begin with the premise that eventually—soon, within two generations at most—natural limits will require radical transformations in human institutional structures, cultural traditions, and individual behavior. These transformations will affect the freedom and material standard of consumption of billions of people in the most powerful countries (economically and militarily) in the world today. Some of the states involved have authoritarian and elite-controlled governance structures; others are more liberal and democratic. But no government in the highly carbon consumptive parts of the world can be indifferent to the conditions of its own normative legitimacy among its own people; no government can simply ignore the direct interests and needs of at least its middle and working classes. No matter how steep its sides or how narrow its pinnacle, each pyramid of power and wealth rests upon its base.

In that sense both authoritarian and democratic governance face, to some degree, the requirements of normative legitimation in mass societies. The social contract that provides a measure of stability can be seen as one in which the demos has given elites political control in exchange for the promise and performance of economic growth and material consumption. Let us call this the “social contract of consumption.” The history and the practicality of this social contract corresponds roughly to the era of fossil carbon based technologies and energy systems of the last 300 years.

If new forms of energy can be made relatively inexpensive, then the new social contract of the future may continue to be something like the social contract of consumption. That could spare us some of the difficult social transformation I envision, but such a technological fix could also spell disaster for biodiversity and ecological resilience, quite apart from the problem of climate change. However, more likely in fact is the scenario of much more expensive energy, a lower material standard of living, and a curtailed consumptive pattern of behavior for that portion of the world’s population that are now the most affluent. That would be us.

If the fossil fuel era is coming to an end for natural reasons beyond our control, then the social contract of consumption will have to give way to a new contract, a compact with new terms—a new constellation of legitimacy, a new foundation for both contentment and commitment, a new basis for political and social stability. For want of a better term, let me call this the “social covenant of ecological trusteeship.” I should like to pose two questions for our discussion: First, how can we move from the old contract to the new covenant, from using up to sustainably using? Second, the social covenant of ecological trusteeship can take either an authoritarian or a democratic form, in comparison to the present governance system of liberal representative democracy and growth centered political economy.¹ Can we devise a way to make the governance that follows
from the new covenant the latter rather than the former: make it democratic in a thick and robust sense rather than authoritarian? Can our sustainable political future go with Rousseau and be governed by ecological democratic citizens; or must we go with Plato and be governed by ecological philosopher-Kings? Or with Hobbes, and be governed by a unitary sovereign power in an ecological Leviathan state?

As I say, the covenant of trusteeship may come in two forms: The first is a relatively autocratic or oligarchic form in which the base gives authority and obedience to the elite in return for ecological security; protection from the horrors of catastrophe and collapse. The second is a more deliberative and directly participatory form of constitutional democratic republic in which a consensus building process from the bottom up sets general principles and goals, while professionals and other expert elites are given the technical function of determining laws and regulations (and the police power to enforce them) to secure ecological integrity, sustainability, and security. In this version of the covenant of trusteeship contentment and commitment come, not from material hedonism, but from a communally and relationally rich quality of life. As Hobbes and Rousseau well understood, the authoritarian covenant of ecological trusteeship can be sustained by fear and self-interest, but for how long? The democratic form of this covenant requires something much more difficult, but perhaps more lasting—it requires a transvaluation of values; an expansion of the moral and the civic imagination, and, in short, civic virtue.

Either by fear and the desire for security or by principled normative commitment and an internalized sense of what is good and fulfilling in life—one way or the other, this new covenant will provide legitimacy and stability even in the face of much less material affluence than the old social contract of consumption has provided in the fading halcyon days of cheap carbon energy.

Following Habermas, I want to look at the problem of governance in a ecological political economy from a particular point of view: I see this problem as fundamentally a challenge for the mechanisms and institutions of political will formation in contemporary states.

Liberal representative democracy is a form of democratic governance prone to incrementalism and preservation of the status quo, or at least great continuity of expectations and practices. Does the time scale and the response horizon of interest group democracy fit with the time dimension of the current ecological crisis? Can it produce policies and social changes that will reduce GHG levels below 350 ppm by 2030? If not, what form of governance will produce the necessary public will and compliance? What type of new institutional structure for governance (not simply government itself, but also the penumbral process of the political culture, the news media, and the civil society) will be able to act in the thoroughgoing and relatively rapid ways necessary?

