

JELENA ČUKOVIĆ

Department of Ethnology and anthropology, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade

jelena.cukovic@f.bg.ac.rs

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2061-5232>

Back to Nature Ideology, the Case Study of Western Serbia*

„Perhaps only human beings can have enough distance
from the matrix of life to abstract an idea of Nature
and brood about going away from or back to it.” (Mills 2008, 1)

This paper focuses on the perception of nature and the natural, which I marked as an ideological viewpoint and will analyze as such. I have based my research on the following sources: different platforms of internet communities connected by the desire to “return to nature” and interviews from the field research in Western Serbia that I have been conducting continuously since 2018. The goal of the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of “living in harmony with nature” and the impact that this idea has had on different aspects of the community’s social and political life.

Keywords: nature, ideology, Western Serbia, nativism, environment

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Идеологија повратка природи, западна Србија као студија случаја

„Можда само људска бића могу имати довољну дистанцу од матрице живота да апстрахују идеју о Природи и расподелају о одласку од ње или враћању њој.“ (Mills 2008, 1)

У раду се бавим перцепцијом природе и природног, коју означавам као идеолошко гледиште и кроз ту призму је анализирам. Своје истраживање засновала сам на следећим изворима: различитим платформама интернет заједница повезаних жељом за „повратком природи“ и интервјуима са теренских истраживања у западној Србији које спроводим у континуитету од 2018. године. Циљ рада је да се допринесе бољем разумевању концепта „живот у складу са природом“ и утицаја који је ова идеја имала на различите аспекте друштвеног и политичког живота заједнице.

Кључне речи: природа, идеологија, западна Србија, нативизам, животна средина

RETURN TO NATURE AS AN IDEOLOGY

“People are becoming more and more alienated from nature, from their roots, from themselves” – this has been a frequent diagnosis of modern men and women in my research. Most of the current societal problems of my interviewees are attributed to some kind of alienation from the human essence that is considered natural. This kind of thinking, although expressed quite simply as common sense, carries a complex and layered ideological system and greatly influences the understanding of other phenomena. According to the arbitrary distinction natural/artificial – the categories positive/negative are determined.

This is by no means a new perspective on the human condition,¹ but with each and every day that we are facing advancements in technology and global industries, it seems like the reactionary need for disobedience towards those who are introducing them is getting stronger. The principle may not be new, but the context is something that we

¹ Similar elements can be traced even back to ancient Greece, and are found in the philosophy of cynicism, nineteenth-century transcendentalists in France, life-reformists in Germany or anarcho-primitivists all around the globe. The historical line of this *back to nature* philosophy can be further looked in Sallins (2016).

have never experienced before, especially with the fast-evolving artificial intelligence.

Conceptions of nature vary historically and ethnographically, and are, therefore, intrinsically cultural and so widely asserted nowadays that it is often assumed that they have become a self-evident anthropological truth (Ellen 2004, 103). In this paper, I will follow the idea that understanding nature depends on individual or collective ideology.²

I am partially guided by the theoretical reflections on ideology as a cultural system presented by Clifford Geertz, who observed ideology as an analytical apparatus. Now, according to Geertz, ideology is a “diagnosis of social, political, and intellectual pathologies that diverted societies from a sensible appreciation of reality” (Geertz 1973, 204). Although broader than Marx’s definition, in which ideology refers only to those sets of ideas and beliefs that are dominant in society and are used to justify the power and privilege of the ruling class, Geertz’s definition also sets ideology as opposed to reality (La Capra 1988, 378). In the paper, I will not discuss the relationship between an ideological explanation of the world and reality, because I have not yet found evidence of an existing explanation of reality absolutely deprived of ideological biases.³

Therefore, I do not regard ideology as something negative that contaminates the one and only truth of the world (Mullins 1979, 144), but as a set of values that are leading people’s actions. The goal is to understand how and why this particular ideology was constructed, without focusing on whether this system of beliefs is based on lies, which I currently find to be irrelevant.

