

# Environment and Democracy: An Introduction

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Heightened awareness and alarmism about climate change have prompted politicians, public intellectuals and scholars alike to reconsider the political values, structures and institutions with which to confront it. A number of recurring directions of thought and experiment may be distinguished. For one, ecological authoritarianism – the strand of thought that proposes to abolish or suspend democracy for the sake of achieving ‘green’ goals – testifies to the perceived shortcomings of democratic politics when it comes to immediate collective environmental action.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, and on the flipside of the same coin, democratic innovations (e.g. citizens’ assemblies, mini-publics and juries) are contemplated to improve popular input, inclusive and deliberative decision-making, and, ultimately, democratic legitimacy in the realm of environmental politics.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, technological solutionism has permeated democratic and non-democratic policy-making alike, adding to the fragile balance of immediacy, legitimacy and technology in contemporary climate politics.

What seems to be lacking in contemporary discussions about the relationship between democracy and climate change, however, is a critical-historical reflection on (or awareness of) some of the deeply ingrained hegemonic assumptions that inform it. These assumptions revolve around three interrelated and recurring orientations toward climate politics: (1) the inclination to anthropocentrism in understanding the state and development of the natural world (as opposed to a multispecies

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1 M. Beeson, ‘The Coming of Environmental Authoritarianism’, in: *Environmental Politics* 19 (2010) 2, 276–294; D.A. Bell, *The China Model. Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, New Jersey 2015.

2 G. Smith, *Deliberative Democracy and the Environment*, Abingdon 2003; L. Kunze / L. P. Fesenfeld, ‘Citizen Assemblies Can Enhance Political Feasibility of Ambitious Climate Policies’, (6 September 2021). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3918532>.

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or planetary perspective for instance); (2) the neglect or ignorance of the incommensurability of temporalities of human experience and planetary time; and (3) the Western hegemony of framing and locating environmental crises that limit attentiveness to the global geographies of environmental injustice and inequality. These issues bear particular salience and complexity in light of democratic praxis and institutions: the anthropocentric, the temporal and the geographical dispositions of democracy fail to grasp the logics of climate change and environmental degradation. How can we, as historians, address these issues?

## I. Anthropocentric, temporal and geographical dispositions of democracy

Anthropocentric perspectives have informed past and currently existing forms of political representation and (human) rights-based approaches. In liberal democracies, human interests take precedence over those of other beings and entities, including non-human animals, ecosystems and biospheres. Democratic communities are human communities. As such, democracy is always human, 'too human' perhaps, in that it implies a definition of who is fit for democracy and, conversely, who is less fit for it, that is, who is 'less human'.<sup>3</sup> As long as anthropocentric rather than ecocentric worldviews underpin collective decision-making, humankind will fail to address climate change and ecological devastation, critics argue. They propose to assign (moral, political) rights to non-human animals and entities, such as rivers, and to expand moral and political communities.<sup>4</sup> Historians may ask if and how past engagements between human and non-human actors have posed challenges to existing political bodies of thought that have put human actors on centre stage. When and how have historical actors (re)conceptualized ethical, legal and political principles to allow for more inclusive polities that do justice to the interdependencies between humans and the (rest of the) natural world?

Temporal dissonances reflect the discrepancy between long-term problems, solutions and (non-human) life cycles, and short-term interests and electoral and policy-making cycles. How has this apparent mismatch historically developed, where can it be located (in patterns of human behaviour, in institutional path dependencies), and how have historical actors recognized, approached and evaluated it? How has the gradual and largely invisible nature of climate change affected forms of political mobilization and collective action? To what extent and how has it challenged older notions of justice, for instance, by including the delayed and invisible victims of environmental degradations (Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence*) and future generations into ethical frameworks?<sup>5</sup> Might it be possible to build 'an Anthropocenic sense of time, value and prosperity' into how we think about and organize politics?<sup>6</sup>

A salient point related to this discussion is the crucial role played by imagination and narratives in making political problems palpable in the first place. As Amitav Ghosh argues for climate change, conceptions of nature in recent history have rendered it harmless to the extent that we

3 J.-P. Gagnon, 'Non-Human Democracy: In the Anthropocene, It Cannot Be All about Us', in: *The Conversation*, 22 December 2015, <https://theconversation.com/non-human-democracy-in-the-anthropocene-it-cannot-be-all-about-us-51404>.

4 P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*, New York 1975; J. Vink / S. Donaldson / J.-P. Gagnon, 'Realizing Interspecies Democracy: The Preconditions for an Egalitarian, Multispecies World', in: *Democratic Theory* 8 (2021) 1, 71–95; E. Meijer, *When Animals Speak: Towards An Interspecies Democracy*, New York 2019.

