# Ecologizing Nature Among (Not Quite) Secular Northerners: Special Issue Editors' Introduction

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If modernization is a process of compartmentalization, then ecologization is its opposite. This is the opening idea of this special issue, borrowed from Bruno Latour's paper 'To Modernize or to Ecologize? That's the Question' from 1998. In this text, Latour's invitation is to take steps toward reconnecting nature, that is, the landscapes, other species, the environment, with the cultural in its political, existential, emotional and spiritual dimensions of our societies. By 'ecologization' Latour means something much broader than merely adapting the insights of ecological science. He addresses the need for breaking with the entire 'modern constitution' that led to the global environmental crises by reducing nature to exterior surroundings and a system of material objects (Latour 1993). To ecologize, then, is to-scientifically but also culturally, philosophically, technologically, politically and religiously—do the opposite of this. The process pinpointed with this neologism offers for Latour a direction out of the modern and a possibility for closing the ontological gaps of modernity's differentiations for those who seek an alternative. As such, Latour has consistently urged politics, the sciences and religions, to face the ecological crises with imagination and courage (Latour 2009, 2022). More concretely, in 1998, Latour cautioned that ecologization is not simply to connect or reconnect to 'nature', since 'nobody knows of what an environment is capable' and thus we have to 'suspend certainty concerning ends and means' (Latour 1998: 19). Instead, to mend what modernization wanted



to keep apart is an open-ended endeavor seeking to break new ground in a space of experimentation where 'everything is complicated and every decision demands caution and prudence' (Latour 1998: 21). In short, as Latour said, 'it is a collective experimentation on the possible associations between things and people without any of these entities being used, from now on, as a simple means by the others' (1998: 21).

Although Latour's description is rather vague, he exemplifies what he means can be seen as instances of ecologization in is writing. His examples ranges from experiments in scientific laboratories to museums, theology, and new modes of practicing multispecies democracy.

The authors of this issue have taken ecologization as a cue for an ethnographic and analytical experimentation within the field of nature, culture and religion. Centered on studies of 'nature' enchantment, spirituality and religion in the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Estonia we have looked out for instances of new assemblages (associations and co-operations) between people, things, and other living beings in ways that challenge the binaries Latour identifies with the modern.

We put nature in inverted commas here in order to stay alert to the fact that nature is an often-used word that we cannot take for granted. In Scandinavia and neighboring countries nature, as pointed out by Cecilie Rubow (this volume), may refer both to landscapes without traces of human activities, and to cultivated areas. Religion, similarly, is also a deeply multilayered and entangled category. Through ethnographic encounters this special issue investigates intersections between ethics, politics, landscapes, species, sciences, special experiences and the sensibilities surrounding them and shows how ecologized practices crop up in a variety of contexts. The stories that we tell about these practices, not only stretch our notions of both nature and religion, but create new, remolded forms of the 'not-quite-secular' (Taylor 2010).

Latour picked up on observations about culture, nature and religion that have been discussed in other fields (Berger 1967; White 1967; Taylor 2010) and his writing connects to anthropology, philosophy, and sociology. While Thomas Hylland-Eriksen has stated that Latour is 'vague as to the actual measures needed to reorient societies' (Hylland Eriksen 2018: 245), this vagueness, we find, can also be interpretated as an imaginative openness. With a concept like modernization and ecologization, and by speaking of a 'critical zone within which we, the terrestrials live', Latour carves out new fields of inquiry that also allows for cooperation between different scholarly disciplines and across ethnographic fields. This issue presents scholars from history of religion and various branches of anthropology working ethnographically in



empirical settings across the Nordic countries. Not only do the contributions traverse the mountainous north of Sápmi, the urban forests around Stockholm, rewilded meadows in Denmark and sacred groves in Estonia, they also, in each their way, explore how the Northerners reconnect to trees, animals and places across educational, ritual, existential and politicized settings of conflict.

Our effort to stay close to local settings and their ways of reorientation, and our common analytical aspiration to engage with processes of ecologization, has also led us to concepts outside of Latour's toolbox. Despite this, however, we find that the stories we tell from the North, in their differing ways, do resonate with his repeated invitations to an ecologized social science, with his speculative eco-theological provocation (2009), and with his call for the recognition of a grounded, 'reterritorialized' reality for our existence on Earth (2018).