My intention is to describe the patterns of the new dominant ideology, that I found in my research to have been shaped in the last few years in Western Serbia as a consequence of the epidemic of the COVID-19 disease, and the environmental crisis caused by investment plans related to the extraction of lithium in the Jadar river valley. These emerging ideas

² Personal ideology here is defined as “an individual’s philosophy of how life should be and of what forces influence human living” (Aubin 1996), but it is considered to be determined by wider systems.

³ Mannheim paradox “is a name for finding that social scientists themselves are humans and thus subject to ideological pressure and laws of human behaviour, which could influence how they perform as scientists. Or in other words, how scientists being humans and thus not fully rational cannot create purely rational theories and purely rational conclusions not influenced by their personal preferences and prejudices.” <https://matej.ceplovi.cz/blog/mannheims-paradox.html> This is a reference to a blog inspired by Carey ([1989] 2008) who wrote about culture and communication, and I find it very helpful.

and beliefs are rooted in larger thought systems, a phenomenon sociologist Mannheim called relationism (Seidel 2011, 220). Geertz explains that Mannheim thinks that this means that sociopolitical thought does not grow out of disembodied reflection but “is always bound up with the existing life situation of the thinker” (Geertz 1973, 194). I will also argue that my interviewees are not aware that their thoughts on nature are “sociopolitical thoughts”. In contrast to the obvious political struggle in terms of a transitional period in which the entire region underwent social and political reforms according to European standards, this kind of need to “return to the roots” had to be publicly separated from the pejorative idea of politics held by this group, because it was connected to the mere idea of life, not just law like in first case. The Covid-19 outbreak change the way that life in the rural areas was regarded and even reinforced emergence of social movements that promote a slow and environmentally friendly lifestyle and the anti-urban trends (Pileva & Markov 2021, 543).

The return to nature as the return to roots and tradition is part of a wider wave of global retraditionalisation or anti-modernism (Gaweda 2018, Lavrič et al. 2019, Brini et al. 2021), which can be understood as a societal (and scientific) reaction to the unsolved (so called) problems of reality in the current ideological model (Leroy & Tatenhove, 2000, 189). Thus, taking into consideration that modernity could not solve the pandemic, and it is threatening to destroy water, air and soil, communities tend to return to previous models as somewhat or altogether better modes of living.

Modern environmental problems provoked different ecologist and environmentalist movements.⁴ In the case of Western Serbia, one can notice strengthened and reshaped motives of nationalism but also elements of anarchism, goals of the liberal left and many other segments of different ideologies that I will analyze further in the following pages.

It is difficult to speak of “societies” and “cultures” as having a single conception of nature, and it would be an exaggeration to claim that it is even true of empirically identifiable local populations (Ellen 2004, 104), but in this specific fieldwork the conception of nature is being used as a non-formal manifesto for mobilizing the community for ecological activism, and it is quite coherent.

⁴ Dobson (1990) draws attention on differences between ecologism and environmentalism, stressing that the first movement is more concerned about other species and maintaining resources, while the environmentalism being more managerial and focused on conservation of status quo in sense of social environment.

I will try, and again not by proving its fallacy, to deconstruct some of the narratives of my interviewees about nature and humans and to stress out the implication that this topic has had on their understanding of their everyday life and decision making.

NATURE IN WESTERN SERBIA AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

My fieldwork did not commence with an exploration of the concept of nature or natural elements in general. I undertook the first of eight field visits to western Serbia motivated by research of intangible cultural heritage, that is, with what might be called a *heritage gaze* (Salemink 2021, 426). I was interested in the potential elements of intangible cultural heritage as described by UNESCO, and the task was to identify and record something resembling that. What I was particularly interested in was the specific area of knowledge, i.e. skills, of various crafts, the most common of which were rakija⁵ brewing and the making of homemade products, so I started by focusing on knowledge and skills related to environmental sustainability. I had the impression that the local people knew their area well, as well as the plant and animal species located there, and that they could use the resources of the environment without endangering it. In this part of the paper I will showcase the pattern of nature perception that I marked on fieldwork, from which the conclusion of back to nature imperative was drawn.