5 R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge 2011.

6 D. Kelly, *Politics and the Anthropocene*, Hoboken 2019.

now find it difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the magnitude of the climate crisis and imagine its devastating outcomes.<sup>7</sup> How have the *Erwartungshorizonte* of historical actors and their sense of agency shaped their actions in the past? How have social imaginaries, that shape collective understandings of the natural environment, variedly preconfigured the implicit faculty of human action vis-à-vis nature?

The perspective pertaining to geographies of injustice and inequality concerns the cross-border nature of environmental problems, which has challenged the legitimacy and the boundaries of (national) polities in the past and continues to do so. While governance structures beyond the nation-state have historically developed in response, they have also generated critiques of their alleged democratic shortcomings from their early inception onward. This includes arguments about the large distance between citizens and rulers, with the former's absolute influence decreasing as the polity grows, and the depoliticizing effects of international institutions, both as a conscious political strategy and an outcome of their very functioning.<sup>8</sup> Even more fundamentally, the fact that millions of people are excluded from polities and lack the means of representation and voice, and yet are severely affected by decisions taken within that polity, may be seen as being at odds with the principle of all-affected interests – that anyone affected by a decision should have some say in its formulation.<sup>9</sup> While scholarship on the influence of historical actors in shaping such structures has flourished, we still know relatively little about how they have perceived their own role and mandate as intermediaries, brokers, representatives or experts.

In other academic fields, scholars have studied the relationship between democracy and the environment for some time. European integration and governance scholars have looked at the field of environmental policy to study how transboundary issues have led to a veritable transnationalization of governance. The development of (environmental) governance beyond the state has raised questions about the democratic legitimacy of supranational institutions and policies. In response to such concerns, civil society actors have become increasingly involved in environmental policy-making in an attempt to make up for the alleged 'democratic deficit'. This 'participatory turn' to governance involving multiple 'stakeholders' culminated when the Aarhus Convention in 1998 established a number of rights for the public, including access to environmental information and public participation in environmental decision-making. The degree to which the involvement of societal actors can and indeed has improved their legitimacy perceptions and those of the public at large, has been the topic of recent political science scholarship on transnational governance.<sup>10</sup>

While extant scholarship remains within the boundaries of liberal democracies to enhance the democratic and environmental quality of decision-making, critical Environmental Political Theory scholars active since the 1990s have argued that *ecological democracy* needs to replace currently existing liberal democracies. Defenders of ecological democracy such as Robyn Eckersley and John Dryzek have highlighted the ways in which liberal democracy itself has been complicit

7 A. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago 2016.

8 R. A. Dahl, 'A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness versus Citizen Participation', in: *Political Science Quarterly* 109 (1994) 1, 23–34; M. Louis / L. Maertens, *Why International Organizations Hate Politics: Depoliticizing the World*, Abingdon 2021.

9 See for instance R. Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*, Cambridge, MA 2004.

10 J. Steffek, *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia*, Oxford 2021; idem / C. Kissling / P. Nanz (eds.), *Civil Society Participation in European and Global Governance: A Cure for the Democratic Deficit?*, Basingstoke 2008; J. Keulartz / G. Leistra (eds.), *Legitimacy in European Nature Conservation Policy: Case Studies in Multilevel Governance*, Houten 2008; B. Kohler-Koch / B. Rittberger (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Legitimacy of the European Union*, Lanham 2007.

in perpetuating ecological problems.<sup>11</sup> They argue that the systematic production of environmental injustices and ecological degradation is the ‘inevitable by-product of the limited temporal, spatial, epistemological, and community horizons of liberal democracies’.<sup>12</sup>

Historians have contributed to offering longer-term perspectives on these individual topics in significant ways. For one, international historians have shown how environmental thought has developed and entered the international agenda, what (and who) have been driving forces, and how early and later instances of environmental summitry and policies may be assessed. In doing so, they have paid particular attention to the role of non-state actors, such as environmental organizations, as a major force in shaping European and global nature conservation and environmental governance.<sup>13</sup> Historians of modern politics, on their turn, have shown the historicity of democratic thought and praxis, highlighting their contested and changing nature over time. This Forum combines the two strands by asking how historical accounts of modern politics may change when narrated through the lens of the environment.

