats, and homeplaces that people call home and in which they experience ecological belonging. As I suggested earlier, ecological populism can perform a dual corrective on behalf of everyday people against developmentalist elites—it can check the power of those elites by forcing their hand through protest, mass mobilization, and electoral politics, and it can bring hitherto invisible environmental values and grievances to the attention of elites who are otherwise blinded by developmentalism.

Ecological populism begins by attending to a key strategy of developmentalism in politics. Developmental appeals tend to emphasize purported economic benefits—jobs, economic growth, tax windfalls—while drawing attention away from ecological costs or ignoring them altogether. In its refusal to deny the existence of the sacrifices demanded by developmentalism, a populist politics in defense of home brings those sacrifices front and center, making visible not just *who* is being sacrificed for the sake of development but also *what* is being sacrificed and how dearly-valued those things are. We can have economic growth and development, argues the ecological populist, on the condition that it does not require the sacrifice of our habitations, habitats, and homeplaces. Those who insist that our ecological homes are the necessary price to pay for progress, development, and growth are asking us to sacrifice too much of the wrong things in pursuit of monetary goods that, while undeniably valuable, are no substitute for our singular ecological homes in which we experience ecological belonging.

Critical attention to the everyday sacrifices of things people love at the hands of developmentalism helps recast environmental politics and broaden its scope and appeal. As Maniates and Meyer argue, simply drawing attention to hitherto-unrecognized sacrifices can make a world of difference in environmental politics because environmental appeals are so often centered on calls for people to sacrifice things they value—wealth, convenience, comfort—for the sake of the environment. To illustrate the problems that stem from this way of framing environmental sacrifice, they identify a sentiment that is as familiar as it is cynical: *Addressing climate change will require citizens of wealthy consumer societies to sacrifice. But that’s never going to happen*.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Accepting this statement as fact implies that there are only two routes to a solution: either widespread environmental disaster will force the public out of its complacency, or informed elites will have to impose the necessary sacrifices in advance.[[40]](#footnote-40) Neither solution is appealing, in no small part because both sit uneasily with any robust understanding of popular democracy. What is more, the ecological populist would insist, the cynical premise overlooks the real problem—namely, that governments and corporations fail to adequately steward and protect the environment *in spite* of broad public support for environmental protection. Furthermore, the current state of affairs already forces some—poor homeowners and renters, workers, indigenous peoples, precarious farmers—to sacrifice themselves and their interests for the benefit of others—land developers, corporate and political elites, financiers, and so on. Above all, a properly *ecological* populism highlights the extent to which the developmentalist political economy already forces the sacrifice of particular *things* of great value to their inhabitants—namely, their ecological homes. The ecological populist insists that our habitations, habitats, and homeplaces are the true cost of developmentalism and of unrestrained economic growth.

Today’s environmentalism tends to focus on the problem of how to persuade the world’s most insatiable consumers to reduce their consumption. This frames the choice as one between our present world of more goods, more growth, and more wealth and a more sustainable world with fewer goods, less growth, and less wealth. This argument for conservation and sustainability trades on values such as austerity and simplicity, insisting that we can and ought to live better with less. The political weaknesses of this argument should be obvious. It asks the wealthy to sacrifice precisely that which they are least interested in sacrificing and the poor to sacrifice future improvement of their standard of living, offering a fraught political frame for both the Global North and Global South. It also makes environmentalism sound like a doctrine preaching self-denial for the sake of something beyond us—nature, the environment, the nonhuman—for which we might be willing to sacrifice if only we *cared* enough.