From the interviews that have accumulated over the years,⁶ I was able to form a common narrative, where the most interesting part for me was connecting the conversation about nature with thinking about modern social and political life in Serbia. Although I wanted to talk about the actual skills and techniques of growing, harvesting and manufacturing a product, the conversation always ended with economic slurs, i.e. statements about the unfair discrepancy between the economic and any other value of their product, which comes primarily from the authorities and the global economic system.

Real, natural, homemade products are not valuable, it seems that artificial... and printed food are better...

⁵ Local brandy made mainly of plums.

⁶ It was also very interesting to see how these narratives emerged during this period, with each year being more coherent and stronger, following the actions of the corporation Rio Tinto, and mobilizing more members of the community.

It is not worth doing it... a lot of effort and work, so people now throw it away instead of selling

The problem is the state, they don't care about our products and our effort, and they are supposed to mediate. But what are they doing? – they are buying foreign tomatoes! They are importing! That way, all of this does not make sense anymore.

Why do you want to know how we make this food? Even our children don't want to know, they just go to the store and buy what they want.

The irony is a very important part of narratives. Repeating something that they perceived as a modern-day principle of Western societies in ironic tones is often the way that they express their attitude:

The most important thing is to dress well and buy an expensive car.
We should go to the city and work in the office.
We will all eat (phone) applications, why not.

Western Serbia is a part of the world that can be described in terms of the stereotypical natural site – green and blue are dominating the space, there is a lot of fresh and clean water going through the land, and woods, hills and mountains secure stunning viewpoints. Villages and houses do not affect the area much, in the sense of changing the landscape, so one may conclude that people here are not trying to interfere with the environment, but desire to live in harmony with it. From 2018 onward, I have visited more than a dozen villages from different municipalities in this area, namely Tršić, Korenita, Paskovac, Voćnjak, Zajača, Gornja Borina, Donja Borina, Zavlaka, Klupci, Runjani, Gornji Dobrić, Donji Dobrić, Jadranska Lešnica, Lipnički Šor, Kozjak, Brezjak, Gornje Nedeljice, Donje Nedeljice, Cikote and Dvorska. With the help of the students,⁷ who were doing their obligatory field practice, I gathered a significant amount of qualitative data concerning the knowledge of both nature and the environment.

⁷ There were five generations of students who were involved in gathering the data in question, and I would like to thank them for conducting interviews and transcribing them, by mentioning all of their names: Jana Petrović, Teodora Smiljanić, Vera Bogosavljev, Tamara Dimić, Đurđina Rakonjac, Anđelka Živojinović, Lazar Barać, Natalija Milić, Ognjen Paročić, Bojana Perković, Dejana Stošić, Katarina Mikljan, Vidosa Stefanović, Vladimir Virijević, Milica Lomić, Ivana Fotić and Marija Terzić.

In recent years, one of the main protagonists of environmental stories has been the big corporation Rio Tinto, that wanted to invest in the excavation of jadarite mineral (lithium borate) and by doing so move people away from their land. The event was a generator of mobilizing the community against this threat and also the catalyst for the awakening of national sentiment. This crisis united locals and the public, and since then, resistance has been shown, especially within a small group of patriotic activists. I opted to round up my material based on their narrative, because it is widespread and quite uniform.

While COVID-19 restrictions did not hit rural households as they did in the cities, the vaccine debate and folklore about the origin of the virus played an essential part in shaping their everyday life. But the most important aspect that has changed after the lockdown is the idea that yards and access to natural sites are of utmost importance, that the people who lived in rural areas still could feel the fresh air, go for walks, and maintain their lives just like they were able to when the lockdown was not in power. This reinforced the notion of the importance of being in nature, and the urgency to go back, for stray city people.

