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ELEMENTAL POLITICS BETWEEN MINORITARIANISM AND LIVE DEMOCRACY – A Case Study of the Soča River Basin**

Abstract. Human interaction combined with natural elements makes water, air, earth/soil and fire inherently political. Access to the elements and the way they are treated cause fundamental injustices and inequalities between living beings, yet at the same time the elements are recognised for their importance for the well-being and prosperity of human societies and ecosystems. After reviewing relevant analogical literature, the author theorises elemental politics, elemental democracy, elemental justice, and elemental citizenship. Based on a case study of past and recent elemental politics pertaining to the Soča River basin and the natureculture of the Nature Worshipers of Primorska, the author argues there is a need for a thorough reconsideration of natural elements, especially of their holism, in view of the elemental legal and political subjectivity. The latter might be achieved with the use of a modified elemental vocabulary and collective imaginary inspired by both naturecultures' ontologies and recent theories on glocalism.

Keywords: *Elemental Politics, Elemental Justice, Soča River Basin, Nature Worship.*

INTRODUCTION – AN ATTEMPT TO THEORISE ELEMENTAL POLITICS

The first association we typically make when we think of the elements is the periodic table of (chemical) elements, followed by natural disasters or “elemental catastrophes”.¹ The natural elements water, air, earth/soil and fire² were originally believed to be substances that cannot be divided into smaller items. Yet

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** Research article.
DOI: 10.51936/tip.61.2.293

¹ In the sense of a »natural disaster caused by natural forces« such as storms, floods, earthquakes and fires; literally an »elemental accident« in Slovenian legal terminology (SURS 2008).

² Western philosophical tradition also considered the fifth element, ether, or star matter. According to the Chinese classical philosophy, the natural elements or substances include, in addition to the four basic ones, wood and metal. The Japanese tradition adds void to the universal elements.

modern knowledge of (sub)atoms, let alone quantum particles such as fermions and bosons, has seen the earliest definition of natural elements being confined to history. In fact, the most recent discoveries in systemic sciences and physics are leading away from the further particularisation of nature to the contention that even the universe itself is a single quantum object (Päs 2023). Nevertheless, the traditionally conceived natural elements remain relevant to human societies as self-evident (f)actors of everyday existence.

Until relatively recently, in the humanities and social sciences natural elements were almost exclusively the conceptual domain of philosophy, having occupied eminent thinkers since the Antiquity (Macauley 2010). They are now becoming an ever more current topic of enquiry and scientific research at the intersections of ecology, economics, sociology, and political science (Mustaqim 2023).

Considerations of natural elements in the context of human interaction with them are inherently political. Modernity led to the paradigmatic transformation of the premodern holistic and sanctifying perception of the natural elements: presently, each element is a separate object of a variety of human political actions. Within the global capitalist economy, the status held by the natural elements and thus their value for humans has become diversified: water and soil have been deemed resources to use, manipulate and protect, air has become a public health concern, fire has been made synonymous with weapons and fire in nature with a threat.

Škof reminds us that:

Uniting humans with the divine and also connecting humans with nature, fire as an elemental force featured both in its creative as well as in its destructive incarnations. But with the rise of the industrial age and related industrial growth, conditioned by the invention of the steam engine, the entirely new science of heat took shape and now also decisively took the priority over any earlier mythological, religious or philosophical appropriations or usages. ... With the new [Capitalist] regime, fire now ignites and supports mass production and accompany wars and, ultimately, concurs in destructive processes related to atmo-terrorism or air itself becoming the weapon. (Škof 2022, 120–21)

With respect to the element of water, Boelens and Seeman state that

water security is necessarily a political dilemma. Policy debates, however, tend to naturalize and de-politicize this concept. Instead of recognizing that water security and distribution belong to the realm of human interests, choices, negotiation, and power plays, they are often represented as following universal economic, legal, and natural-scientific rules ... Water insecurity and deficient water availability for food production commonly reflect ... unequal power structures. (Boelens and Seeman 2014, 1)

Equally relevant to earth/soil, a typical example of such naturalisation and de-politicisation is the World Soil Charter adopted in 1981 by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and revised in 2015 in the face of worsening global soil degradation. Although the recommendations of the updated Charter supposedly »reflect the major policy developments and conceptual advances with relevance to soils«, soil resources are to be managed only »in accordance with the sovereign rights of each state over their natural resources« while governments are compelled to »strive to create socio-economic and institutional conditions favourable to sustainable soil management« by establishing »national soil policies«. There is no mention of soil-related social inequalities and contradictions, let alone of the soil's interconnectedness with other natural elements. The Charter merely invites corporations to engage in sustainable soil management, while the Guidelines for Action bid individuals and the private sector alike to strive for ill-defined and vague sustainability (FAO 2015, 4–6).