Against this doctrine of environmental austerity, ecological populism asks not how to convince people to consume less or care more, but rather how to prevent and resist the sacrifice of those things *we already have* that are *already* most dear to us—our homes. Ecological populism recasts the debate by emphasizing the extent to which the extraction, production, exchange, and consumption of fungible wealth forces us to sacrifice our ecological homes—including our habitation wealth—at the altar of development. Thus, not unlike the economists and policymakers who view all goods in the world as ultimately fungible and thus replaceable, conventional environmentalists overlook the fact that such talk of sacrificing makes the mistake of confusing the value of things that we already have—habitations, habitats, and homeplaces—with future economic development and monetary wealth. By correcting for this error, ecological populists reorient our gaze away from abstract metrics of growth, job creation, and development and toward the actual things in the world that people are asked to sacrifice and the compensatory promises of fungible wealth that so often fail to be realized. This is a more favorable framing of the issue for environmental advocates. It is also the more honest framing of what really matters normatively.

Focusing on the sacrifice of ecological homes also helps make environmentalism more immediately relevant and accessible to everyday people than an environmentalism centered on preserving a nonhuman nature “out there” or making the economy more “sustainable” according to abstract metrics of extraction, production, and consumption. Taking up the political defense of home helps make environmentalism into something far larger and more compelling than simply pollution control and species protection—though of course these should still be championed. As John Meyer says of the populist approach to environmentalism: “If we move down this path, we might also interrogate the role of the label ‘environmentalist’ itself within American discourse. For it would seem that environmental concerns are too big and too important to be addressed only by self-identified environmentalists.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Couching the stakes of that larger politics in place-based attachments and the ecological homes that serve as the inescapable backdrop of human existence might help bring those larger stakes home to the general public. Armed with a multidimensional approach to ecological belonging and environmental value, ecological populism also can help integrate otherwise disparate and often competing sides of the broader struggle to limit the reach of developmentalism, ranging from preservation of habitat in remote wilderness areas to protests in minority neighborhoods against industrial pollution, and from conserving ocean fishery stocks to protecting National Parks from development projects. Perhaps most of all, the ecological populist’s insistence on treating the environment as *home* reveals the parallels between the home destroyed by climate change-induced super storms and the home demolished to make way for urban development. However different in appearances, all of these entail the sacrifice of home for the sake of development, of tangible property for fungible property, and of ecological belonging for monetary wealth. The clash between home and development lies at the heart of environmental politics, and the ecological populist insists that those in power must answer for the sacrifices of home that developmentalism so often entails.

In pursuit of the political defense of home, ecological populists might seek to make visible the *sacrifice zones* that development leaves in its wake. In his investigative reporting on environmental injustices suffered by marginal populations in the U.S., Steve Lerner adapts the term “sacrifice zones”—first used by U.S. officials to label territory contaminated with radioactivity by the extraction and processing of uranium to produce nuclear weapons—to refer more broadly to neighborhoods of poor and predominantly minority residents condemned to endure disproportionate toxic exposure in the shadow of industrial plants and chemical facilities.[[42]](#footnote-42) He notices that this sort of environmental injustice (and often environmental racism) stems in large part from “unwise (or biased) land use decisions dictated by local or state officials intent on attracting big industries to their town, county, or state in an effort to create jobs and raise tax revenues.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Just as gentrification sacrifices the interests of low-income residents to make way for economic development, residents in the shadow of polluting manufacturers find their health traded for promises of growth and prosperity. Yet these sacrifice zones are “essentially hidden from the view of most Americans” because these places are rarely “destinations of choice” for tourists and journalists.[[44]](#footnote-44) These environmental injustices testify to the true costs of the current economic order. “Within these sacrifice zones,” Lerner concludes, “the human cost of our rough-and-tumble, winner-take-all economic system is brutally visible.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

To be sure, as Lerner himself recognizes, it is grassroots activists—with the help of sympathetic experts, including journalists like himself—who make sacrifice zones visible. Ecological populism simply recognizes that these efforts by sympathetic experts and journalists to make sacrifice zones visible are often necessary but wholly insufficient. Similarly, as Naomi Klein points out, the radical ecological ideas of Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson were not enough—*at least by themselves*—to effect substantial change of the economic order. “These ideas were hugely influential in the evolution of ecological thought,” Klein writes, “but unattached to populist movements, they posed little threat to galloping industrialization.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Experts can help make sacrifice zones visible, but these efforts accomplish little without populist agitation and resistance.