Almost every rural household in this (Jadar) region has its own garden and products, and everyone remembers the time when every household also owned livestock. Many older respondents have experienced something in their lives that they describe as an interruption of direct interaction with nature, and although few are satisfied with this, most respondents romanticize the former period. It all began in childhood, when they played more in the woods, outside their houses, and through play learned about plant and animal species, about the quality of wood, and about the potential dangers, as well as the benefits of their natural environment. They also talked about the responsibilities pertaining to them, in terms of planting, watering, picking, and washing fruits and vegetables, and how scarcity of store-bought food made everything look much more tempting (something that they think today's children do not consider valuable, such as *proja*, *kačamak*⁸ and other *simple* and *traditional* dishes). One of my interlocutors gave specific example of knowledge that was common among the kids of his generation – making a bow and arrows out of “natural” materials. The claim that older generations were outside on any occasion possible (that their mothers could not “usher them into the houses”), and that their children today could not be “de-

⁸ Cornbread and corn porridge.

tached” from their devices and that they spend all their time indoor, is big part of common narrative.

This narrative always shows up in comparison with the perception of modern childhood. Today’s children are described as “enamored of technology”, “clueless about their surroundings”, and as, basically, incapable of recognizing the true value of the environment and the area in which they live because they are always interested in something else. Nevertheless, many parents have arranged for their children to go abroad or to bigger cities in Serbia to study, because they think that it does not make sense to continue living in the countryside – and they did that by selling parts of their property.

Another thing that frequently occurred later, in the in-depth interview, is that the interviewees sank into a kind of melancholy and stated that we had become alienated from the nature of our being. They are of the opinion that most modern problems, and illnesses, both physical and mental, are caused by our trying to be something we are not. Natural is as it should be, and what is natural is decided according to the romanticized past.

For my interviewees, many things are not natural: a particular variety of tomatoes, building materials, a particular diet, certain behaviors outside of established gender roles, types of sexuality, religiosity, identity, and interactions between different (ethnic, confessional) identities. In each case, there is a tendency to see the familiar, established, and normal as natural and the unusual and different as deviant. Hence comes the idea of the possible and the impossible, that is, the natural and the unnatural (or the supernatural).

Those respondents who had already thought a lot about nature and man’s place in it, especially after the pandemic, referred me to Internet communities that go into more detail about practical proposals for a “return to nature” and a life “outside the system.” This is the group of people who have agreed on the idea that the modern individual is in trouble. This person is lost, deprived of the ability to flourish. This individual is mentally challenged, forced to consume and unable to produce, because he has been “brainwashed” by large corporations and the global economic system. The propensity to live independently is taken away by alienating the knowledge. But this modern individual can change things by becoming independent and free, by refusing to consume products and content that assures dependence.

The most important things, of course, are air, water and food. In one of these groups on the social media platform Facebook, one can find an abundance of content regarding the preservation of air and water, grow-

ing your own food, and how not to starve if you decide to opt out of the global food system.

Besides the practical, it is also possible to find spiritual content stated about the importance of nature, and religious quotes on getting lost if we do not listen to the nature of our being. Users often post examples of people who give up their jobs and apartments in cities and buy houses in remote villages, while making farming their main occupation. The idealized image of a noble villager is gaining more and more respect in this community.

However, a lot of friction exists in these groups, because opinions on what exactly we, the human species, are returning to, and how pure the form of this archaic life should be vary. The biggest disagreement resides in the dominant ideology that will shape the abovementioned future – should it be based on Slavic mythology, orthodox Christian philosophy, Serbian folk religion, or just cosmopolitan values? It looks like every member has its own perception of the matter at hand.