I believe that two concepts in particular must be explored to cast light on this problem of democratic will formation under a social covenant of ecological trusteeship. They are literacy and citizenship.

**Ecological literacy**

The challenges posed by biospheric ethics, biodiversity conservation, and climate change cannot be met without a greater investment in, and emphasis on, ecological literacy. I intend “literacy” here as a term of art that carries a special meaning. Literacy literally refers to the ability to read, and difficulty reading and other linguistic barriers obviously hamper one’s access to the information and understanding necessary for effective citizenship and democratic decisionmaking. But just as the challenge is broader than this, so too the concept of literacy involves more than the provision of information. Literacy means both the ability to understand one’s relationship to the human and biotic context and the power to act to protect and promote the quality of those relationships. To be sure, our society is rapidly becoming increasingly demanding in the way it requires individuals to master specialized information and complex technical knowledge. Yet the acquisition of skills is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of ecological literacy. It does little good to equip people with functional skills, but then leave them in an unjust or coercive social milieu that makes it difficult to turn those skills into effective capacities or makes it impossible to engage in action that will promote and protect ecological health.

Hence, the critical function of the concept of literacy is not to identify flaws or shortcomings of particular individuals or of particular communities. Individuals and communities that currently lack effective literacy seek access to the skills and information necessary and will attain them if given an opportunity to do so. The critical

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**How can we move from the old contract to the new covenant, from consumption to conserving trusteeship, from using up to sustainably using?**

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function of the notion of ecological literacy is to focus on the institutional context and the conditions of social power within which individuals and communities share information about environmental and conservation issues, understand the meaning of that information in their lives, and deliberate and debate with others how the natural environment should be used and for what purposes. In other words, ecological literacy must be understood as a “capacity,” or “capability,” which is a property not of the individual taken in isolation, but of the individual in the context of a social space that provides effective resources, rights, and freedoms. A capacity relies on the possession of effective freedom and rights by the individual and on a surrounding social and educational system that supports the development of that freedom.

In short, literacy is empowerment, not simply a response to instruction. The absence of ecological literacy among large numbers of Americans bespeaks a systemic and structural flaw in our society.

Ecological citizenship

Now let me turn to the concept of citizenship. Literacy as empowerment is related to citizenship in a particular sense. Here citizenship is not best understood as a bundle of rights that may or may not be exercised at the personal discretion of the individual (such as the right to vote). Instead, citizenship is best understood as an active freedom that involves a particular set of practices, forums, skills, and opportunities. Citizenship is not like a commodity or possession one owns and uses (or not); citizenship is a form of life, a kind of social being that one can cultivate and pursue. In an authoritarian society the opportunities to cultivate that form of life may be severely truncated or even non-existent. In a democracy these opportunities must be open as a matter of right to virtually all adults.

It may well be that familiar approaches in environmental education, such as personal instruction and information sharing, will not suffice. And the movement in the EU to enhance democratic environmental governance by creating an enforceable right of access to information about environmental effects of governmental and corporate activities may only be a first step. Ecological literacy may require the creation of active “publics” that seek out knowledge in the process of engaging in civic action as well as the provision of information to individuals. Ecological literacy may require community organizing and the deliberate creation of enhanced “social capital” or civic renewal no less than it requires the services of trained professionals to provide counseling. In short, ecological literacy may require, as its complement and supplement, some new forms of ecological citizenship.

A democratic steady state?

Let’s consider the concept of citizenship in more detail. I think it is important to distinguish between what I will call the citizen as rational-choice consumer and the citizen as deliberative trustee. The basic distinction here is between: (1) a form of political and social behavior that involves the calculation of individual self-interest or group interest and the creation of a strategy to devise the most rational means to protect and fulfill those interests; and (2) a form of political and civic behavior that involves deliberation, either in a group setting or as a solitary individual, to orient oneself to the common good.