The categories we employ in this special issue take inspiration from our ethnographies. Atempting to step out of the modern might appear to be a staggering endeavour, but by insisting on holding on to our ethnographic minutia we have tried to show the relevance of this aim without loosing touch with academic principles of clarity and robustness. Here we also find precursors in previous ethnography on the Scandinavians. In her studies of everyday life in Norway, for example, Marianne Gullestad (1989: 173) emphasized 'the efforts people make to create integration in their lives'. 'Since', she writes, 'many roles, activities and for aare separated in modern society, it is up to the individual to tie his/her participation in different domains together into an identity and into a life world' (Gullestad 1989: 173). Gullestad points out the stark contrasts between the home and the outside, nature and society, and the many contradictions these binaries produce, while maintaining an emphasis on the integrative force of the cultural order. Today, with a Latourian gaze, we note that the individual burden that Gullestad identifies relies on yet another separation between the individual and society. Nevertheless, Gullestad points to some of the ways in which nature and the ecological crises are stitched into the fabric of modern life. Other ethnographers making a similar point, including Marianne Lien (2015), Frida Hastrup and Nathalia Brichet (2016), Inger Anneberg and Niels Bubandt (2016), Thurfjell (2020), and Rubow (2022).

Our scholarly interest in processes of ecologization connects to several new theoretical dialogues that we find are taking place across disciplines: from various conceptualizations of the Anthropocene (e.g., Gan et al. 2017) to new scientific, integrative paradigms like Earth System Science (e.g., Steffen et al. 2018). If the modern quest for certainty and control constructed silos of knowledge and sequestered



academic practices across the humanities and social sciences, now efforts to ecologize the academy imply thinking in and discovering 'ontogenetic meshworks' (Ingold 2012, 2020), 'webs of terraforming' (Haraway 2016), and processes of 'influx and efflux between individuals and living materials' (Bennett 2020).

From our ethnographic fields we note that what we interpret as processes of ecologization sometimes takes place in unruly and recalcitrant interactions, moods and languages. Ecologization is not a uniform process, and the open-endedness that Latour anticipated, is mirrored in the ethnographic variations we depict and reflect on in this special issue. The contributions focus on environmental activists, city people reconnecting with forests, educators, activists, and biologists engaged in rewilding. We delve into these ethnographic cases with questions pertaining to both environmental anthropology, ethics, politics and the history of religions. If ecologizing is a process that encompasses all natural and social domains, how then does it connect to contemporary connections between the secular and the religious? Does an ecologized nature also involve steps toward an ecologized religion? And what implications does this have for concrete social actions among Northern Europeans, known to be among the most secular in the world?

All contributors have approached people living in northern Europe who partake in, as we see it, ecologizing efforts of reorientation in the setting of climate and environmental crises. These crises are not understood in uniform ways, they may be distant or acutely local, or both, and they may be connected explicitly to deep histories or anticipated to be of the near future. The spaces we explore range from rewilded territories to scientific laboratories, from industrial forests to mines and cities, and the spaces in between. To work in a scientific laboratory, to go hiking, or to engage in activism are all activities that require technical skills, embodied knowledge, and a well-functioning infrastructure. I order to take a walk in a recreational forest, you need more than a bus ticket and a decent pair of shoes. Forest wandering, just like agricultural teaching or scientific dissenting, also involves sensibilities that our interlocutors include under the rubric of the existential, the spiritual, or the religious, since they involve an awareness of and deeply felt connection to 'nature'.

'Nature', for our interlocutors, is not only acted upon as the passive matter of material resources, nor are landscapes and habitats only encountered as pleasant sceneries in the outdoors. Although some voices certainly echo such modernist separations between nature and culture, we find that their interactions with nature cannot be reduced to either materialist and idealistic domains. Many of our interlocutors often reconnect to nature as something wholly different 'out there'. But



at the same time, it seems, they also connect to it as something that resonates with themselves, with their everyday reality and with the very real political challenges of contemporary society. We suggest that these practices not only stretch our notions of both religion and nature, but create new, remolded forms of the not-guite-secular (Taylor 2010). Decades of scholarship has challenged the ontological gaps between nature and culture (Cronon 1995; Descola and Palsson 1995; Ingold 2022), as well as those between the secular and the religious (Lee 2015; Hellas and Woodhead 2005; Ammerman 2020; Thurfjell 2015), and yet these dichotomies tend to return again and again in scholarly discussions, if for no other reason than to challenge the binary order once more. We still need, it seems, the grand oppositions as scales of orientation when we move forward. The oppositional work, even when it is in vain (Latour 1993), is a part of our languages and remains visible as monuments and ruins in the landscape (Gan et al. 2018). Although we attend to these dichotomies in this volume, our primary ambition is to document how Northerners work around them and beyond them, and to discuss what this may suggest about the future or religion and nature.