So, for the purposes of making a more valid argument in the paper, I decided to follow only digital content that coincided with my in-person gathered ethnographic material, which is mostly concerned with tradition in a national sense. Also, I wanted to deconstruct the narrative of people living in rural areas, so I decided to focus on the part off the posts that were written by people with rural background. Unsurprisingly, individuals who posted this kind of content were usually people from Western Serbia interested in a certain kind of eco-activism.

Nature in their discourse is a national entity, because it is soaked with ancestral blood, and it contains bones of parents and grandparents, so it embodies literal DNA. Nature was an ally to the Serbian army on not a small number of occasions. For example, the terrain, Drina river, and wind were sometimes very harsh to the enemy army in the stories that I have collected. Nature is righteous and it cannot be corrupted. Its functioning is perfect, except when it is threatened, in which case it can be unpredictable and revengeful. It seems like one can only follow what is perceived to be the natural course of life, so as not to disturb its harmony and order.

The natural course of life, according to the narratives, is to proceed where your ancestors had to stop. You should attempt to maintain a good name, have a family, create a new generation and live according to tradition, as such. Everything that interferes with this course is considered unnatural. And it seems like, when people here talk about their ancestors, they are always referring to one specific generation, to the ones who lived during World War I. These events that took place in Western Serbia

during the Great War, shaped today's nativistic viewpoint and the specific historical interpretation, which is considered to be an analogy to the Rio Tinto case, and they tell us more about the perspective of people and the environment.

Stories of grandfathers who joined the army at a young age, or grandfathers who marched barehanded as experienced fighters (from the Balkan wars) to defend their homeland against the occupiers, are used to remind us why we owe it to them to defend our land in the same way. The company's performance has reminded some of our interlocutors of the colonial power of the new century, and the fight against them was perceived as a special kind of war. History has recorded the narrative, which is now being reproduced, about the brave resistance against the occupiers, about the victory in the context of the Battle of Cer and as a defeat in the context of the Battle of Mačkov Kamen, where the forest in the area was decimated (while it also served as a protection, same as the Serbian army did). This part of narrative, which is referring to WW1 period, can be regarded as myth. Myths are powerful narratives that shape societies and their values, which are not claims that could in principle be proven right or wrong, but rather axioms that often ground the very categorizations of something as right or wrong (Kozák 2023, 3).

Although based on real historical events, interpretation of the past and its contemporary use is what makes it an ideological myth. According to my interlocutors, the Serbian forest, the Serbian stream and other Serbian natural elements contain the covenant of ancestors and surrendering them to others without a fight bears a curse and an imprecation. In the narratives of respondents who are most involved in actively resisting the company's aims (and everyone who works to fulfill its goals – the state and individuals from the local community), there are beliefs that bad things happen to those who give up their land.⁹ From the loss of newly purchased property, illness, even the death of loved ones and the tragic deaths of those committing the acts in question (Ćuković 2023b, 212–213). This is also considered to be a consequence of the functioning of the natural order.

⁹ I have had the opportunity to talk to some of the people who have sold their land, and, of course their perspective is quite different as to the explanation for their actions. It is impossible to know though, how much they were really affected by the stories of curses and justice.

NATURE, NATIVISM AND NATIONALISM

Nature operates as perhaps the single most pervasive construction through which modernity has organized the perception of the world (Williams 1976; Thomas 1983, as cited in Campbell 2005, 286). It is at the core of every personal and collective ideology. The category of nature embodies the things we perceive as given, and existing, without interference, and our selection of those things can speak a lot about ourselves. Even though the debates of natural vs. cultural and nature vs. nurture have been put in the past in terms of practice in both social studies and bioscience, this is still dominant thinking in some ideologies, ontologies or cultures.

