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The sustainability of democracy

On limits to growth, the post-democratic turn and reactionary democrats

Emancipation, the central demand of democracy, has come to mean liberation from restrictive social and ecological imperatives. Before proposing radical participatory solutions we need to ask how democracy itself serves the politics of unsustainability, argues Ingolfur Blühdorn.

The question of the sustainability of democracy has two dimensions: first, that of the sustainability of democracy itself, which has been debated ever since the "crisis theories" of the 1970s;¹ second, the question whether democratic structures are capable of managing the sustainability crisis, which is most commonly associated with the finiteness of natural resources and the phenomenon of climate change, but also has a whole range of other aspects. The first dimension has recently received much attention. In the light of globalisation, political cynicism and diminishing trust in democratic institutions, there has been much talk about the coming of "post-democracy".² Nevertheless, democracy has time and again proven its impressive adaptability to diverse and changing societal conditions.

Much less debated is the second dimension — not least because established democratic commitments make it extremely difficult to even consider the possibility that democracy might fail to deliver. Early suggestions, made in the wake of the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report,³ that the scarcity of resources would render the suspension of democratic rule and the adoption of eco-authoritarian policies a necessity of human survival,⁴ have been robustly refuted. Yet the issue as to whether democratic systems are really capable of effectively addressing the sustainability crisis has remained unresolved. With the powerful re-emergence of the debate on the finiteness of resources and the post-growth economy,⁵ this question is more urgent than ever.

Sustainability from below?

Ever since the emancipatory social movements of the 1970s and 1980s forced environmental issues onto national and international political agendas, the assumption has become deeply entrenched that ecology and democracy are inextricably linked. Political ecologists, in particular, have argued that the liberation of the environment and the empowerment of citizens are two sides of the same coin, and have engaged in a struggle for radical democratisation even in established democracies. Disempowerment of political and economic elites and the devolution of power to the citizenry were proposed as the best means for securing both ecological integrity and civic self-determination. From the mid-1980s, the paradigm of ecological modernization gradually depoliticised ecological issues. Incrementally, these were reframed as technological and

economic questions as well as matters of efficient management. The way in which the ecological issue has been appropriated by scientific experts, technological pioneers and the expertocratic state is most visible in Nicholas Stern's report on the *Economics of Climate Change*,⁶ in the assessment reports of the IPCC, or in the widely promoted Green New Deal policies, which are supposed to generate sustainable jobs and ecologically benign economic growth.

Yet, for all their undeniable achievements, techno–managerial policy approaches have so far been unable to bring about anything like the profound structural transformations that are required if internationalised consumer society is ever to become sustainable. After the fiasco of international climate politics in Copenhagen, after international investment banks were declared too big to fail, and after the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, it is clear how unambiguously priorities are set. There is little evidence that this will change in any substantial way in the foreseeable future.

True to the tradition of the emancipatory social movements, critics of established approaches have been calling for a bottom–up renewal of climate and environmental policy. Claus Leggewie and Harald Welzer, for example, posit that "Only when [...] members of the political community are spoken to as active architects of *their* society, can changes in lifestyle and options for action be realized."⁷ The remodelling of industrial society "will only function", they suggest "if it is posed as a project with which members of society identify. [...] Then it will become a generator of identity rather than a problem of implementation ". The dysfunctional politics of the elites can be corrected only through "'more democracy', in other words innovative forms of direct participation." Similarly, Clive Hamilton asserts that "the climate crisis is upon us because democracy has been corrupted".⁸ The "passivity of the public", he believes, has bred a political class "who stand for little other than self–advancement".⁹ Accordingly, he sees "reclaiming democracy for the citizenry" as the only way to mitigate the effects of climate change and to "ensure that the wealthy and powerful cannot protect their own interests at the expense of the rest". In a manner truly reminiscent of political ecology at the time of the nuclear arms race he urges: "We must democratise survivability"¹⁰ and adopt "a new radicalism [...] that refuses to be drawn into short–term electoral trade–offs and aims to shift the ground of politics itself".¹¹ And in the same vein, Daniel Hausknost insists: "Given the state's inability to initiate radical change, it is down to civil society to mobilise political and social imagination and make genuine alternatives to the current trajectory conceivable and tangible".¹² For him, too, "the refusal to participate in ecological *governance*–processes", would be a first decisive step towards "de–legitimizing the liberal state's politics of simulation" (ibid.) and making authentic progress towards sustainability.