Klein also takes up the notion of sacrifice zones but in a more expansive sense. While Lerner uses the term exclusively to describe the habitations of predominantly poor and minority residents condemned to endure disproportionate toxic exposure, Klein defines sacrifice zones as “places that, to their extractors, somehow don’t count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress.”[[47]](#footnote-47) She also builds on Lerner’s recognition of environmental racism while expanding its scope to include colonial relegation of natives to a lesser status that legitimized violent resource extraction and pollution in their homeplaces. Tellingly, Klein notes that extractivism thrived in colonial settings because empires “[related] to the world as a frontier of conquest … rather than a home.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Ecological populism proceeds from Klein’s broadened understanding of sacrifice zones and emphasizes that these sacrifice zones are, above all, *homes*. Thus, the primary objective is to prevent ecological homes from being turned into sacrifice zones in pursuit of growth and development.

By diagnosing the logic of developmentalism and making it the focal point of environmental politics, the ecological populist can adopt a conception of sacrifice zones even broader than Klein’s. In keeping with my understanding of developmentalism as the set of norms and practices that treat ecological homes of middling monetary value as prime sites for development, sacrifice zones encompass any and all habitations, habitats, and homeplaces that are destroyed, degraded, and dispossessed in the wake of development. The ecological populist who takes a political stand in defense of home sees that sacrifice zones include but extend beyond the minority neighborhoods and post-colonial native communities documented by Lerner and Klein to include human habitations damaged and destroyed by climate change, nonhuman habitats demolished by development, and dearly-held homeplaces degraded beyond recognition by pollution and resource extraction. To be sure, Klein is right to focus especially on marginalized places and the people who inhabit them—sacrifice zones are in fact “[o]ut-of-the-way places … where residents [lack] political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language, and class.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Indeed, both functions of ecological populism that I identified earlier—mobilizing counter-power against insulated elites and making visible neglected values and grievances—help give political power and voice to the powerless and voiceless. What other social justice approaches to environmentalism often miss, or at least undersell, is the imperative to defend not just marginalized people but the habitations, habitats, and homeplaces—the *homes*—that they need and cherish.

**The Politics of Ecological Self-Defense and the New Protectionism**

An ecological populism attentive to the values held by everyday people and their sense of ecological belonging ought to cast a critical eye on political, economic, and intellectual elites, especially insofar as those elites legitimize and enact developmentalist sacrifices of home. Indeed, against reductive forms of populism that target ‘the elite’ and expertise *as such*, a constructive ecological populism must recognize that expertise in and of itself is not the problem. On the contrary, and especially in environmental politics, the efforts of environmental regulators, scientists, and educators are indispensable, helping to alert a vulnerable public to pollution, habitat loss, climate change, and environmental externalities. Still, the populist persuasion reminds us that these environmental experts cannot do their work alone and that they are fallible. Like any other elites, they can be ignorant, willfully or not, of facts and values on the ground. Thus, the better angels of populism decree not that expertise ought to be rejected outright, but rather that, in a democracy, popular support for experts must be conditional—it must be readily and enthusiastically given when experts, scientists, and regulators help protect and steward our ecological homes, but it must be withheld with equal fervor when they do not.