The elemental pollution generated by capitalist modernity has drawn sharp and lasting dividing lines between the post-industrial Western societies and the developing ones that were initially imposed by colonial expansionism. The former have the means to address the effects of pollution on public health and nature, whereas the latter are engulfed in the ongoing elemental degradation spiral that is especially afflicting the ever-growing urban areas. Politicised carbon taxes and carbon emissions, and recently water futures trading (Singh 2024), have in the meanwhile become common, if controversial, items of the global capitalist economy. Against the background of the environmental benefits of 'remediation' for fossil fuel consumption, they are slowing down the (equally politicised) green transition and raising the living costs of the poor – more concisely, they are prolonging the status quo of 'business-as-usual' under the auspices of an ecomodernism that in fact is neither ecological nor modernist (Chaudhary 2024, 108). Nature is under increasing pressure everywhere due to the globality of planet's ecosystem and the omnipresent capitalist extractivism now reaching uninhabitable regions such as both Poles, even space.

Access to the elements and the way they are treated cause fundamental injustices and inequalities between living beings, yet at the same time the elements are recognised for their importance for the well-being and prosperity of human societies and ecosystems.

Tying elemental agency not only to an ecological but also to a political sensitivity facilitates a politics of visibility, of foregrounding processes of material distribution that frequently remain hidden, and of explicating the concealed socio-technical infrastructures that enable articulations of power and capital,

note Ingwerson and Müller (2022, 16–17). "Elemental agency" here is limited to humans. Since other-than-humans such as the elements also have agency (in

the sense of a capacity of action causing an effect), the impact of humans on the natural elements may be described as elemental politics standing for any political process or action that relates to and affects the earth/soil, air, water and fire along with other natural elements recognised as such by human societies.

Elemental political decisions may be made by individual actors and communities holding various competencies. The effect of their implementation generally exceeds these communities' territorial sovereignty. Elemental political decision-makers should therefore be accountable to affected humans and other-than-humans, whether on the regional, continental, or planetary level. An example of this kind of elemental political decision-making with consequences for the entire planet is Brazil's sovereign management of the Amazon rainforest (Butt et al. 2023, 1–8). The policies decided on by the president or a handful of political representatives of Brazil to the benefit of corporate extractors are negatively affecting the 'lungs of the planet' and impacting the local nature and global weather, as well as the cultural wealth of humanity. Elemental politics thus compels us to reconsider the concepts of (state) sovereignty and (private) ownership, but not necessarily reinvent them.

Intentional elemental political decision-making and action falls into two main categories as to their purpose and effects: policies stemming from anthropocentric extractivism, based on greed and will to power that commodify and degrade natural elements for all living beings with the aim of generating profits for a minority of stockholders, and policies with a protective, preserving and improving impact on natural elements in favour of all affected stakeholders. While the former may correspond to a minoritarianist regime (political power held by a minority) or capture,³ the latter may be identified as elemental democracy whose final objective is elemental justice: access for all living beings to drinking water, clean air, fertile soil and the warmth and beauty of fire as well as fire safety. Elemental democratic actors are nature-conscious citizens and communities and occasional progressive governments opposing predatory corporations and growth-obsessed capitalist class. Besides conventional expressions of political positions, elemental democracy may include practices of counter-conduct (Foucault 1994, 237) and infrapolitical acts (Scott 1990, 199). Elemental democratic action is often initiated and engaged in by indigenous naturecultures (Harraway 2003, 4),⁴ which are the most dependent on natural elements. Having

³ The rule/law of capture originates in Roman law on property (*ratione soli*) stipulating that the ownership of land includes the subsurface and air within the land's boundaries. In practice, this means that a landowner can "capture" or dry out underground fluids such as water or oil belonging to adjacent properties (Nolon 2010, 1298).

⁴ The concept of natureculture, as in "a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed ..." emerges from the scholarly interrogation of dualisms that are deeply embedded within the intellectual traditions of the sciences and humanities (e.g., human–animal; nature–culture). The human species subsequently alienated itself from nature to the extent that natural laws supposedly no longer apply to it and humans are now dictating the laws of nature, as the concept of "the Anthropocene" suggests (Malone and Ovenden 2017, 1).

internalised a deep citizenship of care for self, community and the planet, as deep citizenship was defined by Paul B. Clarke (1996, 119), these communities are biocentric in their norm that all species, including humans, are equal, inherently valuable, and codependent members of the community of life (Taylor (1986, 99). Naturecultures around the world have been the most steadfast, if increasingly powerless, guardians of the natural elements. Moreover, in these struggles women prone to nurturing and preserving life have been increasingly coming to the fore (V, 2023). Naturecultures tend to be materially poor and politically disenfranchised. It thus seems reasonable to argue that elemental justice is an intersecting topic from the perspective of scientific disciplines but also an intersectional topic from the perspective of gender, social class, and race.

Beyond naturecultures, age is another important intersectional factor in the struggle for elemental justice. Young generations have demonstrated an understandable sensitivity for elemental issues – their future is currently being sealed by the powers that be. Pressured by the uncertain “Long Now” of the Anthropocene that has redefined the political time (Chaudhary 2024, 233), young people are prompted to innovate and adopt new forms of political engagement and action that remain under the radar of institutionalised politics (Banjac 2024).