## 2. About this forum

In this collection of essays, we aim to think about environment and democracy in conjunction with each other. We posit a number of questions that deserve historians’ attention and offer a forum for colleagues who have begun to address such questions in their work. The collection of essays in this forum highlights why it is important – if not necessary – to disclose the historicity of predominant categories of thought and social practice. As many of the authors make clear, without reconsidering and deconstructing the intricate historical relationships between the political and the environmental, little imaginative space remains to create agendas of change that have the ability to come to terms with the anthropocentrism, the conflicting temporalities and the geographies of injustice and inequality of the (recent) past.

This, we believe, is what historians of modern politics and environmentalism can bring to the table: to critically revise historical understandings of the centrality of humans, ‘chronotime’ and occidentalist geography vis-à-vis the natural environment. In so doing, the essays foreground varying historical episodes, contexts and regimes (e.g. World War I, the post-war boom, a divided Europe in the Cold War, postcolonialism and Europe’s relationship to Africa, as well as the emergence of neoliberalism) in which particular anthropocentric, temporal and geographical dispositions of environmental politics are teased out.

When it comes to unravelling anthropocentrism, Duncan Kelly argues that a new figuration of time is imperative in order to overcome the restricted human experience of time and make it commensurate with planetary time in the age of the Anthropocene. Only then might it be possible to translate the immanence of environmental degradation and destruction into a grammar that encapsulates global and planetary perspectives. The consequences of the absence of such a multitemporal

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- 11 R. Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*, Albany 1992; J. Dryzek, ‘Ecology and Discursive Democracy: Beyond Liberal Capitalism and the Administrative State’, in: *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 3 (1992) 2, 18–42.
  - 12 R. Eckersley, ‘Ecological Democracy and the Rise and Decline of Liberal Democracy: Looking Back, Looking Forward’, in: *Environmental Politics* 29 (2020) 2, 214–234, 218.
  - 13 For example: A. Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World*, Berkeley 2002; J.-H. Meyer, ‘Greening Europe? Environmental Interest Groups and the Europeanisation of a New Policy Field’, in: *Comparativ* 20 (2010) 3, 83–104; A.-K. Wöbse, *Weltnaturschutz. Umweltdiplomatie in Völkerbund und Vereinten Nationen, 1920–1950*, Frankfurt 2012; S. Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2015; R. de Bont, *Nature’s Diplomats: Science, Internationalism, and Preservation, 1920–1960*, Pittsburgh 2021.

imaginary are illustrated by Niklas Olsen and Rasmus Skov Andersen. They show that a libertarian backlash to environmentalism in the 1970s, enabled an anthropocentric imaginary that has since been frequently tapped into by anti-statist, anti-collectivist and ultimately anti-environmentalist thinkers and actors in Western liberal democracies, which thus rearticulates human experience as the organizing principle in environmental concerns. More recently, as both Kelly as well as Stefan Couperus and Stephen Milder suggest, the Green New Deal mostly testifies to the persistent resonance of pre-existing models of crisis politics. This, again, discloses the neglect of temporal dissonance (between the policy cycles of state interventionism, the long-termism of climate change, and planetary time). Moreover, it reveals the hegemony of the post-war (i.e. post-World War II) moment in imagining political change. Ergo, Couperus and Milder claim, collective action and political response to climate change are still deeply rooted in a post-war political culture, making it hard to see parts of this political culture as being conducive to climate change, and, thus, complicating the 'solutionist' potential of democratic politics today.

When posting a particular form of anthropocentrism (i.e. the centrality of white, European societies in global politics) as being central to the imperial project of the West, geographies of environmental injustice and inequality become potent reminders of why we need to refer to history when revisiting the entanglements of democracy and climate change. Iva Peša points to the perpetuation of climate injustice at the global level, which can be attributed to persistent democratic deficits in global environmental politics. By bringing into focus the historical and spatial entanglements of Congo and Belgium, Peša shows that coloniality, as part of a historical critique of anthropocentrism, human temporalities and geographies of inequality, is a necessary critical lens to better understanding the democracy-climate change nexus. Similarly, Julie Ault critically reconsiders the alleged contrast between 'environmentally aware' democracies in Western Europe and 'polluting' communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe in the 20th century. By scrutinizing the political and economic ambitions of regimes and the limitations of environmental politics of the 1970s and 1980s, her contribution shows that authoritarianism and democracy are not necessarily juxtaposed politics or mirror images.

Taken together, the essays thus address persistent normative assumptions with regard to the relationship between democracy and climate change, and they are attentive to anthropocentric notions (such as economic growth) that have been constitutive to this relationship. They also address the temporal dissonance between human time experience and planetary time as well as articulate the Western-centric hegemonies that obscure a critical view on geographies of injustice and inequality.

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