Naturalism is a discourse created around the belief that nature simply does exist, that certain things owe their existence and development to a principle extraneous both to chance and to the effects of human will (Rosset 1973; Descola 2004, 88). Therefore, naturalism creates a specific ontological domain, a place of order and necessity where nothing happens without a reason or a cause (Descola 2004, 88)

I am discussing nature narratives that I have collected in my research as ideology, in the sense of it being the justificatory, apologetic dimension of culture (Geertz 1973, 231) that refers to the part of a culture which is actively concerned with the establishment and defense of patterns of belief and value (Fallers 1961, 680). "Return to nature" in this sense means going away from culture, at least the culture of the West which is the culture that knows no boundaries of acceptable behavior. Many times my interviewees would say, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, that people were acting as if they were God, taking over and trying to control nature, and that their actions will have consequences, with revenge being brought upon them. In cultures that are more connected to the natural pulse of life (like ours) illnesses simply do not exist. A very important part of the health folklore are narratives about different toxins that were first brought here with wars, bombing and different investment groups – Rio Tinto was the straw that broke the camel's back.

I regard this local discourse with the help of the idea that each society is a specific homeostatic device tightly adapted to a specific environment (Descola & Pallson 2004, 4).

Many anthropologists and historians now agree that conceptions of nature are socially constructed, that they vary according to cultural and historical determinations, and that, therefore, our own dualistic view of the universe should not be projected as an ontological para-

digm onto the many cultures where it does not apply. (Descola 2004, 82) But, where does a particular skill or body of knowledge have to be located to be classified as 'indigenous'? How old does it have to be to count as 'traditional'? Another contested issue relates to the concept of knowledge itself. Practical knowledge is sometimes presented as a marketable commodity, a thing like 'cultural capital', for instance when encoding indigenous knowledge for the protection of intellectual property rights and defending legal. Much of the practitioner's knowledge, however, is tacit—dispositions acquired in the process of direct engagement with everyday tasks. The dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' created in this context of reasoning implicitly supposes a distinction between 'knowledge embedded in society, and knowledge independent of society' (Latour 1987, 213). The former modes of knowledge are usually designated by the prefix 'ethno'. To remind people in Western societies that scientific knowledge about nature is also generated in local cultures, dependent on specific circumstances and situated traditions, is one of the central issues of symmetric anthropology. (Nothnagel 2004, 271)

Questions raised in this excerpt, are also questions that my research of intangible cultural heritage has tackled, and although I wrote about it on a couple of occasions (Čuković 2019, Čuković 2023a), I never really connected this issue with nature and the concept of nativism that can be traced back to the collected narratives of Western Serbia. Nativism in anthropology is regarded as a social movement that proclaims the return to power of the natives of a colonized area and the resurgence of native culture, along with the decline of the colonizers. The term has also been used to refer to a widespread attitude of a society when it comes to the rejection of alien persons or cultures.¹⁰

In the first sense, it is clear that nativism is being used by people in Western Serbia to showcase the importance of resisting corporations, and the refusal to be someone's economic colony. We also have the notion of native right to the land, and the perceived failure of any outsider who attempts in vain to truly understand this territory.

Nostalgia usually plays a role in the emergence of nativism/tribalism perspectives, particularly when people are experiencing very rapid change

¹⁰ Source of definition: The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th ed. 2023, Columbia University Press. <https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/social-science/cultures/anthropology/nativism>

(Davis 2019, 101), which I argue is the case in Western Serbia, or Serbian society as a whole. The special kind of nostalgia, the restorative one, as Davis explained was defined by Boym (2001), involves a desire to return to, or revive the past. It is all about “heritage and tradition”, although it is often an invented tradition and a dogmatic, stable myth that gives you a coherent version of the past (Davis 2019, 102) needed in times of ongoing change. As Kozák noticed:

Environmental and climate change mythologies are, in at least two respects, similar to national mythologies. As national myths, environmental myths are generally based on facts. While national myths are based on real historical events (however selected and interpreted), climate change myths are based on scientific facts (with the same caveat). In both cases the facts serve as “anchors” for a narrative imbued with strong and deep affective content, which explains our place in the world and the challenges humanity faces. (Kozák 2023, 5-6)

There is a side of nativistic ideology that is sometimes considered xenophobic, because it proclaims the inherent ignorance of “outsiders” of the territory and the people. Some traces of a nativistic view are argued to be characteristic of Serbian culture per se, as seen in the paper “It Takes Serb to Know Serb” by anthropologist Van de Port. Van de Port (1999, 8) points out that there is knowledge that his “Serbian informants labeled as impenetrable to Western knowledge”, and in some sense, that is also applicable to the knowledge about nature in Western Serbia.