In 2021, controversial government amendments to Slovenia’s Water Act led to a civic mobilisation in Slovenia that resulted in a referendum precluding the private appropriation of riverbanks and the seashore from construction and economic exploitation. Citizens across the country of all generations and social standing joined in the effort to make the referendum succeed, even though the legislation on referenda in Slovenia’s representative democracy facilitates public interventions in legislative processes only with considerable difficulty. By the due time, 10,000 citizens’ signatures more than the necessary 40,000 to launch a referendum were collected and voter participation in it was the second-highest in the country’s history. The 2021 Water Act referendum succeeded with over 86% of those voting being against the government amendments (STA 2021). Elemental justice prevailed.

In the case of the Water Act, Slovenian voters acted as textbook water citizens, embodying the water citizenship that more often applies to elemental struggles between postcolonial societies and foreign corporations on other continents. According to Paeregaard et al., water citizenship encompasses

discursive processes and institutional practices through which water users create membership, belonging, and loyalty to water supplies and water infrastructure and through which they distribute, govern, and manage water and possibly leads to a “new water culture” (Paeregaard et al. 2016, 199).

An analogical definition of elemental citizenship may be broadened to include the processes and practices conducted by humans and affecting the elements that reach beyond institutions, renounce the governance and management of

a particular element for respect and protective care for all elements and, most importantly, to extend the concept of citizenship to all living beings with agency.

Based on the case study that follows and a review of relevant theoretical literature, coupled with historical inquiry and comparative policy analysis, I argue in this text in favour of a thorough reconsideration of natural elements, especially of their holistic dimension, in view of their legal and political subjectivisation. For natural elements to be attributed with the status of legal and political subjects, I propose to explore designs based on a modified elemental vocabulary and collective imaginary inspired by naturecultures' ontologies and recent reflections on glocalism.

CASE STUDY: ELEMENTAL POLITICS IN THE SOČA RIVER BASIN **The Nature Worship of Primorska**

Elemental politics is not merely a matter of 'the Long Now' of the looming elemental catastrophe. Natural elements have been politicised and manipulated for millennia. Intentional collective efforts to irrigate waters permitted the gradual neolithic shift to agricultural food production as did the use of fire to create fertile soil instead of forests. The wilful or accidental degradation of water, soil and air, also by firepower, was an integral part of colonialism; it accompanied the ecological colonisation of the non-Western world by Westerners in the name of expansionist 'progress'. Traditional societies religiously attached to and vitally dependent on natural elements eventually fell victims to such actions and policies. These societies' caring elemental policies were namely overridden by careless abuse of the elements. One does not need to look to overseas parts of the world for examples. Although the medieval colonisation of Europe happened centuries prior to what is considered to be modern colonialism, it had a comparable devastating impact on indigenous populations. One such community was the Nature Worshippers of Western Slovenia.

Nature Worshippers were a historical religious minority and a political community⁵ surviving in secret since the 9th century Frankish colonisation and Christianisation of what is now the Primorska region in Slovenia and the adjacent Friuli region across the Slovenian-Italian border. In the mid-20th century, local ethnographer Pavel Medvešček-Klančar encountered the last remaining members of this community. The Slovenian public only learned of the Nature Worshippers in 2015 following the publication of Medvešček's collection of ethnographic records *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* (Medvešček 2015). In this book, Pavel Medvešček made public extensive and thoroughly documented ethnographic material largely consisting of interviews conducted between 1950 and 1978 with the inhabitants of the remote hilly areas of Primorska during his fieldwork for the Heritage Protection Authority. The content of these interviews

⁵ Based on Hannah Arendt's definition of political community relative to the physical space it inhabits (Arendt in Parekh 1981, 154–55).

could not be disclosed any earlier due to the oath Pavel Medvešček was required to make by his interlocutors after they had confided in and partly adopted him in their secret community.⁶

Nature Worship was monotheistic and henotheistic, amalgamating fragments of Ancient Slavic, Ancient Roman and still unidentified religious traditions. Besides the supreme Creatrix Nikrmana, inconsistently equated with the Great Mother (Nature), the Nature Worshipers worshiped the Sun as the source of light and warmth. The Moon was an even more venerable celestial body for them because of its obvious power over nature and especially water. Nature Worship included characteristics of pre-Christian societies, such as animism, ancestor worship, worship of sacred riverbeds, hilltops, rocks and underground caves, and the sacralising of trees, animals and plants.

The Nature Worshipers did not reject modern technology in the name of their values, only the 'progress' perceived and enforced as such by the authorities, which threatened nature and in turn the existence of their community. The community disintegrated in the 20th century after the environmental degradation and emigration caused by both World Wars and infrastructure construction, industrialisation, and urbanisation of the region. These processes harmed communal ties and demographically emptied the areas where the Nature Worshipers lived. All of the key reasons that the Nature Worshipers community had been able to secretly survive despite being persecuted by the Christian majority – namely, the extreme remoteness of their villages and farms, which kept foreigners away and facilitated their concealment, the skills of their meritocratic leaders "dehnars", the effectiveness of their repressive apparatus called the Black Watch in enforcing justice and providing security, the long-term continuity of their settlement and thus their ancient traditions – were annihilated in the 20th century in the name of 'modernisation'. The community of Nature Worshipers no longer exists not only because Christianity eventually prevailed by all means available but also because the nature from and in which Nature Worship evolved in the remote past has been irreversibly transformed by elemental politics.