Undoubtedly, the radical criticism of de–politicization and expert rule implied in these statements is perfectly justified. The rule of experts is, and has always been, the rule of vested interests, and no structural change to the established order of unsustainability is ever to be expected from those who confine themselves to stimulating ever new cycles of techno–managerial innovation, economic growth and mass consumption. There is also every reason to be concerned about the global elites' determination to buy their way out of the crisis and maintain their lifestyles of unsustainability, whatever the costs for the vulnerable and excluded. And thirdly, the demand for a new radicalism that re–opens a debate on the very principles of liberal consumer capitalism is also fully justified: rising to the challenge of the climate and sustainability crisis

does indeed necessitate "thinking about a third industrial revolution in less instrumental terms than the first and the second. Climate change means cultural change — and hence a change in political culture."¹³

Yet assertions that the empowerment of civil society will trigger such a revolution, that more democracy will promote more sustainability, and that at the grass roots of consumer societies an "alternative hedonism"¹⁴ that might provide the basis for the democratic transition towards sustainability is already emerging, seem idealistic. Alternative niche-cultures certainly exist, and the recent revitalisation of citizen protests in a number of European countries — most notably perhaps the revitalised anti-nuclear movement in Germany — is a beacon of hope. But how much confidence should we have that empowering the democratic citizenry will really move contemporary society closer towards sustainability? What are participatory-democratic approaches able to achieve exactly? More broadly, how are the conditions of contemporary modernity reconfiguring democracy?

Democracy and sustainability

Doubts about the feasibility of democratic solutions to the sustainability crisis have commonly been fended off with warnings that those who raise them are probably sympathetic to authoritarian approaches. Yet this logic disregards two important points. First, in addition to the participatory-democratic and the expertocratic-authoritarian solutions to the sustainability crisis, there is also the option of *non-solution*, i.e. a sustained *politics of unsustainability*¹⁵ that seeks to extend the status quo and manage its unpleasant implications for as long as possible. Second, democracy — depending on its particular form — can be just as much part of the problem as part of the solution. There is evidence to suggest that under the particular conditions of modern consumer society, democracy may indeed be assuming a shape that is geared more towards stabilizing than radically changing the unsustainable status quo.

Doubts about the capacity of democracy to deal with environmental problems are, of course, not entirely new. It has often been pointed out, for example, that democracy is anthropocentric and has only limited potential to represent that which has no political voice. Notably, electoral democracy has a strong fixation on the present, in other words it prioritizes the interests of today and is structurally inclined to discount those of future generations. Moreover democracy encourages compromise, although compromise solutions are often ecologically ineffective. Democratic procedures are time- and resource-consuming and therefore inappropriate wherever fast and decisive action is necessary. Democracy is, at least in modern differentiated societies, highly individualistic and therefore ill-suited to determining, let alone implementing, something like a Rousseauian *volonté générale* or public good. Instead, democracy aligns politics with the electoral majority, even though the preferences of the majority — witness, for example, the addiction to car- or air-travel — are rarely sensible in terms of sustainability. Democratic systems are hard pushed to generate majorities for policies that burden citizens with costs or restrictions mainly for the benefit of people in faraway parts of the world and for something as abstract as the global climate. And, perhaps most importantly, democracy is always emancipatory, in other words it always centres on the *enhancement* of rights and (material) living conditions. It is not really suited to *restricting* the rights or material conditions affecting the majority — unless, as with the rule that red traffic lights must be observed, the benefits are immediately tangible.

All these concerns have articulated by eco-political sceptics of democracy for a long time. They have taken authors like Paul Ehrlich, Robert Heilbroner or Herbert Gruhl, into eco-authoritarian terrain. In 1975 Wolfgang Harich considered a "strong, rigorous allocation state", an "ascetic distributive state", as the only way out of the looming environmental crisis.¹⁶ William Ophuls believed that the crisis "may require the sacrifice of equality and majority rule" and that "democracy *must* give way to elite rule".¹⁷ Hans Jonas mused about "a well-intentioned, well-informed tyranny" as the most promising solution.¹⁸ But such elitist perspectives have always triggered profound and very justified scepticism, and since the 1970s emancipatory social movements have forcefully insisted that effective environmental policies can only be developed bottom-up and require broad democratic legitimation.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the ongoing process of modernisation reinforced emancipatory claims for individual freedom, self-determination and self-fulfilment, but also deepened doubts about whether democracy is suitable as a political tool for restructuring contemporary societies towards sustainability. Relevant developments have included:

- Multiculturalism and the pluralisation of social values and individual lifestyles, raising fundamental questions about whether *categorical ecological imperatives* (most recently the IPCC's famous 4°C threshold) really do exist.
- The functional differentiation of modern societies, implying that the democratic institutions of the state are less and less able to integrate and control societal subsystems. The new patterns of governance are increasingly undemocratic (opaque, unaccountable), with the state only one of several actors with its sovereignty noticeably castrated.
- The rapid increase of societal subsystems — most notably the economy, science and the media — as well as individual lifeworlds and network, beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, hence increasingly eluding the control of national democratic politics.
- The increasing abstraction and complexity of environmental issues (e.g. climate change, energy security, the environmental footprint of specific products). The most important risks cannot be directly perceived by citizens but are measured, framed and communicated by scientific experts. Invariably, this implies the disempowerment of the democratic sovereign.
- The acceleration of change and the flexibilization of social norms, reinforcing a fixation on the present. In both private life and public policy, thinking beyond the crises of the day and taking decisions for an entirely unpredictable future becomes increasingly difficult.
- Finally, the extension of the ecological footprint of modern consumer societies far beyond their national territory (and their respective present), invalidating the democratic principle of congruence between the authors of political decisions and those affected by them. Effectively, national democratic structures have turned into a means of legitimizing the externalization of ecological and social costs.

These developments, which are inherent to the ongoing process of modernization and hardly controllable, progressively undermine the ability of democracy to devise and implement appropriate strategies against the sustainability crisis. No wonder that suspicions about the eco-political failure of liberal democracy re-emerged in the late 1990s. Contrary to the democratic optimism of social movements and Green Parties, some, for example Laura Westra,¹⁹ have seen democracy increasingly to be part of the problem. More recently, David Shearman and Joseph Wayne Smith have concluded that the underlying cause of the sustainability crisis is not the capitalist growth

economy but, ultimately, liberal democracy itself.²⁰ Anthony Giddens, in his *Politics of Climate Change*, regards the commitment of social movements and the Green parties to participatory democracy as eco-politically ineffective.²¹ Echoing Westra's call for a "global regulatory authority" to pursue top-down policy implementation, Giddens advocates an "active interventionist state" as the all-important eco-political actor. He explicitly calls for the de-politicization of climate policy and insists that centralised planning and an "ensuring state" are the best strategies for making sure that politicians do not only set well-sounding targets, but can actually guarantee policy delivery.

Identity and emancipation

Thus, whilst some diagnose a democratic deficit and call for a comprehensive democratization of democracy, others detect insurmountable deficits in democracy *itself* and consider top-down approaches to eco-politics more effective. To be sure, democracy and democratization can only be seen as a suitable means for ecological and social ends insofar as the institutionalized authorities and elites are regarded as representing the alienating and destructive logic of unsustainability. According to this view, citizens or civil society are understood as the subject of a social-cum-ecological reason, which must be empowered if self-serving elites are to be held to account and the transition to authentic fulfilment and sustainability initiated. Put the other way round, emancipatory-democratic optimism loses its foundations if emancipation, rather than being understood as liberation from the alienating and destructive logic of productivism, efficiency, growth and consumption, is seen as being compliant with the established system — in other words as the realisation of ever more individualised freedom and choice, ever more flexibility and, in particular, increasingly consumerist lifestyles. Exactly this, however, is arguably what characterizes contemporary consumer democracies.

It would be mistaken, of course, to assert that there has ever been a Golden Age when all citizens were deeply committed to the tenets of political ecology and campaigned for a radical departure from consumer capitalism. Yet the belief that industrial modernity and consumer culture are profoundly alienating and that individual fulfilment, collective happiness and lasting social peace can only be attained beyond the established system of competitive consumerism was widely shared in the 1970s and early 1980s — and well beyond the narrow circles of political ecologists. In contemporary consumer democracies, however, such beliefs have less and less political purchase, since the prevalent understanding of freedom and emancipation and the predominant patterns of self-fulfilment and self-experience have changed fundamentally.