#### The Secularized North

The contributors to this volume all focus on northern Europe, more precisely the countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Estonia, including the transnational cultural region of Sápmi. Besides their shared geological, environmental, and climatic features, there are certain historical, cultural, and political traits that bind these countries together. The modern history of the region is deeply intertwined with the protestant reformation of the 16th century. Politically, the 16th through 18th centuries were marked by conflicts between Denmark, Sweden, Poland, and Russia over territorial control of the peoples and resources of the Baltic Sea region. Denmark and Sweden were both expansionist monarchies with imperial ambitions. During this period, they expanded their domination to the lands that subsequently became Estonia, Finland, and Norway. Evangelical Lutheran Christianity constituted a religious superstructure and a national narrative that provided legitimacy to this project (Holmquist and Pleijel 1938). Because of its teachings, and its severed connection to Rome, Lutheranism fostered ties between the teachings of the church and the ambitions and power structures of the state. It hence made a perfect ally for monarchs seeking to strengthen their position through national unity. The state church systems that developed in the 17th century, therefore, gave the church far-reaching responsibilities for administration and



governance. The state churches, under the patronage of the king, hence became responsible for education, welfare, the administration of justice, and many other basic functions of the burgeoning state.

Henrik Berggren, Lars Trägårdh, Erika Willander, and others have suggested that the far-reaching secularization in this part of the world is a consequence of this Lutheran state church tradition (Berggren and Trägårdh 2014; Willander 2019; Thurfjell 2015). The Nordic countries and Estonia are today among the least religious in the world if measured in terms of professed belief, church attendance, or claimed importance of religion (Thurfiell 2015, 2020). Historically, Lutheranism encouraged its followers to avoid ritualism, to internalize faith, to trust authorities, and to serve God by adhering to their individual professional calling (Thurfjell 2015). When the citizens of these countries display low church attendance rates, but the highest levels of individualism and trust in authorities in the world, this can be construed as far-reaching secularization, but also, paradoxically, as far-reaching consistency with their state-church Lutheran heritage (Berggren and Trägårdh 2014; Thurfjell 2015; Willander 2019).

These countries are also united by their similar systems of welfare distribution. The Nordic countries are among the most highly taxed in the world and they have developed a typical political, economic, and social welfare state model sometimes referred to as 'the Nordic model', which includes high union membership rates, a large public sector, farreaching welfare services, and a model of social corporatism. Because of its history of Soviet occupation, Estonia stands out when compared to the other countries included in this volume, although, since its independence in 1992, also this country is increasingly adapting to the Nordic model.

Moreover, the countries of focus in this volume have gone through a massive process of urbanization over the last century and a half. In the mid-19th century, ninety percent of Sweden's population—to take one example—lived in rural areas, while today, ninety percent live in cities. Hugh McLeod, Callum Brown and other historians have attributed this development to the massive industrialization that occurred during the 20th century (Brown 1988; McLeod 2000). This process coincided with the growth of nationalist sentiments, and an idea of a cultural closeness to nature became a central feature in the concomitant nationalist narratives. This idea, as this volume will demonstrate, is still very much alive today.



#### Modernization

In our discussion of modernization, we have been walking on well-trodden paths. We have seen modernization as a complex process instigated by the economic growth and technological development brought about by 19th and 20th century industrialization. Modernization increased affluence, which in turn increased existential security (Norris and Inglehart 2011) and led to a growth in consumerism and individualism (Bellah et al. 1985). We also endorse Weber's analysis of the processes of disenchantment and rationalization (Weber et al. 1971 [1920]), although we would particularly emphasize how modernization has promoted a development toward a more atomistic worldview and a societal structure characterized by differentiation (Luckmann 1967) or, to use different terms, segmentation (Luckmann 1967), or disembeddedment (Giddens 1991), and autonomisation (Berger 1967; Wilson 1969).

How, then, do these processes of modernization play out in this particular region of the world? The idea that modernization divides life into segments differentiated from one another fits well with the lifestyle of most Northerners. Anthropologist Alf Hornborg argues that northerners, much like people in most industrialized societies, have become experts at moving between roles and adapt to different behaviors, emotional registers, and ethical profiles depending on their situation. The private, public and professional constitute separate domains in such a modern organization of life, and blending them is frowned upon. Hornborg argues that this differentiation is one of the root causes of the environmental crisis (Hornborg 2013). This is so, he says, because it makes it possible to uphold an identity of being, say, an environmentally aware nature lover in the private sphere, while continuing to uphold environmentally destructive structures professionally. If the generally espoused ideal is that personally held convictions should not affect one's professional life, then the spirituality, private morality, or existential experiences of professional foresters, miners, farmers, fishermen, investors, or bankers must not affect the execution of their professional duties, or the systems that they uphold (Hornborg 2013). Sociologist Hartmut Rosa draws a similar conclusion by noticing another segmentation in modern life, namely that of our disentanglement from the other species. Our behavior reveals a muted relation to the living world, Rosa states, and the 'ever-growing concern about the destruction of the environment is an expression of our desired resonant relationship to nature and our anxiety about losing it' (2016: 277).