The Nature Worshipers of Primorska were a typical Gramscian anti-hegemonic "denied culture", both literally and figuratively, since their community posed an ethical challenge to the hegemonic Christian society, and to survive it was forced to even deny itself (Medvešček 2015, 81). Further, the Nature Worshipers were a genuine natureculture, one in which nature and culture were inseparable, where the natural and 'supernatural' coexisted, and the split between nature and culture, typical of Western modernity, was inconsistent with the perceived reality of the living world in which everything was natural. Expectedly, the natural elements largely determined the religious and social practices of the Nature Worshipers.

⁶ The credibility of Medvešček's records was among others critically addressed by Katja Hrobat Virloget (2021, 198), Miha Kozorog (2020, 111-23) and Cirila Toplak (2023, 37-47).

In their tradition, one could only become a Nature Worshipper if one lived off the meagre albeit sacred soils of Primorska, “from which everything comes and to which everything returns”. Tellingly, an archaic Slovenian term for land (and the world as a whole) is “svet”, stemming from the same root word as “sveto”, meaning sacred. The Nature Worshipers described the soil to Pavel Medvešček as a living being that has been “wounded” by disastrous developmental and political actions from the early 20th century on. Wood growing from the soil was of great significance to the Nature Worshipers as a versatile product of the then mostly forested landscape of Primorska. The forest, “which always triumphs over man in the end”, was “like a womb” to Nature Worshipers. It was also the home of trees, which they considered to be fellow dwellers (Medvešček 2015, 531).⁷ However, the crucial derivative of earth/soil for the Nature Worshipers was stone. Like wood, stone was abundant in their landscape and served as a construction material and component of most of their everyday and ritual objects.⁸ Nature Worshipers’ secular and religious leaders (dehnars) consecrated special magnetic stones in sacred water; with this ritual the stones were turned into guardian “snake heads”, positioned in territorial triads called *tročan* on hilltops, in caves, on sacred megaliths called *matjar*, and in people’s homes to ensure communal protection and fertility.⁹ The snake head stones thus combined the elements of soil, water and fire within them. Beside these protective and fertilising snake heads, Nature Worshipers used special stones to heal and divine, for the personal protection of children, as symbols of hospitality etc.

In the earliest times when according to their tradition the Nature Worshipers first found shelter in caves, fire provided them with warmth and security. Fire enabled them to create pastures for livestock, fields for growing crops and vegetables, and room to live outside the forest. Fire fortified various objects that were kept on home hearths and thereby imbued with firepower. The winter and summer solstices, the most important holidays for Nature Worshipers, were celebrated with bonfires, the most important communal events accompanied by rituals, as well as socialising, feasting on special bonfire dishes, and dancing. Through the ancient art of charcoal making, fire provided efficient heating and a modest income for charcoal burners. Fire or embers were used to ritually purify, divine and heal. Although lightning, a symbol of fire, was feared, the Nature Worshipers knew of its ability to magnetise rocks and used that to their advantage by establishing the protective *tročan* system.

⁷ Forest is an important subject of political ecology. The Barbarians of Ancient Rome were called *silvatici* in Latin, “of the woods”. The term for the basic territorial administrative unit of Nature Worshipers, *hosta*, means a forest or thicket in Slovenian. *Hosta* was also synonymous with resistance: *hostar* was a peasant rebel in hiding and later also an armed member of the anti-Nazi resistance.

⁸ The importance of stone in Nature Worship is indicated by dozens of different terms the community exclusively used for stones according to their properties or purpose. It is to be noted that the Nature Worshipers also knew of a fifth element, which they called *prh* (Medvešček 2015, 378).

⁹ Given the frequency of lightning strikes in the Soča River basin – among the highest in Europe – and the activity related to Earth’s magnetism through the tectonic plates that meet here (Čop 2022, 147–56) as well as the high iron content in the local rock bed, it is reasonable to assume the Nature Worshipers became aware of Earth’s magnetic field and its properties.

For the Nature Worshipers, an individual's breath was 'alive', i.e., more permanent than the individual who was breathing. The air was the abode of spirits and deceased ancestors, yet also an intermediary to their mother deity Nikrmana. Air was the medium of the transmigration of souls, a key element distinguishing Nature Worship from Christianity. *Zduhec*, the Nature Worshipers' equivalent of the Christian soul and the aerial being angel, etymologically originates from the Slavic root word for "air". *Zduhec* was also a kind of 'invisible friend' with whom one could talk and consult. Like angels, some *zduhci* flew across the sky as Nikrmana's messengers, visible to people as shooting stars. *Zduhn*, finally, was an object that symbolised deceased ancestors. In the form of a wooden dove, it hung in the air above the dining table. The Nature Worshipers considered the aerial spirits of their ancestors integral members of the family and asked them for help with difficult decisions (Medvešček 2015, 97; 115).