Above all, the populist defense of home focuses attention on *developmentalist* elites—corporate, partisan, regulatory, and academic—who propagate a worldview that threatens any habitations, habitats, and homeplaces of lesser monetary value with destruction, degradation, and dispossession as acceptable costs of economic progress and development. This requires bold and sustained resistance to economic doctrines and interests that view ecological homes as underdeveloped zones waiting to be exploited for future monetary value. Key to understanding the ongoing environmental problems faced by local communities across the globe is to recognize the central role played by the power of fungible wealth and the systems of production, consumption, and distribution supporting and reproducing it. While many environmentalists have long joined critics of capitalism and the market economy in interrogating the power of money and wealthy interests, the ecological populist’s focus on developmentalism reminds us of the extent to which the money economy blinds economists, policymakers, and—yes—everyday producers and consumers to the value of ecological homes. In its remarkable tendency to hyper-value growth and devalue habitations, habitats, and homeplaces, developmentalism forces us to sacrifice things of great worth for the promise of economic progress and fungible wealth. Whether or not the price is worth paying is the central question to which environmental political thought must attend. I would argue that it is also the necessary framing for a cogent environmental politics that will resonate beyond committed environmentalists of the Global North.

The historical legacy of the American Populists gives ecological populism rich theoretical resources with which to frame and motivate a movement. As Kazin argues, the farmer-labor populism of the late-19th century coalesced around a producer ethic in which the many who create tangible wealth (food and other goods and services) ought to hold political power rather than the few who enrich themselves with artificial wealth (money) and enjoy comfort and leisure on the backs of the many.[[50]](#footnote-50) Yet, with the onset of interest-group liberalism and the post-war backlash against populism, “[l]iberal intellectuals responded by discarding nearly all sentimental vestiges of the producer ethic” while retrospectively viewing the People’s Party “as cranky provincials instead of a coalition of producers.”[[51]](#footnote-51) To be sure, structural shifts in the American economy away from broad employment in agriculture and manufacturing make a populist mobilization of farmers and laborers reminiscent of the 19th-century producer coalition all but impossible today. Yet a subtle but profound shift in the language of producerism might jumpstart a renewed ecological populism—already practiced across the country and around the world in the present movements for environmental justice, preservation, and sustainability—into a movement in defense of an ecological ethic in which those who hold tangible wealth of a different kind—habitations, habitats, and homeplaces—ought to counteract the destructive influence of the power and interest of fungible wealth—the relative few who truly benefit from developmentalism and whose wealth and power comes at the sacrifice of the ecological homes of everyday people.

This suggests that today’s ecological populism amounts to a kind of protectionism. Political scientists and economists typically use the word to describe policies designed to shield (some) domestic firms from foreign competition and price pressures, with economists in favor of free trade criticizing protectionism for hindering economic growth and providing economic rents to inefficient firms.[[52]](#footnote-52) Yet this understanding of protectionism suggests that only fungible property is worthy of protection. Whereas developmentalists understand protectionism to mean shielding fungible property, the ecological populist recasts protectionism as a mode of ecological and social self-defense by everyday people in which human habitations, natural habitats, and cherished homeplaces are protected against being made into sacrifice zones for development.[[53]](#footnote-53) Rather than advocating protectionism to shield domestic manufacturing interests from the maelstrom of globalization, ecological populists seek protection of our ecological homes from annihilation and degradation at the hands of pollution, climate change, dispossession, and habitat destruction—all at the hands of developmentalism. Protectionism ought to include state policies, but, as Wendell Berry argues, it cannot be the only route to ecological self-defense. As he writes, “[i]f government does not propose to protect the lives, the livelihoods, and the freedoms of its people, then the people must think about protecting themselves.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Whether self-defense comes in the form of local subsistence and slow food movements or government policies of economic regulation and fair trade, however, Berry warns that it “will be disparaged by the globalists as protectionism—and that is exactly what it is.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Along with the environmental justice activist’s question of *who* is to be protected, ecological populism helps answer the question of *what* ought to be protected—namely, our ecological homes.