The difference between Van de Port’s research and mine is that I have the viewpoint of the insider, or someone regarded as also being a native – not to this exact location but in the sense of national identity and also because of the fact that I grew up in a village myself. So much of their narrative is supposed to be understood by me effortlessly, just by referring to a historical event, site or figure.

Nativeness, if not *nativism*, has always been core to the idea of the nation (Bertossi et al. 2022). Nature and place are commonly woven into nationalistic rhetoric, in the sense that they offer a common moralizing discourse to that of nationalism: defend your land, defend your nation; identify with your place and be willing to preserve it (Hunt 2018, 89). Nature in this context serves as a national symbol. Apart from emphasizing the national distinctiveness of nature, rivers, mountains, and food, national symbols have also drawn from another resource of nature: animals. Most states have unofficial but commonly accepted animals whose status

as “national” already gives them a privileged position.¹¹ The intimate connections with place and their characteristics is being made, and the sense of territorial rootedness is being constructed (Malkki 1992).

In 1999, Jonathan Olsen wrote about the phenomenon of right-wing ecology as a distinct form of modern environmentalism, and he did it by carefully analyzing the statements and activities of radical right-political parties in Germany. His main point was that environmentalism is not, as it is often assumed to be, an expression of left-wing or liberal politics. There is a coherent ideology of right-wing ecology, and thus environmentalism cuts across the traditional distinction between right and left (Katz 2001, 219). The term eco-nationalism to refer to the tendency of the goals of nationalist movements to coincide with the goals of ecologist and environmentalist movement (Margulies 2021, 23). Eco-nationalism proposes a path for maintaining intact the idea of the nation by offering the form of sovereignty rooted in territorial commitments in their most literal sense: the responsibility to take care of the earth in the face of diminishing resources of water, food and arable land (Aronczyk 2023, 3).

The rhetoric of my interviewees’ ecological concept of preserving nature is mixed with the nationalistic idea of preserving the fatherland. I do not think that is possible to put them into a political box of eco-nationalism as an existing option, because they are not aware of their political agency in a formal sense. They know that their actions matter but solely in the sense of defending physical space. My respondents are interested in justice, but they are not a political movement. They will often emphasize the moral disgust that they feel towards politics and politicians. So, that is why I think that their shared goal and system of values, that do not exist in any document, must be regarded as implicit reactionary ideology. I can illustrate this with a quote from one of the villagers that can be found in newspapers:

This is a topic that has nothing to do with ideology. This is a topic related to the survival of Serbia, the Serbian people and to putting an end to the sale of our country – he says.

However, I see the ideology as not fact-based or objective statement but normative beliefs informed by basic assumptions about reality that contain answers to the questions that are intended to guide first-order

¹¹ <https://nationalismstudies.wordpress.com/2011/03/09/nationalism-and-nature/>

principles of political views, thus shaping one's ideological commitments (Steinmetz 2019, 25). In this sense, the protection of nature and the environment in Western Serbia is all about ideology.

Barbara Gaweda (2018, 1) wrote, while researching Polish and Russian societies, that the

rejection of state socialism, which nominally proclaimed itself an egalitarian system and the lack of attention to social inequalities after 1989 produced a vehement reaction in the form of resurgent, nostalgic ethno-nationalism, militant religiosity, and social conservatism.