The Soča, the largest river in western Slovenia, was especially sacred for the Nature Worshipers. In the Soča they envisioned Nikrmana, attributing it with a soul and considering it an "echo of pre-time"¹⁰ (Medvešček 2015, 319). They talked to the river, pleaded with it, made offerings to it, and divined from it. The Babja Jama (Wild Women's) cave on the left bank of the Soča, the "earthly heart of Nikrmana", was the principal sanctuary of the Nature Worshipers (Medvešček 2015, 428). The Soča River basin was interspersed with sites of power, and even the streams running to the Soča tributaries, especially the Idrijca and the Bača, were considered sacred waters. The Nature Worshipers ritually washed in them and had the sick and the dying drink their waters to heal/die more easily, both human and animal. They foretold the future from the colour and movement of the sacred confluent waters called *devince*. Some members of the community regarded rivers as their sisters and lovers, and all Nature Worshipers believed rivers were living beings (Medvešček 2015, 318).

With elemental policies being political decisions and establishing power relations in a community or on behalf of a community with an (in)direct or (un)intentional effect on natural elements, and given the Nature Worshipers' dependence on natural elements, it is not surprising that past interventions in nature made by various authorities ruling over Primorska have had a direct and mostly negative impact on their community. These elemental policies differed chiefly with respect to whether they were consciously directed against the Nature Worshipers' counterculture or indirectly harmed them through acts of ethnic discrimination, military aggression, and occupation, as well as anthropocentric economic and social development.

The oldest written source about the existence of Nature Worshipers already refers to this kind of elemental political action. The "Kobarid crusade", of which a contemporaneous archival record has been preserved, took place in 1331. According to the chronicler of the event, the clergy from the nearby bishopric

¹⁰ Nature Worshipers' equivalent of the Aboriginal Dreamtime.

seat of Čedad/Cividale sent an “army” of priests and mercenaries to the village of Kobarid on the bank of the Soča to suppress the paganism of the locals. The “Crusaders” cut the holy tree down and blocked the holy well in the middle of the village (Toplak 2017). Although Nature Worship was far from eradicated then as official histories claimed (Rutar 1881, 65), the violent attacks by the Christians on the Nature Worshipers’ sanctuaries, sacred rocks, waters and trees continued and eventually helped bring about the end of the community. Subsequently, the elements of Nature Worshipers’ distinct acculturation of the local landscape, which also made them a political community, gradually disappeared.

The second set of elemental policies to the detriment of Nature Worship were development policies enacted by the authorities unaware that the secret community existed (Medvešček 2015, 279). Up until the early 20th century, in this regard the Nature Worshipers were spared somewhat by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy that tended to neglect the “wild” border region with the Republic of Venice. In the end, a railway was constructed even to these remote places as a branch of the rail corridor connecting Vienna with the Adriatic Sea. The construction of the railway in the Soča valley during the first decade of the 20th century led to the destruction of the Nature Worshipers’ most revered sanctuary, the Babja Jama cave, which the railway literally ran over the top of. The Babja Jama lost its original power and sanctity in the process. Although some rituals were still carried out in secrecy there, the Nature Worshipers redirected their activities to the Padence sanctuary on the opposite bank of the Soča. However, the Padence and many other sanctuaries were also indirectly threatened by the railway as the foreign railway workers were settling in, with curiosity leading them to eventually trample over the Nature Worshipers’ sacred and secret sites in nature (Medvešček 2015, 52).

The interwar fascist Italian authorities continued developing the annexed region of Primorska by constructing a modern road along the Soča and the first hydroelectric power plant on the river near Doblar. The Soča was slowed down for the plant by a gigantic dam at Podselo, which irreversibly harmed the Padence sanctuary (Medvešček 2015, 436). Dam construction began in 1936 and in 1939 the hydroelectric power plant was in operation (SENG 1, 2024). Another inadvertently harmful elemental policy by the interwar Italian administration was the ban on outdoor fires. The Nature Worshipers were thus prevented from celebrating the solstices by their ancient custom of bonfires. Some resisted the ban, although most adapted to it. Communal celebration in nature had to be substituted by isolated family gatherings around the home hearth. The ban loosened and atomised the Nature Worshipers’ community, further reducing its social space (Medvešček 2015, 450).

Another ban from that era applied to logging in the forests of Primorska to such an extent that it even deprived the locals of firewood (Medvešček 2015, 225). While the hostile Christians deliberately cut down the Nature Worshipers’ sacred trees, the foreign forest workers also unwittingly destroyed many a sacred

tree and made it impossible for the Nature Worshipers to draw on those trees' energy and healing properties.

