A democratic order does not inherently need to be mentally rooted in “the nation” as a pre-political community of shared destiny. The strength of the democratic constitutional state lies precisely in its ability to close the holes of social integration through the political participation of its citizens.

—Jürgen Habermas¹

The right to life, and to the free development of the living species still represented on the earth, is the only right that can be called inalienable—for the simple reason that the disappearance of any species leaves us with an irreparable void in the system of creation. The right of the environment... is the right of the environment in regard to man, and not the right of man in regard to the environment.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss²

What is between Gaia and demos? What connects the planet as an assembly of life and the democratic polity as an assembly for the good life of the people? They exist on vastly different scales certainly, but do they belong to different worlds, different orders of existence? If not, how should we speak about their common fate?

Regardless of how they are connected, Earth and democracy are undergoing a common assault. Something is disassembling the planet, overwhelming its resilience and forcing its systems over the edge into a cascading state transformation, a bio-geophysical coup d’état. Something is also undoing the demos in those very places and nations where achieving the sovereignty of the people in civic association and equal human rights seemed almost within reach. Aspirational democracy, so fleeting and fugitive historically, might be achieved. But now something is forcing that horizon to recede, bending the arc of history away from justice.

TURNING ANTHROPOCENTRISM INSIDE OUT

The more I read, the more it makes sense to me to see “neoliberalism” behind these natural and socio-cultural devolutions. By neoliberalism I mean a political economy being shaped into an institutional system of privatization and the emergence of a style of reasoning and valuing to rationalize that system. Influenced initially by thinkers as different as Austrian economist Friedrich A. Hayek (1899-1992) and American economist Milton Friedman (1912-2006), neoliberalism is based on an utter rejection of social planning, politically driven governmental regulation, and value-based redistributive programs—all programs that provide greater security and equality to individuals living in capitalist societies. Neoliberalism is opposed to security and redistribution. Security is complacency and equal distribution is theft.

Compared with other manifestations of capitalism with which it co-exists, neoliberalism promotes a more unrestrained, rapacious style of economic activity that is extractive (rent seeking and privatizing of previously public functions), monocultural (everything is monetizable and fungible), and excretory (externalizing risk and cost) in virtually all sectors, from agriculture to finance, from higher education to health care. It prescribes the shock “therapy” of social austerity for spendthrift countries like Chile, Greece, Spain, and Italy, while it burrows and spreads rhizomic tendrils into the way associational aims are defined, the way priorities are set and choices are framed, the way success is measured, and the way a person becomes the bearer of “human capital,” rather than rights and solidarities. The human becomes an ensemble of entrepreneurialism and investment, just like nature for so long has been considered raw material with value only for human use. Neoliberalism turns anthropocentrism inside out.

It is important to recognize that neoliberalism is futuristic rather than nostalgic; it doesn’t want to return to anything. It breaks with welfare state liberalism, to be sure, but not in the name of the laissez-faire capitalism and the night-watchman state of nineteenth century thought. Its main animus is the social contract of egalitarian liberalism and...
civic humanism that has informed the political philosophy of the long twentieth century.

Moreover, neoliberalism is unlike what has come before because it does not seek to tip the balance of power in the direction of private enterprise; it aims to eliminate the distinction between public norms and private interests altogether. Undermining the notion of public sovereignty over private enterprise opens the door to this economic regime, and the institutionalization of global and unregulated private competition locks in this way of thinking. Since the turn of the century, neoliberalism has achieved take off as a system with positive feedback loops between theory and practice, and that is a formidable thing. Once begun, it erodes public sovereignty by corrupting it and undermining its public legitimacy. Historian and political commentator Perry Anderson captures this process in his discussion of the political and financial scandals besetting many European countries during the past twenty years:

The pollution of power by money and fraud follows from the leaching of substance or involvement in democracy.... But corruption is not just a function of the decline of the political order. It is also, of course, a symptom of the economic regime that has taken hold of Europe since the 1980s. In a neoliberal universe, where markets are the gauge of value, money becomes, more straightforwardly than ever before, the measure of all things. If hospitals, schools and prisons can be privatised as enterprises for profit, why not political office too?3

Putting too much pressure on the boundaries of Earth systems leads to the disruption of ecological separations on smaller scales—niches and evolved specialized capabilities and functionings, spheres and boundaries allowing for diversity and symbiosis. Breaking down spheres of social diversity governed by different norms and relationships has a destructive political and ethical effect also. Anderson’s closing irony here serves to remind us of the good of boundaries between the public and the private spheres. Are there some things that money shouldn’t be allowed to buy? Neoliberalism answers no.4