Social and political scientists have long acknowledged this. Since the mid-1970s they have been discussing the implications of a cultural shift that Ronald Inglehart famously called the "silent revolution".²² At the level of individual identity, the contemporary extension of this shift has brought about what, following Zygmunt Bauman's notion of Liquid Modernity,²³ could be described as *liquid identity*. This oxymoron captures the fact that in advanced western societies, the bourgeois-modernist ideal of a unitary individual identity that evolves and matures throughout a person's lifetime has been superseded — or at least supplemented — by the intrinsically contradictory ideal of a multiple, fragmented and flexible identity. In today's competition- and consumption-based societies, earlier notions of subjectivity and identity, with all their implications of rational-cum-moral duty, consistency and self-discipline, have become counter-productive and burdensome: the qualities in demand today are flexibility, versatility, mobility and

innovativeness. These are not only the imperatives of the modern labour market, they also appear to open up new options for a richer experience of life and more personal fulfilment. Accordingly, modern citizens have adapted their understanding of their self and their norms of identity, to become more complex, flexible, innovative and tolerant towards intrinsic contradictions.

Somewhat one-sidedly, Richard Sennett has described this cultural shift as "the corrosion of character".²⁴ But taking into account its emancipatory causes and potentials, it could also be framed positively in terms of liberation. For democracy and for the prospect of a democratically organised restructuring of modern society towards sustainability, this shift is important. The new self-understanding demanded by the modern economy, preferred by modern individuals and enforced by the so-called "activating state", is fundamentally unsustainable in a number of respects. First, it is by definition flexible, fluid and volatile, in other words precisely not stable and sustained. Second, this new self-conception focuses very strongly on the present. It is constantly reinvented in accordance with the conditions given at a particular point in time, it is not committed to consistency with the past, and it is not overly concerned about the increasingly unpredictable future. Third, this contemporary ideal of identity strongly relies on acts of consumption as its most important means of self-construction, self-expression and self-experience.

To some extent this consumerism may be ethically and ecologically informed but, crucially, this pattern of identity construction and self-expression relies on the volatile sign-value and novelty-value of consumer goods — which, in turn, necessitates an ever-accelerating pace of (resource-)consumption. This shift towards the *inherently unsustainable self* has by no means fully replaced more traditional notions of identity,²⁵ and it is not equally prevalent in all social milieus. But it is particularly strong in the most innovative, entrepreneurial and pace-setting parts of society, and as these patterns of self-construction and self-experience become prevalent, citizens will demand to see them represented by democratic processes and institutions. For a democratically legitimised transition towards sustainability, the implications of this are dire.

The limits to growth considerably accelerate the dynamics of this modernisation-induced cultural shift, at the same time causing social competition to become increasingly fierce and governments to enforce policies of privatisation, welfare retrenchment and self-responsibility. It becomes ever more difficult for policy makers to resolve the old tension between democratic principles of liberalism and redistributive egalitarianism, and the democratic paradox²⁶ again becomes politically virulent. The notion of emancipation is reconfigured in a way that prioritises liberalism over egalitarianism.

In fact, at the limits to growth, a second-order or *reflexive* emancipation supersedes traditional or first-order emancipation. The latter may be understood to refer to the 1970s and 1980s, when increasingly self-confident citizens, conceiving of themselves as the subject of authentic reason, struggled for liberation from the guardianship of traditional elites and were determined to assume responsibility for the common good, which they aimed to negotiate and implement in participatory-democratic ways. Second-order or reflexive emancipation, by contrast, refers to a trend noticeable since the 1990s, entailing partial deliverance from the very responsibilities that citizens had previously enthusiastically fought for. In particular, it seeks liberation from moral and intellectual overload and calls for reassessment of restrictive social or ecological imperatives. Citizens continue to see themselves as the political

principal and articulate demands accordingly. However wherever it promises to pay off, they delegate social and political responsibility to service providers, hoping to gain both more effective interest representation *and* additional leeway in the private pursuit of self-fulfilment.

Clearly, this second phase of the emancipatory project is closely connected to the rise of liquid identity; together they form the core of what I have called the post-democratic turn.²⁷ From the perspective of established political institutions, liquid identity and second-order emancipation lead to the crisis of overload and ungovernability that Crozier and colleagues predicted in the 1970s.²⁸ From the perspective of citizens, these cultural shifts lead to frustration with existing democratic institutions and cynicism about democratic processes. These institutions and processes invariably fail to organize, articulate and represent the complexity and dynamics of modern needs and identities. At the abstract level and in terms of citizens' expectations of public bodies, the post-democratic turn leaves democratic values fully in place. Yet in actual practice, democracy entails ever less of a guarantee, be it for the already marginalised or excluded (who are increasingly turning away from political engagement), or for those trying to utilise their available resources to secure personal advantage in the growing struggle for opportunities.