The two World Wars, albeit not purposefully elemental, had the most destructive impact on natural elements in the region. The greatest overall desecration inflicted on the Nature Worshipers' land occurred in the First World War. The Soča/Isonzo front was so devastating that the Nature Worshipers' community considered the First World War to be the most important milestone in its recent history and measured time as being either "before" or "after" the Great War (Medvešček 2015, 65). The first war to be deemed "total" in historiography was total also in the way the military's use of firepower affected the soil, water and air.¹¹ On top of the terrible destruction caused by the trench fighting on their sanctuaries in nature and the sacred soil, the Nature Worshipers suffered tragic consequences of modern warfare such as massive human casualties among conscripted soldiers and civilians, a traumatic exile, and the loss of traditional ways in the 4-year state of emergency.

After the Second World War, which also brought numerous painful losses, the material destruction and pollution of nature to all inhabitants of Primorska, the integration of the region in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was followed by a period of intensive industrialisation. The Doblar and the Plave (launched in 1940) plants met 40% of the electricity needs of postwar Slovenia. Slovenian authorities ended up constructing 25 hydroelectric power plants on the Soča River and its tributaries (SENG 2, 2024). Electricity was promised to the locals as a symbol of progress, even though it took decades before it found its way into their homes (Medvešček 2015, 217). In the valley of the Soča and its tributaries, factories were constructed with the intention of keeping these sensitive Cold War border areas populated. They also caused the depletion and pollution of the elements. Pesticides and chemicals from the increasingly mechanised farming permeated the soil. Road connections brought remote places closer to urban centres; they also brought noise and air pollution. The modern way of life destroyed the former peace and quiet when a person could still hear the winds and the waters, know, and predict them. Light pollution ended the tradition of observing the night sky that over the generations led to the Nature Worshipers' astounding astronomical knowledge. Modern entertainment scared away the animals and further atomised communities (Medvešček 2015, 109; 229). Even if the socialist regime was largely indifferent to Nature Worship, focused as it was on the socialist brave new world, modernisation processes caused as much

¹¹ In the words of one of Medvešček's interviewees:
rocks, trees and the underworld [were] drained in human pain and suffering. Horror, screams, and cries were imprinted on everything that grows there. The soil that once fed its people is now filled with steel, lead, gunpowder and other waste that has been dumped here all these years. (Medvešček 2015, 117)

When, upon the insistence of the *dehnars*, members of the community cleaned the soil of heavy metals, the *tročan* system was only partly reactivated. Even more than a century after the First World War, heavy rains still bring military metal objects from this period down in torrential streams.

and even more damage to the secret natureculture than had it been openly persecuted. These policies cannot be described as minoritarianist since they were implemented in the public interest and not for the profit of a few. Still, they were a form of capture of natural elements by a self-proclaimed 'progressive', anthropocentric society, equally focused on economic growth as the capitalist ones.

Present Struggles for Elemental Justice in the Soča River Basin

A century after the beginning of the end of the Nature Worshippers' community, the Soča River has today been thoroughly banalised. It is now a self-evident principal regional resource for drinking and industrial water, electricity, fishing, sand as construction material, and tourism. While it may still be called "the holy river" on the Italian side of the border, these days that is in the context of militant patriotism. Only in times of drought, floods and subsequent landslides are the Soča and other rivers of Primorska perceived differently, not in the old but in a new way: as a threat and an enemy. The same applies to fire in nature (Uradni list 2014); it is to be tamed and suppressed as quickly as possible, although the benefits of controlled fire for restoring ecosystems are long known, and the prevention of fires is recognised as more effective than firefighting (Sedjo 2002). "Firefighting" is even a phrase in Slovenian for a late/futile reaction to something, yet bureaucratic inertia and the political consequences of catastrophic fires maintain the modern perception of fire as a villain. Even in people's homes, the use of fire is strictly monitored and increasingly restricted due to alarming air pollution levels by fossil fuels, which previous generations burned excessively. Besides modest picnic fires, a fire in nature may now at best be lit for May Day celebrations, and the participants probably hardly notice its beauty and might. Experts and inhabitants alike in the Soča River basin also perceive the process of rewilding previously farmed soil as a threat. Instead of recognising the vital role of rewilding processes in the prevention of erosion and protection of biodiversity, rewilding is seen as degradation of the cultural landscape and hence as an obstacle to tourism (Kunaver 2024). The quality of air in the region is a matter of constant contention between the big industrial polluters and the concerned citizenry, with road traffic, often overwhelming in the main tourist season, today being the second-largest source of air and noise pollution (EkoAnhovo 2021).

Along the utilitarian (ab)use of natural elements runs a parallel stream of democratic civic resistance to elemental processes affecting the health and well-being of people living in the Soča River basin. For decades, the Anhovo cement factory in the municipality of Kanal ob Soči in the middle Soča valley has been opposed by local civic initiatives presenting evidence that the cement factory's production and waste treatment operations (the Anhovo waste incineration plant) have detrimentally affected public health in the form of widespread asbestosis, cancer and other illnesses caused by polluted air, water and soil. In 2023, several civic actors sought to amend the Nature Protection Act to alleviate

the Anhovo plant's pressure on the local nature and people. Despite the Anhovo plant having managed to prevent the adoption of environmental legal standards that would eventually have seen it close, the adoption of the amended Nature Protection Act was an example of a successful struggle for elemental justice in Primorska. Another important achievement was the 2024 connection of the municipality of Kanal ob Soči to the Mrzlek underground water distribution facility; previously, the Anhovo cement plant had provided locals with drinking water from the Soča.