Disassembling the planet disrupts the wonderful life of evolutionary worldmaking. Undoing the demos disrupts the just civic worldmaking that I believe is the best historical expression of human being and becoming. It erases the zoon politikon or homo politicus from our aspirational sense of self and the possibilities of real politics, real contestation, real self-discovery from our collective lives. At stake is the ancient and enduring democratic ideal, first articulated in Greek in the late sixth century BCE with the prefix iso- (equal): isonomia (equality under law), isegoria (equality of voice or speech), and isokratia (parity of power).5 It has taken centuries to achieve the inclusion that is dreamed of in the iso; to extend a political life of justice, deliberation, and power from the few to the many to the most to the almost all.

Disassembling the planet disrupts... evolutionary worldmaking. Undoing the demos disrupts... just civic worldmaking.

In the early 1980s, a significant enabler of the rise of neoliberalism, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, reflected on what she was trying to do in abandoning the balance between capitalism and democracy, which she thought amounted to collectivism: “the whole direction of politics in the last 30 years [has] always been towards the collectivist society. People have forgotten about the personal society.... I set out really to change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation.”6 On another occasion, she famously remarked that there is no such thing as “society” really, only collections of individuals.

The modest term “approach” hardly does justice to the significance of what she was talking about. Neoliberalism involves a large-scale change in the social imaginary—in the images, narratives, and figurations with which we form social aspirations and personal identities.7 In her recent study of neoliberalism and democracy, political theorist...
Wendy Brown captures the breadth and distinctiveness of the neoliberal aspiration:

Neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*.... Neoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense, a reality principle remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation..... Within neoliberal rationality, human capital is both our “is” and our “ought”—what we are said to be, what we should be, and what the rationality makes us into through its norms and construction of environments.... Human capital’s constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement, or reinventing itself in a new life, is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking.8

**NEOLIBERAL ANXIETY AT THE PENALTY KICK**

Neoliberalism undermines democratic sovereignty and the priority of public good over private interest, but it also oversees the historical transformation of capitalism itself from a national system of production and capital accumulation into a global system in which everything, natural, technological, and human alike, becomes embodied capital to be hired and rewarded according to its competitive contribution to a market impelled by the categorical imperative of growth.9

Neoliberalism has a direct and indirect relationship with climate change—and hence with the planet and the polis—that manifests in two ways, through its cultural fallout and its systemic impact. Here I am primarily concerned with its fallout—its acid rain that is turning democracy into a dead lake.

Neoliberalism’s substantive advocacy against environmental regulation is predicated on the dogma that market-driven competition and growth will self-correct and overcome natural limits if planners and ethically motivated advocates are not permitted to interfere. What provides this self-correcting ability is not what Adam Smith called the “invisible hand” of market competition, in which micro-decisions by narrowly self-interested individuals will produce a patterned outcome at the macro-level that will promote the common good. Neoliberalism does not reprise that idea. Instead, it is change as its own end, the constant momentum of growth and innovation, motivated not by the desire of individuals reaching for gain that may lie just ahead, but by the anxiety of individuals who are always on the brink of loss and do not know when or how the ax will fall. There is only making more with which to make more.

Since neoliberalism cannot countenance economics as a complex and open bioenergetic system, it eschews environmental regulation for ends that markets cannot sanction. In the meantime, it imposes shock economic policies and austerity on wayward nations that live beyond their means and falter in the new global economics of fungibility, mobility, and incessant insecurity. If the *homo politicus* of the democratic parliament cannot stop talking, the *homo oeconomicus* of neoliberalism dares not rest.10

But while neoliberal rationality produces public policy that undermines timely climate change mitigation, there is a deeper trend at work that we should try to fathom. The greatest danger that neoliberalism poses to effective and just climate action politics is in the effects of its discourse. Brown captures this chemistry as follows:

When there is only *homo oeconomicus*, and when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good. Here, the problem is not just that public goods are defunded and common ends are devalued by neoliberal reason, although this is so, but that citizenship itself loses its political valence and venue.... The norms and principles of neoliberal rationality do not dictate precise economic policy, but rather set out novel
ways of conceiving and relating state, society, economy and subject and also inaugurate a new “economization” of heretofore noneconomic spheres and endeavors.  