Governing unsustainability

In the wake of the post-democratic turn, the sustainability of democracy itself may well become a problem, and the capacity of democracy to initiate a turn towards sustainability may be permanently impaired. But democracy comes in many shapes and forms, of course, and political scientists have always praised its great flexibility and adaptability. They have drawn hope from its proven problem-solving capacity and its ability to reflexively address its own faults.²⁹ Indeed, although the social and cultural resources on which democracy has always been based have, in the process of modernisation, become dangerously depleted, the collapse of democracy predicted by some³⁰ has not yet not occurred. Even in countries like the UK, where the exhaustion of socio-cultural capital is most dramatically on display, where the diagnosis of the "broken society" is widely debated,³¹ and which Crouch portrayed as the paradigmatic example of "post-democracy", the basic structures of democracy remain intact. The Arab Spring, meanwhile, seems to provide strong evidence of the ongoing appeal of democratic ideals worldwide, and in the industrialised nations democracy has powerful allies firmly committed to its defence.

Nevertheless, given the cultural shift outlined above, a revitalization of democracy as envisaged by Leggewie and Welzer, Crouch, Hamilton, Hausknost and so many others will not easily be feasible. For in the wake of the post-democratic turn, the structural limitations that have always existed are powerfully reinforced by new cultural limitations that essentially stifle all hopes for the profound value change necessary for any democratic transition to sustainability. Indeed, contrary to the narratives of an emerging alternative hedonism, it is to be feared that, under the conditions of advanced modern societies, more democracy could imply even less sustainability.

None of this implies that expertocratic-authoritarian policy approaches are in any way more promising. Hence, it has been suggested that even "despite its evident insufficiencies, democracy might still be the best chance we have to address the challenges" of the sustainability crisis.³² This is the eco-political reformulation of the old Churchill-hypothesis. Dangerously, however, this proposal fails to recognize the extent to which democracy is quietly changing

its quality. For after the post-democratic turn, democratic values are forcefully mobilised to fend off the structural changes without which sustainability will never be achieved.

In its classical understanding, democracy was perceived as emancipatory, egalitarian and progressive. It aimed for the empowerment of the underprivileged vis-à-vis the ruling elites. At the limits to growth, however, and in view of the second-order emancipation discussed above, it transmutes into a tool for the defence of established order. Whilst there is little evidence that democracy is suited to the implementation of sustainability, constraint and burden-sharing, there is plenty of evidence to show that democratic values are invoked by the power-elites as well as by the embattled middle classes to legitimize privileged lifestyles that can now be sustained only at the price of increasing social injustice and exclusion. This is most drastically visible in the United States, where neoliberal elites and the bottom-up Tea Party movement have joined forces to deny climate change, alarmed that it might "provide a rationale for the government to "intrude" everywhere, curtail consumer choice and property rights, and increase the state's size and surveillance".³³ But it reverberates also in Europe. In the UK, for example, the Conservative government's "big society" project has appropriated the language of civil society and empowerment to orchestrate a massive austerity programme set to dramatically reinforce the already high level of social inequality and exclusion.

Thus, at the limits to growth and after the post-democratic turn, democracy — redefined purely in terms of individual freedom and the right to unfettered consumer choice — is turning reactionary and exclusive. When the modernist normative foundations upon which it once rested have largely crumbled away, democracy may become the most powerful instrument for the governance of unsustainability. For the disempowered who are having to bear the brunt, the *chuzpe* of neoliberal intellectuals who candidly state — pretentiously veiled as social criticism — that democracy is becoming "a system, open and accessible in theory, but ruled in reality by organized or rich or fanatical minorities, protecting themselves for the present and sacrificing the future", only adds insult to injury.³⁴

Thus, in a quite unexpected manner, democracy once again provides evidence of its great flexibility and adaptability. It again demonstrates its impressive problem-solving-capacity — the problem now being the governance of unsustainability. The narratives of those who simplistically rave about democratic empowerment and alternative hedonism may, unintendedly, be contributing to this agenda. What is required instead is a much more detailed enquiry into this new *reactionary democracy*. This is a theoretical as well as an empirical challenge to which the social sciences are only now beginning to face up.

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