Since the Slovenian-Italian border continues along the Idrija River just over the range of hills, the elemental struggles in the Soča valley obviously call for cross-border political action, which is still largely missing for complex political and cultural reasons. Moreover, the locals are far from united when it comes to elemental justice issues: some Anhovo plant workers had protested against amending of the Nature Protection Act, declaring it a threat to their jobs. Felt by individuals and communities, a tension persists between the economic benefits (investments, profits, employments) of the natural elements considered resources and the harm that 'resourcing' does to the elements and, subsequently, all living beings that depend on them.

Awareness-raising campaigns are thus important to ensure wide public support by increasing the public's sensitivity and solidarity as crucial dimensions of struggles for elemental justice across issues and various dividing lines, and by emphasising the accountability of polluters. In 2022, for example, the association Balkan River Defence launched the "A Glass of Soča" campaign in response to a massive spill from the TKK factory of apparently inoffensive chemicals in the upper Soča valley. The activists publicly invited the factory's CEO to drink water from the Soča since, according to the factory management, the spill had caused no harm to nature (Balkan River Defence, 2022). Judging by their name and other campaigns, the Balkan River Defence understands and correctly interprets the transversality of environmental stakes. The fragmentation of civic endeavours to protect natural elements is prone to become a weakness for polluters to exploit. For example, local municipalities along the Soča have adopted municipal acts on the commercial use of waters without consulting or coordinating with each other as if the Soča could be stopped and regulated at will within municipal boundaries (Municipality of Kobarid 2024). Evidently, many more novel ways of networking, coordination and solidarity as the foundations for political action are needed across internal and external geographic boundaries, economic divides, and various social struggles, notwithstanding the stakes of other species, to maintain the chance of a more elementally just existence in this region.

CONCLUSION

Within Western modernity, natural elements have been thoroughly de-sanctified, objectified, commodified and politicised. Various nature protection regimes only seemingly counter this fact when indeed they perpetuate elemental

injustices and human alienation from nature, our supposed controllable protegee. “Integral” local, national and global landscape policies (Bevk et al. 2020) and climate acts (Podnebni zakon 2023) continue treating the natural elements as resources that can be managed and controlled separately and arbitrarily. Such forms of political ‘conduct of conduct’ only lull us into leaving the care for natural elements to abstract ‘authorities’ while it beholds to each and every one of us. The International Water Day, the International Day of Clean Air, the World Soil Day etc. will also not do; they are a green-washing substitute for a continuous internalisation that natural elements are not once-a-year reminders, but the determinants of a good life for all life that should be celebrated daily. Natural elements remain an example of the human and other-than-human commons that Aristotle saw as a “tragedy of the commons”, a much-debated concept denoting a plea for private ownership that supposedly only elicits effective care. There are, however, many examples across the world that show communities can maintain a duty of care for natural elements (Ostrom et al. 1999) as an integral and necessary part of people caring for each other (Vodovnik 2024). Instead of leaving the ownership and subsequent care for the commons to a ‘public’ without any clearly assigned responsibility as happened in former socialist Yugoslavia, it might be more fitting to adopt the Nature Worshipers’ conception of the commons that the Christians knew as *gmajna* (from the German *gemeine*, meaning common, public), while the Nature Worshipers called their commons *našina*, (from the Slovenian *naš*, ours), a term that highlights joint responsibility and care. Language mediates our perception of reality, and it does matter when we call “public” what is “ours”, or when we refer to the abstract singular “water” instead of the subjective “waters” and, by analogy, winds and rocks etc. (Hamlin 2000, 314); Slovenian language still retains an echo of pre-Christian animism in the term for bedrock that translates literally as “live rock” or the term for water with healing properties, “live water”. Most importantly, when we speak of “the environment” implying something around us of which we have extracted and can control, we are speaking of “nature” which we are clearly part of, and we depend on. The term “environment” first appeared early in the industrial era along with the human instrumentalisation of nature (Jessop 2012, 708); the Nature Worshipers never used it as a synonym for nature.