A few words of reminder about what Dewey called the “faith of democracy.” The basic principle of democracy is that the moral authority of government rests on the active, informed consent of the governed. What all varieties of democratic theory have in common are the value of respect for persons as free and equal agents and the value of being a member of a community of mutual care and respect. The legitimate exercise of power must rest on the consent of the governed because ultimately no one knows better than the governed what is in their own best interest and in the common good. All voices and all value orientations should be heard. No competent adult should be excluded from the practice of consent if he or she is willing to assume the responsibilities of membership or citizenship; the assumptions of natural superiority and hierarchy that accompany non-democratic ideologies are absent in democracy. A basic faith in the intelligence and perceptiveness of the common person pervades democratic thinking. And this can potentially have a spill over effect in reducing the anthropocentric or at least anthropo-hierarchic orientation toward the human ecosystemic surround.

Again, the core notion of democracy is that law and public policies are ethically justified and legitimate to the extent that they emerge from the reasonable deliberation of free and equal citizens who will be significantly affected by them. As the understanding of citizenship has been privatized during the era of the social contract of consumption, the deliberative element has been narrowed to a representative (in theory) elite, and as practiced by elites, the very notion of deliberation has been reconceptualized and transformed into a discursive practice that is quite different, namely, bargaining.

Liberal representative democracy thus pitches citizenship at two levels: first, for large numbers of people, the selection of representatives, and second, for a much smaller number of activists and organized interest groups,
engagement in the political bargaining process, that is, a system of interest-group negotiations to determine the distribution of various kinds of resources, tangible and symbolic. The governance challenge ahead resides in the fact that this type of democracy is no longer sufficient. An adequate response to the governance of biodiversity and climate change, if it is to remain democratic in any meaningful sense, will require retrieving, reinvigorating, and nurturing the stream of deliberative democratic citizenship as an alternative to rational-choice consumerism (of candidates or issues) and to the politics of bargaining among representative elites and interest-groups which magnify and project the mentality of consumerism.

Rational-choice consumerism manifests itself most obviously and directly in our private lives as consumers of both economic and political commodities that we perceive meet our private interests—whether it is the purchase of a new car or the passage of a policy of governmental deregulation and tax cuts for the top quintile of the population. As the latter examples indicate, consumerism cuts across the economic/governmental or private/public boundary line. Rational-choice consumerism effects how we interact with each other in political communities and attempt to influence government on matters of policy and law. Indeed it is the conventional wisdom in political science and in practical politics that this self-interested, “what’s in it for me?” approach is the necessary and proper orientation to take. The rational-choice consumer and the “private citizen” become one and the same. In this, the privatization remains; the citizenship, the civic dimension, gets erased.

The two orientations of deliberative citizen and rational-choice consumer can also be contrasted in terms of the basic social and psychological orientation that informs them. Deliberative citizenship is essentially a dialogic, collective activity, while the consumer orientation is essentially monologic, and solitary. When one deliberates, one engages in a dialogue of arguments and counter-arguments, reasons and counter-reasons, with others. This dialogic character of deliberation is obvious when it is done in a town meeting or at some other community gathering; it may not be quite so obvious, but still remains the case even when an individual is alone thinking through a problem. An interior dialogue takes place in the person’s mind as he or she imaginatively reconstructs the give and take with fellow citizens in a group setting. A decision reached through the dialogue of deliberation is not a personal or individual decision, strictly speaking, although each individual may share in the decision. It is a collective or common decision in the sense that it grows out of a process that has revealed a common good and a common resolve.

With decisions to consume, by contrast, the individual consults his or her own interior preferences, desires, goals, and personal values and makes a decision based on the principle of realizing one’s own self-interest through the act of consumption. The give and take of reasons does not assume the form of a dialogue in this case because even if others have given you their opinion or their advice about what to decide, those views are treated as external information (advisory opinions) only. The ultimate decision will be an individual decision taken by the individual alone as the final best judge of his or her own values and preferences.

Citizenship is not like a commodity or possession one owns and uses (or not); citizenship is a form of life, a kind of social being that one can cultivate and pursue.