This discourse aims to undermine and displace the civic ideals of democratic politics and government, as well as the egalitarian liberal values of Keynesian macroeconomics. Together, these political moralities provided direction and rationale for the liberal capitalist welfare state, but they also helped to sustain the environmental values that support climate action. The weakening of these ideals and values is the indirect or background effect of neoliberalism on the disassembling of Gaia, and it is more powerful and far-reaching than any direct lobbying or public policy effect neoliberal interests are likely to achieve. Its goal is not to win a political argument but to recast the debate itself in economic terms that reflect an enterprise society and eclipse the solidarity and mutual aid of a civic association. The neoliberal imaginary enshrines an anti-civic or anti-political discourse, with its ways of talking, thinking, and acting in which the civic dimension of humanity becomes invisible, illegible—almost, if not quite yet, unthinkable.

THE DREAM OF ISO-

Climate action politics that is progressive and effective, just and transformative, does have a future. And the path to it, I believe, lies in tapping dimensions of political possibility in contemporary democratic societies in ways that will allow democratic will formation (the voice of the demos, isegoria) writ small on local and regional scales to kindle democratic will formation writ large in national and international governance. I now turn to two lines of thought that suggest dimensions of politics that could effectively counter the reframing of society and the self that neoliberalism promotes. These lines of thought thereby give the dream of the iso a new lease on life.

The first grows out of systemic approaches to mobilizing climate actions that bring together material interests, respect for legitimate norms, and ego-ideals. This takes as given the functional differentiation and institutional separation of social action systems in the modern period. Alert to the dangers and difficulty of breaking down barriers that modernity has built between the state, the economy, the civil society, and the family, this approach does not seek to recapture the holistic cultural ethos and worldview of traditional societies, an integrated world to which communitarian and ecological thinkers have often been drawn. Instead, this approach seeks to defend Earth and democracy through strengthening sociological pluralism and communicative dialogue amid diversity.

The second line of thought suggests a dynamic of political and moral psychology that potentially could reframe and redirect climate action politics through a renewed recognition and avowal of the blessings and duties of associational membership through the practice of democratic citizenship. A new complex of communicative action can form among and between the differentiated institutional systems in response to the challenges and opportunities that a new scientific awareness of Earth-system functioning has called to our attention. The emerging “complex of action” to which I refer is made up of the discourse of social movements and civic deliberative activities, as well as formal law, legislation, regulation, and economic decision making. At its substantive core are conceptions of relationality—associational coexistence, interdependence, capabilities of mutual flourishing, solidarity, and what I shall call “civic avowal.”

In sum, we must develop conceptual resources and capabilities that will enable human beings to think and act like members of a community of reciprocal recognition and mutual empowerment in their dealings with their own kind and other species. The growth of moral awareness that participation in the activism of social movements and the deliberations of citizenship—the precise opposite of what Anderson identified as the “pollution of power”—can set in motion will not only heal the environment, it will rescue the dream of iso and redo the demos.
Neoliberalism... is motivated... by the anxiety of individuals who are always on the brink of loss and do not know when or how the ax will fall. There is only making more with which to make more.

IN PLURALITY ASSEMBLED

In order to guide effective climate action, and to counteract neoliberal reason, a good starting point is to locate political thinking and the formation of democratic values in the context of the differentiated systems of social action in modern societies. Neoliberal reason promotes a monoculture of morality; Gaia and demos thrive in a moral plurality or assemblage, a network with multiple nodes of meaning and value.

As one example of this, consider Charles E. Lindblom, who built a theory of political economy around three mechanisms of social control, which he called the “authority system,” “the exchange system,” and “the persuasion system.” These systems are symbiotic; although a given society may stress one, in reality all three are always operative to some degree. As the terms imply, authority shapes behavior by coercion, exchange shapes behavior through the pursuit of self-interest, and persuasion shapes behavior by appeal to moral ideals and reasons.

The term “politics” might be thought of as activity confined within the authority system, but that is clearly a mistake. The authority system has mainly to do with bureaucratic public administration, a close analogue to corporate private economic administration. Politics pervades each of the three systems, and within each, it involves strategic manipulation and access to power, to be sure, but also open dispute and contestation over political legitimacy and access to accountable leadership. In a democracy, Lindblom’s persuasion system takes on a special political dimension not found in more closed authoritarian societies. Democratic politics is intertwined with, and ideally ultimately subordinate to, the public sphere of civic deliberation and the communicative validation of empirical knowledge and ethical norms.