In the case of Western Serbia, communism and the socialist regime of Yugoslavia created an even more reactionary effect, since (among other things) it fell apart in the atrocious war that affected the area very much. Gaweda also noticed something that is currently applicable on *back to nature* ideology in this part of the world – religious authorities, while not having explicit control over policymaking, are legitimate agents on the political scene and their input on policies is sought after and respected, having long-lasting effects on how citizens and the states conceive what is thinkable and unthinkable (Gaweda 2018, 2–3). Although there are church figures who do not represent authority for my interviewees, and sometimes the church has also had a bad reputation, religious beliefs and practices are a big part of their lives, and God and nature are often terms used in the same sense.

The specific idea of a return to nature for the community in rural Western Serbia is there as a recommendation to others. My interviewees think that they live in accordance with nature as much as one can in the modern world, but they fear for their children, who have already parted from the nature by turning to technology and Western influence. This opinion coincides with certain research whose findings state that a person's connection to nature has been shown to motivate engagement in environmentally protective behavior (Mayer and Frantz 2004, 503), and the lack of it has also been blamed for people's apathy toward environmental degradation and conservation (Pyle 1978, 329; Oh et al 2021, 9). But if we regard the connection to nature solely as life in a condition less adapted for human urban life, it does not always make sense why people from concrete landscapes crave green surfaces, and why a significant part of rural population is not into environmental protection. My point is that my interviewees have moral issues with modern life, and that both their resistance and moral compass rely heavily on their interpretation of nature.

The hybrid ideology¹² that I detected among people living in Western Serbia while conducting research about environmental knowledge, is a system of beliefs and values mainly conservative but also a mixture of “green” and liberal goals. The idea that the government’s poor decisions and greed have led to the deconstruction of resources that we call natural, and that we as a society should rise up against that is taken from the left point of view, but the solution that is going back to nature, national tradition and God is a purely politically right idea. A nationalist movement takes the legitimacy of the state to be normative, believing that “the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner & Breuille 2013, 1; Margulies 2021, 23), which is not demonstrated by the state in opinion of my interviewees. Understanding how nature is instrumentalized as a concept that legitimizes human values and therefore actions is of utmost importance in the future world of fast-evolving artificiality and local and global challenges.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The idea that humanity has gone astray, not solely in terms of technology, is not something new. Also, eco-nationalism as an ideology has already had its long life in Europe and other places. However, I think that my case study of Western Serbia can be a valuable contribution to a better understanding of how ideology has shaped the view of nature, and how the perception of nature and natural have affected the view on everything else.

In that sense, the popular imperative of returning to nature in this specific case almost always meant returning to the life of the ancestors, at least to the life we like to think they had. In this act of going back to a “simpler” and hence better life, people celebrate the past but more importantly – they actively criticize the present.

The “back to nature” concept is also instrumentalized in the tourist sense. The few places that were able to give the illusion of immediate interaction with nature are very visited. I say illusion here, because I do not think that the so-called intact natural flora and fauna would be of tourist interest in a larger scope. This is also what was well understood during the pandemic, the fact that *ethno* or *nature* tourism will be very valuable in the future.

In a political sense, living according to nature is a term that marks the right behaviour. Artificiality sounds like a danger in this discourse. That

¹² I am aware that in a sense all ideologies are hybrids.

way many organizations concerned with the technological shift characterize themselves as eco-terrorists.

But the community that I was researching in this paper is not a community solely based on such a political agenda, nor have they lived in a city and then have gone through a transformative experience. They do not think that they need to get back to nature because they are still there.

The interesting thing is that rural communities in Western Serbia, while trying to preserve their households against globalization and big corporations, are inventing the ideology. Without perceived prevailing influence, they are reviving arguments that have existed for so long and they are giving them new aspects. I think that this example of globalised ideological creation can contribute to a wider understanding of the making of ontologies and reactionary resistance, and it is in need of more research in the future.

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