Kopka notes that “we probably would not even be able to address these other [environmental] issues in a just manner without paying attention to our breath and to air we breathe” (Kopka 2022, 146). The element of air is indeed characterised by greater urgency due to the biological design of most living beings, yet the other natural elements hold equal vital importance for life. The natural elements are so closely intertwined and codependent that separating and categorising them into the politics or democracy of water, fire, air and soil/earth makes no sense; they constitute one elemental (political) subject encompassing a myriad of physical manifestations. There is no sensible and effective water citizenship or soil activism but instead one elemental citizenship for each of us,

and one elemental justice for the collectives we belong to, to make our own. To achieve elemental justice, the interconnectedness of natural elements as the pre-conditions for a good life of all life on Earth and as (f)actors of everyday human existence inspiring awe and respect, should be acknowledged and internalised by individuals and communities. Our ancestors in the Soča River basin knew this. The natural elements were not only vitally important and omnipresent in the Nature Worshipers' existence, for them they were inseparably interwoven in the wholeness of nature, the one to always live and act according with and never against. The oldest symbol of the Nature Worship of Primorska was *grmin*, a ritual object consisting of a snake engraved on the wooden handle of an axe split into three and 'crowned' with bull's horns. The highest, middle part of the split axe symbolised air, the horned side parts were soil and water, and the handle was fire. The testimony concerning *grmin* recorded by Pavel Medvešček was unequivocal that *grmin* represented all four natural elements (Pleterski 2015, 23; 454).

Upon reconsidering their interconnectedness and universality manifested via a multitude of local phenomena, the elements may be inviting us to rethink the meaning of glocal and to subsequently renew global community action based on the multitude of behaviours and traditions of local naturecultures. Roudometof proposes that

glocalization is globalization refracted through the local. That [] interpretation of glocalization explicitly allows its analytical autonomy from globalization. The local is not annihilated or absorbed or destroyed by globalization but, rather, operates symbiotically with globalization and shapes the telos or end state or result [which is] a multitude of glocalities. (Roudometof 2016, 10)

In the case of natural elements, political action to achieve that might require a reinvention of terminology, as suggested throughout this text. Moreover, natural elements should be a key part of an ontological shift in the humanities and social sciences in view of redressing humans' position toward and in nature following a radical reconsideration of the concept of being that will include other-than-human beings (Kurnik 2024) and recognise nature and, in turn, natural elements as living entities and political subjects. Cohen and Duckert ask a pertinent question about human attitudes to the natural elements:

We continue to talk about the elements, but now we anthropomorphize them as entities to defend against: their cruelty, especially in unpredictable climates, their capriciousness and danger. ... But what if the elements are more than a threat? After tsunamis, earthquakes and storm systems, we are still all too aware of elemental social divisions, struggles and conflicts. What are the elements forcing us to do with the threat of collapse? (Cohen and Duckert 2015, 6)

A simplistic anthropomorphising of the elements is not a meaningful reaction to the current threat of the collapse of human societies. The fundamental otherness of other-than-human political subjects cannot be lost on more arrogant projections and should not be an excuse for patronising sympathy but rather a motivation for humans to objectify our (self) perception. This shift in mentality and ensuing political subjectivisation of nature are already under way. Like glocalism, this is not a radically new notion, but rather a mission to renew and contextualise and reevaluate. While criticising the supposed illiberal normative imperative of contemporary ecogism, Ferry describes several medieval examples of the legal recognition of animal agency (Ferry 1992, 9–29). Half a century ago, Stone (1972) was the first to argue that natural objects have legal rights. More recently, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) provided a set of arguments for animal citizenship. Ongoing enactments of the subjectivisation of nature include the 2008/2021 constitution of Ecuador that bestows legal rights on Mother Earth, the status of a legal person attributed to the Whanganui River that is sacred to the Māori in New Zealand (Charpleix 2018) or the current groundbreaking political experiment in Iceland where by human proxy the glacier Snæfellsjökull is running for president (Kassa 2024).

Vandana Shiva argues that only “democracy of all life is a living democracy” (Shiva 2005, 62). Elemental justice for all living beings within a multitude of symbiotic glocalities may be the way of achieving a worthwhile life for humans. It is becoming difficult to imagine a new social contract on the fundamental paradigmatic and institutional changes that human societies need to make in the present multi-crisis if humans do not admit and accept their origin as naturecultures, with all of the political consequences this implies.

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ELEMENTALNA POLITIKA MED MINORITARIZMOM IN ŽIVO DEMOKRACIJO – PRIMER POSOČJA

Povzetek. Človekova interakcija z naravnimi elementi dela vodo, zrak, zemljo/prst in ogenj inherentno politične. Dostop do elementov in ravnanje z njimi povzroča temeljne krivice in neenakosti med živimi bitji, prinaša pa tudi priznanje njihovega pomena za blaginjo človeških družb in ekosistemov. Avtorica z uvidi v ustrezno analogno literaturo teoretizira elementarno politiko, elementarno demokracijo, elementarno pravičnost in elementarno državljanstvo. Na podlagi študije primera preteklih in sodobnih elementarnih politik v Posočju in zgodovinskega primorskega naravoverstva zagovarja nujnost temeljite refleksije naravnih elementov, predvsem njihove celostnosti, v luči njihove potencialne pravne in politične subjektivizacije. Slednje bi bilo moč doseči s transformacijo elementalnega besednjaka in kolektivnega imaginarija, ki jo navdihujejo ontologije naravnih kultur in sodobne teorije glocalizma.

Ključni pojmi: elementalna politika, elementalna pravičnost, Posočje, naravoverstvo.