Two sectors of society that have been similarly reconfigured by the differentiation of modernity are 'religion' and 'nature'. It is telling



that both of these can be spoken of as sectors. In the case of religion, the process of secularization can be described as the gradual separation of Christianity from other aspects of society. In northern Europe this process has been consistent from the mid-19th century onwards. Northern citizens and their governments legally separated religion from many of its former societal functions, and this fostered a mentality in which religion started to be thought, and spoken of, as a separate domain in people's life (Thurfjell 2020). Modern differentiation, hence, led to the appearance of a new notion of religion, one characterized by a narrow understanding of it as something set apart and private, centered around spiritual matters, certain rituals, and specialized religious institutions. Nature, in its turn, went through a similar change. Instead of being an integrated part of people's lives and the land with which they interacted and by which they subsisted, modernization carved out nature and separated it into a separate domain characterized by wildness, authenticity, and calmness (Löfgren et al. 1992; Hastrup 2015; Thurfjell 2020).

## **Ecologized Natures**

Besides our reference to Latour's idea of 'the opposite of modernization', we do not present a fixed definition of ecologization. Instead, our ambition is to experiment with this notion and to explore whether and how it may be helpful in assisting us in grasping the moods and motivations that may rise in the interface between sensuous experiences, individual commitment, and political engagement in a time of ecological crises. Our methodological outset was to follow some of the many 'quests for nature' that we observed among Northerners. Why, we asked, have outdoor activities, once again, become so popular all over Scandinavia? How did the forest become an emblem of the Estonian nation? Why did ethnic politics suddenly turn environmental in Norway? And why has rewilding in Denmark ascended within a few years to national politics?

When we began our research, we put brackets around the term 'nature'. In Estonian, Finnish, Saami and the Scandinavian languages the term nature is no less complex than in English, with parallel conceptual histories and multiple layers of meaning. As in English, it is not common to pluralize the term. In the Scandinavian languages, nature (naturen) is typically thought of in the singular definite, as a monolithic entity untouched by the plurality of human societies and culture. With our selected ethnographic cases, however, nature became pluralized. The forests in Estonia and Sweden may consist of the same species of spruce and birch and from afar look very similar



in the way they encircle lakes and mires, but the stories we tell about them implicate very different national, political, personal biosocial itineraries. Historically, too, the forests have been cultivated in different ways, and concomitantly—following Tim Ingold's fondness of verbalizing inflexible nouns (2022: xiii, xiv)—we may say that we have attempted to explore how Northerners are engaged in 'naturing' diverse natures.

The ethnographies we present here also suggest that contemporary Northerners are cultivating new sensibilities as they engage in new types of ecologized nature (see also Krøijer and Rubow 2022). While endeavoring to describe and analyze these practices, we paused when our interlocutors—inhabitants, people on the move, experts of many strands-stumbled over their words when trying to convey their experimentation with connecting what had previously been separate. The nature that used to be placed in the silos of 'science', 'production', or 'recreation' were now beginning, or so it seemed, to be intertwined with content belonging to the former silos of 'enchantment', 'legal rights', or 'ancestral spirits'. And in the effort to cultivate these interconnections-through practice as well as language-there would sometimes be outbursts of the not-quite-secular sensibilities captured in words such as 'almost magical' or 'holy', which in our analytics turned into cases of 'the face of the forest' (Ohlsson), 'biocene enchantment' (Weisdorf), 'animism' (Ohlsson), and 'weird magic' (Rubow).

Learning to appreciate ancient rocks, slow mosses, neighborhood trees (David Thurfjell and Henrik Ohlsson), and hitherto unknown insects (Matti Weisdorf) might involve intense intergenerational work. To connect one's climate activism in the street with the more-than-human world might take years of ethical training and endless oversights despite meticulous studies and a cultivated sense of outright weird connections (Cecilie Rubow). To claim rights to traditional land might involve a reevaluation of the landscape (Siv Ellen Kraft), as well as a reconnection with certain revered forests (Atko Remmel) and their ecological agencies (Stine Krøijer).

Working together, our research group has continuously asked whether ecologizing practices could simply be repudiated as vestiges of old-school romanticism in line with the prominent critiques expressed across the humanities and social sciences (Cronon 1995; Tsing 2005; Rosa 2016). Or, as we have asked, in dialogue with Jane Bennett (2001, 2022), Bron Taylor (2010), Nancy Ammerman (2020), and Kocku von Stuckrad (2022), among others, could it be that we have been tracking a more fundamental relocation of the physics and metaphysics of nature? Do we see not-quite-secular relocations moving from the romantic grand narrative of a wholly different nature evocating the



sublime, to new types of ecologized wonders connected and intertwined with the political ethicalities and ecological challenges of our time?

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