A cross-cutting model that is useful in defining even more specifically the challenge posed by neoliberal reason is found in the work of the social philosopher Jürgen Habermas. He presents a theory of the intersection between social systems and the symbolically constituted “lifeworld” of culture and social interpretation. These can be viewed as institutional and practical spaces or architectures within which authority, exchange, and persuasion—together with the “politics” each contains—are enacted. There is an architecture of power and money in a structural system of governmental administration and capitalist economy. There is an architecture of justice and the common good within a cultural and legal system of normative argumentation and consensus formation. And there is an architecture of desire and reflective judgment in a lifeworld of relational association and self-identity formation.

Habermas is a pluralist, and he is especially concerned about the tendency of the state and the economy to impose their system rationalities (bureaucratic power and money) on the mentality or rationality of the cultural lifeworld. He calls this the “colonization” of the lifeworld, and it is essentially what Brown also sees at work in neoliberalism with the cultural dominance of _homo oeconomicus_. Neoliberalism betrays Gaia and hobbles demos. It will fail as a governing mentality for both the planet and the people so long as it remains blind to the synergy among pluralistic systems of social control and fatefuly strives to bring about hegemony by reinventing authority, exchange, and persuasion it its own image and on its own terms. Fortunately, such hegemony is exceedingly difficult to attain or to sustain within a polyvalent lifeworld so long as the institutions, practices, and forums of deliberative democratic discourse and citizenship continue to function.

Preserving the autonomy of the lifeworld may seem far removed from ecological problems like climate and the fate of Gaia, but it is not. The lifeworld (the cultural incubator of the norms and
values of civic association) is the home ground of *homo politicus*, the dream of the iso, and the normative space critically maintained and progressively improved by deliberative democratic citizens. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that the active, argumentative civic lifeworld *is* the demos—the people—without which concrete manifestations of rule (*kratia*) such as voting and competitive elections, the free flow of verified information, the impartial rule of law, and individual civil liberties would be in peril. Democracies can be disassembled and reassembled as tyrannies. They often are.

**WE ARE A WE**

On that sober note, I now turn to the prospect of redoing an undone democracy through the kind of citizenship that is a practice of recognition avowing the good of civic association. This form of citizenship may be exercised during elections and during deliberations within parliaments (places of talking), but it also emerges from activist social movements and from local participatory deliberation that affirm both impersonal rights and personal investments in place and heritage. The old adage is only half-right: all politics is not local; politics is a bridge between locale and world, polis and the cosmopolis.

*Gaia and demos thrive in a moral plurality or assemblage, a network with multiple nodes of meaning and value.*

Climate change is a global threat that requires political action, and climate action is a politics that requires the political reasoning and self-understanding of *homo politicus*, not the human capital of *homo oeconomicus*. If it is to have any traction and be sustainable—institutionalized rather than simply episodic and gestural—the new politics of climate action must have recourse to *values and purposes* ordinary people will understand if they think and act like interdependent and relational selves. We need to cultivate a citizenship that avows association and citizens who really do think and act in ways appropriate to the human condition of interdependence and relationality. How else can we ever garner the civic will to move climate action politics and policy in the right direction?

But citizenship avowal also needs a political venue, a place of demos practice and iso-dreaming. Here it seems to me that the politics of participatory and deliberative democracy, not a behind the scenes politics of scientific and technocratic elitism, holds the key. It alone can provide spaces and practices in which the human capability for relational being and civic doing will be stimulated and developed—not through the influences of defaults, habits, or inattention, but by attentive learning, consideration of evidence, and discovering reasons and implications of an action or decision. These spaces and practices are social movements and civic debate and consensus formation in the public spheres of civil society.

Political sociologists Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato come to a similar conclusion about the power of broadly participatory civic discourse:

> [As individuals we] affirm and in part constitute through discourse who we are, and under which rules we wish to live together, apart from our personal or particular identities and differences—that is, what our collective identity as members of the same civil society is... the discovery of generalizable interests in discussion... can show us that, after all, we do have something in common, that we are a we, and that we agree on or presuppose certain principles that constitute our collective identity. These [generalizable interests and principles] become dimensions of the content of legitimate legal norms and the foundation of social solidarity.... [Through the praxis of democratic citizenship we learn to] take reflective distance from our own perspective so as to entertain others,... recognize or create anew what we have in common, and come to see which dimensions of our traditions are worth preserving and which ought to be abandoned or changed.15
AVOWING CITIZENSHIP

The notion of practices of mutual recognition is important, and in the discussions of the ethics and politics of climate action we should talk more about it. Solidarity, one might say, is a recognition in practice of the moral standing of others as subjects and fellow members of communities of interdependence. Care is the practice of recognizing and paying attention to the need and vulnerability of others. In a similar way, citizenship might be understood as a practice of recognizing and avowing (publicly making a commitment to) the benefits and duties of associational membership with others who are interdependence beings. If solidarity is standing up for, and care is attending to, citizenship is facing up to.