Thus, ecological populism acknowledges, as Berry puts it, “a division between people who are trying to defend the health, the integrity, even the existence of places whose values they sum up in the words ‘home’ and ‘community,’ and people for whom those words signify no value at all.”[[56]](#footnote-56) The ecological populist seeks protectionism and does so in opposition to developmentalists who see no need for it, or who see protectionism of all sorts as pesky impediments to economic growth and development. The guiding principle of ecological populism is that the environment is where we *live*—the places where we work and play, in which we experience the world and coexist with our nonhuman neighbors. To the extent that the places where we live—or desire to live—are places where we experience ecological belonging in all its modes, the politics of ecological protectionism is a politics of self-defense. Ecological populism seeks primarily to protect *places*—habitations, habitats, and homeplaces—and only secondarily to protect particular industries or economic interests.

**Conclusion: United in Defense of Home**

With its grounding in a multidimensional understanding of the value of home, ecological populism promises to broaden the appeal of environmental protection beyond those who readily identify as environmentalists. While many environmental philosophers and political theorists seek to combat anthropocentrism by advocating for a reformed consciousness or ontological shift in the way we conceive of the nonhuman, attending to the value of ecological home suggests that it is primarily ecological belonging—that is, the attachments to nature that people *already* can and do experience—that motivate everyday people to become environmentally political.[[57]](#footnote-57) They do so to the extent that they see environmental degradation as impinging on the well-being of themselves and their own—which, by way of ecological belonging, includes their local environs. Indeed, that’s the strength of populism in general and ecological populism in particular—it taps into the immediate energies of local, tangible grievances and attachments in pursuit of environmental conservation, preservation, and protection. This is what it means to suggest that ecological populism is a form of militant particularism and a form of self-defense. Populism is the politics of the grassroots.

Nonetheless, it is surely not enough for isolated individuals and groups to stand up in defense of their homes. After all, my diagnosis of developmentalism shares with longstanding critiques of neoliberalism, capitalism, and globalization an emphasis on the structural links connecting one sacrifice zone to another—saving one particular place from destruction, while an important victory, does not directly entail the liberation of other places. Mindful of the global (and uneven) reach of problems like climate change and unaccountable economic development, critics of militant particularism will argue that it is not enough. At best, the critic might say, it amounts to little more than reactive resistance in isolation. While I would be remiss not to speak up in defense of the virtues of reactive resistance—we could use more NIMBY resistance to ecologically and socially destructive development—the critic’s charge is important, for it suggests that, ecological populism notwithstanding, environmental degradation will continue to threaten local places around the world even as a few scattered ones manage to escape destruction. The defense of one’s own does not make a movement.

Yet this overlooks the core of my argument across these chapters in favor of attending to ecological belonging, that is, to experiences of value and attachment shared by many and that form the foundation of the human experience of nature. Our ecological homes may be particular, but the appeal of ecological belonging and especially the need for ecological home is not. The issue for an ecological populism in defense of home is not simply one of defending any particular habitation, habitat, or homeplace, but of defending ecological homes *as such*. The task of ecological populism and the defense of home is not just to defend *my* home or even *our* homes (however the “our” happens to be defined), but rather *home* as such—the collection of habitations, habitats, and homeplaces that, in all their exquisite diversity, make up our common home on the earth.[[58]](#footnote-58)

At its core, then, the politics of ecological belonging is a politics of human flourishing. Rather than condemning economic growth and development out of a misplaced commitment to austerity, self-denial, or misanthropy, ecological populism favors a rich understanding of human flourishing linked to our environs and our attachments to them and fights against its subordination to another—that of developmentalism, which is wedded to economic growth, technological progress, global development, and above all the perpetual proliferation of fungible wealth. Whether it does so openly or not, developmentalism and its model of human flourishing ask us to sacrifice ecological homes to keep the engine of growth and development from stalling. By resisting the sacrifice of home, the ecological populist maintains that human flourishing depends on our ties to tangible, dearly-held things in the world, things that make us who we are, illuminate our world, and allow us to survive and thrive. Thinking of human flourishing in this way—as so many modes of dwelling—makes us open to our nonhuman neighbors and the places we inhabit together, but it also reminds us that the fate of our nonhuman neighbors is an inescapably *human* issue at the heart of which is the weightiest question of all—of who we are and what we want to be. That question can only be answered by individuals, by communities, and by the cultural institutions they trust. It is arguably a question well beyond the domain of political theory. Even so, if my argument is right, our answers to that question must attend to our homes, and our experiences as dwellers—as those who remember, seek, and inhabit our homes and who share with our ecological neighbors the many places that are our greatest inheritance and our most important legacy.

1. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon Press, 2001 [1944], 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wendell Berry, “The Whole Horse,” in *Citizenship Papers*, Counterpoint, 2004, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, Island Press, 1993, pg. 209, quoted in Meyer, “Populism,” 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I define developmentalism in chapter 1 of my dissertation as an economistic mindset that prizes economic growth and development to such an extent that it values all things—including human homes and nonhuman habitats—only insofar as they are productive of present and future monetary value. A hallmark of developmentalism is its drive to constantly develop and redevelop lands and neighborhoods alike in pursuit of future wealth, making it difficult to justify the preservation of anything that might stand in the way of development and the prosperity it promises. Developmentalism also holds, in theory at least, that any loss can be compensated by a proper sum of money—and thus that anything can be *replaced* by that sum of money. Thus, developmentalism uses the projected benefits of development projects and economic growth to justify the destruction of homes and habitats of low market value and the dispossession of the powerless—it is the logic of habitat loss and gentrification alike. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The three modes of ecological belonging are three different ways in which humans come to experience a sense of attachment to their environs. In the first (economic) mode, we *use* nature to cultivate food and build homes for ourselves to meet our material needs and make a living. Here nature is revealed to us as our *habitations*—as the places where we live and the sources of our daily needs, our shelter and sustenance. In the second (epistemic) mode, we come to *know* nature as something beyond us but also connected to us, as ecosystems with diverse life that has needs and characteristics beyond our own and that we ought to steward and preserve. Here nature is revealed to us as *habitats*—as the nonhuman homes of our ecological neighbors, a realm revealed to us through various ways of knowing the natural world ranging from indigenous knowledges to Western ecological science. In the third (affective) mode, we come to *love* nature through enduring personal or communal relationships with particular places that help define who we are. Here nature is revealed as our *homeplaces*—our National Parks, urban parks, the mountains outside one’s hometown, the river valley near one’s home city, and so on. Each mode of belonging corresponds to a mode of ecological valuation (use, intrinsic, and experiential, respectively), and each makes important claims on environmental politics that are often in tension. It is the burden of this chapter to show that all three can be united in an environmental politics in defense of home in which everyday people stand up against developmentalism to protect the places in which they and others experience ecological belonging. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For Raymond Williams’ use of the term “militant particularism,” see his *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (Verson, 1989). For a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of militant particularism from a Marxist perspective, see David Harvey, “Militant Particularism and Global Ambition: The Conceptual Politics of Place, Space, and Environment in the Work of Raymond Williams,” *Social Text* 42, Spring 1995, pp. 69-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For just a few studies of populism by political theorists, see Ernesto Laclau, *Populist Reason*, Verso, 2007; Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For Christopher Lasch’s views on populism, see *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (Norton, 1991) and *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (W.W. Norton, 1995); for Harry Boyte’s writings on populism, see *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) and Harry C. Boyte, Heather Booth, and Steve Max (ed.), *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* (Temple University Press, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Müller, *What is Populism?*, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. That is to say, states need populist social movements to force them to pursue environmental protection. For the broader role of social movements in pushing states to adopt environmental protection, see John Dryzek, Daid Downs, Hans-Kristian Hernes, and David Schlosberg, *Green States and Social Movements: Environmentalism in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway*, Oxford University Press, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As commentators from Müller to Margaret Canovan have argued, much also depends on how one defines the people (e.g. Canovan, *The People*, Polity, 2005). With regard to the ecological populism I describe here, however, that question has a fairly simple answer, at least conceptually—the people are simply the *inhabitants* of a place—those who call the place home. To be sure, as in any place-based politics, who is an inhabitant (and who is not) can and will be contested. Yet ecological populism is defined less by a substantive vision of a unified and pure demos and more by a simple normative commitment to the principle that the inhabitants of a place ought to keep their homes, retain healthy habitats, and enjoy their ecological homeplaces. This means that the