This is true no matter what the object being “consumed.” It could be a product or commodity. Or it could be a candidate’s platform, character, or views which are made the object of choice and consumption by casting a vote for the candidate at election time, or deciding to donate money to a campaign, or even a decision to actively make phone calls or hand out leaflets. All of these are acts of citizenship as a form of consumption and consumerism, rather than citizenship as a act of deliberation.

It is not my argument that self-interested orientations should be entirely purged in human social life. I doubt that it would be possible and, if some past attempts at “thought reform,” and “reeducation” are any guide, it would not be desirable. Individual autonomy and the freedom to support policies that benefit your interests are longstanding values not only of the liberal representative democratic tradition, but also of the participatory democratic tradition. Social revolutions that have made a concerted attempt to eliminate consumerism and self-interest from political (and even private) life have ended by betraying democracy and imposing frightful forms of dictatorial and totalitarian rule. The problem is not the presence of self-interest in politics; the problem arises when only consumerism and self-interest are present. Hence the need to make a place
for both the stance of consumerism and deliberation.

Civic renewal and ecological literacy (understood as a form of empowerment and not simply as information or instruction) depend upon the capacity to see and to make connections. Civic engagement feeds on the imaginative capacity to see beyond the limits of one’s own situation and experience. Publics or communities are formed when a significant number of people develop that capacity and orient it in the same direction. To form a public is thus quite different from creating an interest group. A public is constituted by a perception of a shared or common good, not by a strategic alliance based on overlapping private interests.

The medium through which this perception of the common good of both human and biotic communities arises may take several forms. It is founded on shared or widespread experiences of a certain kind; such as the experience of struggling to gain recognition and respect for nonhuman nature in a stressed and overextended local economic system. Such experiences are then filtered through existing forms and patterns of cultural meaning and collective understanding. This interpretative activity takes place at all levels and fills the interstices of a neighborhood’s or an ethnic community’s life. It is at work in conversations among women shopping at the market, and men on lunch breaks or in social gatherings. It is at work in houses of worship and service clubs. It is at work in political meetings or other kinds of civic assembly.

Finally, these shared experiences form the basis for what might be called public judgments by being discussed and shared with other members of the community through a participatory process of deliberation. In deliberation, the ordinary discourse of story telling—more precisely, the attempt to make sense of what is happening by assimilating it to familiar cultural paradigms—is focused by the exchange of reasons and justifications for one’s position. It also involves a concerted attempt to assess the significance of what is going on and, if deemed appropriate, to take some kind of collective action in response to the problem. Judgment and deliberation are activities of democratic citizenship par excellence. They build and exercise the moral and the civic imagination.

From I to We

Can the notion of individual human interests be salvaged in a post-fossil carbon age by redefining it? Can it come to be indentified with sustainable modes of living? Or will the post-fossil carbon age also be a post-liberal and post-individualistic age in which the concept of interests is not merely transformed and redefined but actually overridden and subordinated to a marginal place in our moral and political lives? It is overweening at present, to be sure, but for how much longer?

At least we can say this much. It is unrealistic to expect that the virtues of deliberation and an orientation toward the common good will be the natural starting point for most of the people who come to democratic community meetings and who keep coming and stay involved. By and large, the consumerist orientation is going to be very strong—if not dominant—at the grassroots level, at least at the outset. People will invest their time in such a process only if they feel that they will benefit from it and that it will serve their interest. This is particularly true of a minority community that may feel especially disenfranchised, marginalized, and alienated from the mainstream political system and civil society.

If the main challenge of authoritarian rule is exercising power without unsustainable coercion, the challenge facing the deliberative side of citizenship is how to create its spark—its dialogic civic virtue—in the first place, and how to develop and reinforce it over time? What are the kinds of institutional settings and structures that will lead a group of people naturally and normally out of the consumerist stance and into a mode of deliberation? Out of monologue and into dialogue? It is hard to get anyone to participate in much of anything these days; significant barriers of time, mistrust, and hopelessness must be overcome. But it is probably easier to motivate people when you are able reasonably to appeal to their interests than it is to promise them the very hard work of coming to think, see, and imagine in new ways. Yet, if I am correct in thinking that the future governance of an ecological political economy will need a sense of the common good and dialogic interaction, this is precisely what ecological literacy and ecological citizenship ask of us. Only thus can we manage the transition from the social contract of consumption to the social covenant of ecological citizenship successfully.