Citizenship is not limited to governing or exercising collective authority. It is also civic associating and involves the praxis of making connections in a pluralistic and a panarchic society. It involves carving out common spaces for sharing commitments and mutual learning. More specifically, citizenship as civic associating is a dynamic, concerted, and transformational practice that both fosters and is sustained by a narrative of self-discovery for both individuals and communities. Through dialogic question and answer and deliberation, we build our capacity to appreciate the possibilities opened up by human symbiotic interdependence and to see accommodating natural limits as a form of freedom rather than restriction. Civic association helps make that possible.

There is a developmental dimension to civic association, as well. The experience and activity of dialogic and self-reflective deliberation have morally and politically positive developmental effects on individuals, enlarging their imaginative capacity for care and solidarity, allowing them to value diversity, and honing their appreciation for the behavioral and the institutional requirements that will bring about values and actions to sustain both Gaia and the demos.

One aspect of civic avowal is trusteeship on behalf of the well-being of the association as a whole and for how it exemplifies just recognition and relationship, among human beings and between humans and nature. When one sees immigrant families in internment camps and children separated from their parents on the southwestern border of the United States and says, this government action does not bespeak who we are or the people we aspire to be; or when one views the devastation of the Athabasca tar sands of Alberta and says, the wealth this pays is poison and brings shame upon our land; it is not partisanship speaking, but civic trusteeship.

The new politics of climate action must have recourse to values and purposes ordinary people will understand if they think and act like interdependent and relational selves.

Another aspect of civic avowal is civic learning. Through taking part in the trusteeship practices of civic avowal, citizens learn to interpret rights and obligations in new and more just ways and to institutionalize them more equally and effectively. Through citizenship individuals also learn to respect their neighbors, think about the common good, and understand why compromise is necessary. As Kathleen Dean Moore has rightly said: “Moral reasoning is a discourse in which people affirm what they think is true or good or right, and then they back up their claims with reasons.... It’s an invitation to a respectful dialogue in which both sides listen and might even change their minds. In civil discourse you test your beliefs against experience—your own and others’—and revise and improve them.”

Finally, an aspect of civic avowal is remembering, by which I mean not so much recall of what has happened in the past, but re-membering as sustaining associational ties and holding people together through the rhythms of conflict and reconciliation, fracture and unity, political self-assertion and humility.

The work of civic avowal is done within social networks, social movements, and the various
communicative public spheres where critical activism and deliberation take place. Neoliberalism ensconces itself into common sense and countering it will need the drive of both passion and righteous commitment. The social imaginary and common sense are the ground that is being lost and must be retaken.

One of the challenges of redoing the demos is to balance conflicts and tensions between movement advocacy and civic learning—debate and deliberation, contestation and consensus. Anderson astutely notices this when he says, “If it is to be effective, protest requires manoeuvre of the intelligence, along with intransigence of the will.”

Movements are often fueled by strong feelings and engaged voices; they need an answering chord of considered reasons and unifying voices that civic learning provides. Movements are often angry and adversarial when they confront those who use power to exclude, objectify, and hurt; yet they need a counterpoint of reconciliation, repair, and comity to provide healing in the aftermath of confrontation and conflict.

Adversarial advocacy and the civic learning that comes through dialogic conversation and deliberation are stronger together than apart. Debate alone is not always constructive; deliberation alone is not always able to hear more than one voice. Adversarial debate drives some away and closes minds; conciliatory deliberation can be too open minded, too porous. Frustrated debate is perhaps too quick to find compromise compromising; deliberation depends on a genuine desire to reach reasonable agreement, but it is vulnerable to infiltration by those who are insincere and would use it strategically for private ends. Courage is the virtue of movements; patience is that of deliberation.

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NOTES

10. “As human capital, the subject is at once in charge of itself, responsible for itself, yet an instrumentalizable and potentially dispensable element of the whole.” Brown, Undoing the Demos, 38.
11. Ibid., 39, 50.