question of how the elite is defined is the more central question in ecological populism. Who counts as a “rightful” inhabitant of a place is both politically and historically fraught, and this chapter cannot attend to that thorny question. Yet, no matter who dwells in a place, the place remains, and it remains *as a home* to humans and nonhumans alike. Indeed, that is what makes it an *ecological* home and its defense an *ecological* populism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This worry goes as at least as far back as the influential volume on populism edited by Ernest Gellner and Ionescu Ghita (*Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, Macmillan, 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Müller, op. cit., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 1, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*, 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Kazin, pp. 26-169, esp. 165-9. Of post-WWII populist conservatism, Kazin observes: “This was quite a departure. For the first time in United States history, large numbers of activists and politicians were employing a populist vocabulary to oppose social reform instead of support it” (167). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, see Michael Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*, The MIT Press, 1967; Michael Kazin, op. cit., esp. 190-3; Yannis Stavrakakis, “How did ‘populism’ become a pejorative concept? And why is this important today? A genealogy of double hermeneutics.” *Populismus* Working Paper No. 6, April 2017, esp. pp. 4-6, 9-11. Stavrakakis goes so far as to insist that “[i]t is no exaggeration to argue that today’s dominant anti-populist arguments emanate from Hofstadter’s work…” (5). For key texts in the initial liberal pluralist critique of populism, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, Vintage, 1955; David Bell (ed.) *The Radical Right*, Criterion Books, 1955; Edward A. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*, The Free Press, 1956; Ernest Gellner and Ionescu Ghita (ed.), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, Macmillan, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought*, Harvard University Press. 1962; Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, Oxford University Press, 1976; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, Oxford University Press, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. And, often, with fascism or fascism-lite. The ethno-nationalism and xenophobia of such right-wing populist parties as Trump’s GOP, UKIP, France’s FN, Holland’s PVV, Germany’s AFD, and Hungary’s Fidezs make this association between populism and fascism understandable, though no less conceptually reductive. For an interesting argument against conflating even ethno-centric right-wing populism with fascism, see John Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, Columbia Global Reports, 2016, pp. 154-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Müller helpfully illustrates the anti-pluralism of contemporary populist parties by contrasting their claim that “We, and *only* we, are the people” with the pluralist claim that “We are *also* the people” (98, emphasis added). Thus, for Müller, populist (that is, anti-pluralist) parties claim a monopoly on legitimate representation, whereas pluralists claim a right to *also* be represented. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For Müller’s discussion of the American People’s Party, see *What is Populism*?, pp. 85-91. As he recognizes, “The Populists formulated their demands in political language that clearly set ‘the people’ against self-serving elites” (87). According to my use of the term ‘populism,’ this is enough, especially given the willingness of the Populists to question received dogmas of economic theory—that is to say, to question and resist economic ideas and institutions hostile to their communities and livelihoods. While Müller’s theory of populism is useful, it should not exhaust the meaning of populism as a term in political theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This is why my use of the term ‘populism’ is more in line with the writings of Lasch and Boyte than with contemporary political theorists like Müller. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. John M. Meyer, “Populism, Paternalism, and the State of Environmentalism in the US,” *Environmental Politics*, 17:2, 219-236. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*, 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*, 224-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Timothy W. Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology: Departing from Marx*, University of Illinois Press, 1999, x, 107. It is a testament to how far-ranging the meaning of the term ‘populism’ has been that Luke saw populism as “problematic” in no small part because of its associations at the time with the anarcho-libertarian domestic terrorism of the Unabomber and Timothy McVeigh. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Luke, 10. Meyer also recognizes the role of class and expertise in his assessment of populism and paternalism: “What the populist impulse indicates, then, is the conceptual difference in ‘environmentalism’ as it moves across a divide between a well-educated class of knowledge workers and others in American society” (“Populism,” 227). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Luke, 235. NIMBYism has been critiqued for displacing environment harms onto those lacking the political power to resist them. As a result, some use the alternative acronym NIABY (Not in Anyone’s Backyard) to describe opposition to development that transcends this form of ecological privilege. For a discussion, see Hilary Chaffer Boudet, “From NIMBY to NIABY: Regional Mobilization Against Liquefied Natural Gas in the United States,” *Environmental Politics*, 20.5, 2011, pp. 786-806. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002 [1962]. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For other examples of bureaucratic neglect of vulnerable populations by agencies charged with environmental protection, see Steve Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*, The MIT Press, 2012. The differential protection of different populations by race, class, and gender is one of the primary grievances of the global environmental justice movement, as we will soon see. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Dewitt John, “Civic Environmentalism,” *Issues in Science and Technology*, 10:4, Summer 1994, pp. 30-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Daniel Carpenter’s seminal work points to the importance of independent popular support in giving regulatory agencies the independent power they need to enforce policy and pursue their political goals. See Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928*, Princeton University Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This is why science and technology scholars emphasize the need for “citizen scientists” who can bring grassroots scientific data and interpretation to bear when elite scientists do not take grassroots concerns about local pollution and toxic contamination seriously. For example, see Gwen Ottinger, “Making Sense of Citizen Science: Stories as a Hermeneutic Resource,” *Energy Research & Social Science*, 31 (2017), 41-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For a theoretical study of the environmental justice movement and its objectives see David Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, 1998; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. John M. Meyer and Michael Maniates, “Must We Sacrifice?: Confronting the Politics of Sacrifice in an Ecologically Full World,” in *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice*, ed. Michael Maniates and John M. Meyer, The MIT Press, 2010, p. 1. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Meyer, “Populism,” 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Steve Lerner, “Sacrifice Zones,” 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Ibid*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Lerner, “Sacrifice Zones,” 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Simon and Schuster, 2014, pg. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Ibid*, 169. Well before Lerner and Klein adopted the term “sacrifice zones,” Timothy Luke discussed the same problem under the heading of “externalization zones.” He writes: “The occupants of externalization zones—ordinary people—have rarely shared equally in the economic profits or working benefits of these arrangements. Instead they suffer; they are poisoned; they pay” (*Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology*, 239). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Ibid*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Ibid*, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid*, 191-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. To be sure, one can recognize the national advantages of protectionism in fostering a domestic manufacturing sector—not to mention the hypocrisy of developed nations preaching free trade when their own economic ascendance owed much to protection of their farmers and manufacturers. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. This formulation of protectionism owes much to Karl Polanyi’s theory of the “double movement” in which the destructive effects of market liberalization and the false commodification of land, labor, and money were countered by widespread but spontaneous efforts to regulate and curb markets out of self-defense. See the first epigraph to this chapter, and generally *The Great Transformation*, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Wendell Berry, “The Total Economy,” 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Ibid*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Wendell Berry, “Higher Education and Home Defense,” in *Home Economics*, Counterpoint, 1987, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. For just a few prominent examples of the many arguments for changes in consciousness to address the environmental crisis, see Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered*, Gibbs Smith 2007 [1985]; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Pope Francis’ encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, calls for people of all faiths to address the environmental issues of our time and marks Francis as a potential ally for ecological populists. Of course, the Pope holds views on the afterlife, scriptural truth, and the nature of morality that some ecological populists may share but many others may not. As William Connolly argues with regard to his politics of swarming—itself a popular politics of environmentalism—we ought to seek out spiritual affinities across creedal differences in pursuit of the world we want. For Connolly’s sympathetic discussion of Francis, see William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming*, Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 141-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)