Notes

1. Actually existing democracy. The mainstream framework of democratic governance consists of interest group pluralism and representative democracy. Within this framework, democratic institutions are responsive to individual interests, concatenated or organized by the formation of various group structures that compete for the attention of popularly elected officials. Their competition in this regard consists both of the market place of ideas and the market place of campaign contributions, and other financial incentives for public officials. Modern societies
are too large and complex to be governed by direct participatory mechanisms; democracy consists essentially in the right to vote and free and fair competition among candidates and parties for the support of self-interested voters. This form of democratic theory, of course, bears a striking resemblance to the orientation of mainstream economic and market theory, and no wonder, because for at least fifty years there has been much cross-fertilization between the two fields, so much so that many now consider political science to be a sub-field of economics. One of the most famous works of political science in the last half-century was Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy.

2. The principal alternative to interest group liberal democracy is a mode of democratic governance generally known as deliberative democracy. It differs from interest group democracy in some fundamental respects. It challenges the primacy of a rather utilitarian and materialistic notion of interests as the basis of the psychological and moral dimension of a democratic polity. It also argues for both the feasibility and the normative justification of a more participatory form of democratic citizenship. Not passive electoral consumers, but active democratic trustees. However, it is not clear how deeply the theorists of deliberative democracy challenge some of the fundamental assumptions about individualism, autonomy, and the aggregative nature of social utility, the public interest, or the common good. Whether deliberative democracy is the appropriate governance model to correspond to ecological economics and to the new covenant of ecological trusteeship remains to be seen.

3. Traditionally conservation efforts have been viewed as a function of the state in keeping with its part of the social contract of consumption, both economic and aesthetic consumption. This top-down conception of conservation has recently been supplemented—if not supplanted—by a greater emphasis on working with affected communities to build their own conservation promoting and problem solving capacity. Living in a vital, well-functioning human community itself seems to have positive affects on the value people place on conserving the biotic community. I believe the reverse is also true. Hence the values of biodiversity conservation, more sustainable patterns of living, respect for rights, equity, social justice, and enhanced quality of life as an active participant in collective activities—these values are all intertwined. Meanwhile, the new challenges of biospheric ethics are beginning to generate a grassroots movement of its own, partly made up of activists and partly made up of those with various religious, political, and environmental concerns about the destructiveness of the social contract of consumption. This grassroots movement brings conservation into the domain of democratic political theory.

4. It must be said that while democracy respects and values all groups, not all groups value democracy. The ideals of equality, inclusiveness, and solidarity do not fit well with the traditional beliefs and practices of many religions and cultural groups. So initiatives to promote ecological citizenship, particularly those that are based on a deliberative procedure, may not be readily embraced. The reasons for this reluctance may be insightful and deep. They may go beyond the sheer complexity of the subject matter, and its seeming distance or irrelevance to the community. And they may go beyond historical mistrust and suspicion that some communities feel about something that is perceived to be brought in by outsiders. In addition, there may be a sense that the purpose of these meetings is not only to inform or empower the members of the community, but also to transform them morally and politically. This suspicion is not without foundation.

5. Reflections and conceptual analyses such as these strike some as quite far removed from the practical issues. I submit that they are not. Conceptual clarification and theoretical analysis can relate to work on the ground, so to speak, the various experiments in community involvement and grassroots participation that are being developed, often in a rather seat-of-the-pants fashion, as the projects go forward. Like the bourgeois gentilhomme in Molière’s play who did not know that he was speaking “prose,” there is often a telling connection between what community groups are doing and general values and strategies that many other democratic and civic groups and thinkers have attempted before. To discuss the concept underlying such a strategy or value, therefore, is to place the activity in a historical and cultural context; it is to tie present efforts to those of the past, and it is to point beyond present activities toward future possibilities. Civic conservation professionals can abet this insight by working closely with citizen deliberators and supporting them with forms of technical expert knowledge. Moreover, analysis and clarification of the conceptual framework implicit in various civic activities make it possible to draw connections between aspects of a problem that appear to be disparate and unconnected.

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