GOVERNANCE IN A POST-GROWTH SOCIETY: AN INQUIRY INTO THE DEMOCRATIC PROSPECT

By BRUCE JENNINGS

Looking back on the environmental debates of the 1970s, I am struck by an overwhelming sense of opportunity missed then and precious time squandered since. Our political and moral efforts to come to grips with the limits to growth were feeble and inconclusive. And how rapidly in the aftermath of the OPEC oil embargo and falling rates of global corporate profits (which should have been seen as writing on the wall), the prevailing intellectual winds shifted and returned public attention back to the more familiar economic issues. In 1979 President Carter dared to speak some inconvenient truths (avant la lettre), and Ronald Reagan made him pay the price.\(^1\) Political courage and leadership in the United States never recovered. The normal agenda of the growth-oriented political economy of liberalism was reestablished with remarkable ease and virtually without any commentary on the implications that this extraordinary failure of political nerve was going to have for the future.

Arguably the most important debate of the late twentieth century was not so much decided as terminated, and a shift from egalitarian liberalism to market liberalism took place with remarkably little real opposition. Instead of rising to the occasion of this historic challenge posed by the limits to growth, liberal governance just shrugged its shoulders and quickly reverted to the conventional goal of “trickle-down” affluence through growth. Since the 1980s in virtually all developed countries and with the blessing of virtually all major political parties, governance concentrated on policies designed to foster high technology-oriented productivity and stimulate aggregate demand for products. Environmental regulations and protections were little more than side-constraints, acceptable so long as they did not interfere with profits or employment.

GOVERNANCE IN A TIME OF NEOLIBERALISM

During this period, little by little, Keynesian liberalism has morphed into neoliberalism and free market orthodoxy. Today, not only environmental policy but even the protection and management of the post–World War II welfare state seem to be a lost cause. Income has been stagnant in real terms for the majority of the work force in the developed world, while the ecologically harmful volume and pace of economic activity has increased tremendously.\(^2\) Inequality in the domestic distribution of wealth and income have reached levels in many countries not seen since the heyday of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Social mobility is growing more rigid; in much of the developed world, including the United States, the single best predictor of a young person’s lifetime income prospects is the income of his or her father.\(^3\) Only a few countries, the most egalitarian ones, have not yet succumbed to that trend. If one wants to live what is called by my compatriots “the American Dream,” one needs to move to Denmark.

In addition, new developments have arisen to complicate governance enormously, such as the global mobility of capital and investment that undermines the relative power of the nation state as a meaningful policy maker and as a locus of economic leverage. Meanwhile, regional and global ecological problems have gotten much worse than they were in the 1970s—
climate change, biodiversity loss, fresh water shortages, damage to the ocean ecosystems. Hence, the continuing viability of the liberal tradition—a proud and hard-won intellectual orientation promoting liberty, equality, and human rights for three hundred years beginning in the seventeenth century—is in serious question. Can we be sanguine about the possibility of genuinely coping with limits to growth while still remaining committed to these basic values, institutions, and practices?

Two points, however, do seem reasonably certain. First, while we do not know what form the transition to a new structure of governance will take, that transition will be necessary and inevitable. Consider the issue of climate change and the attempt to limit greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. As we witness the current struggles by global democracies to respond to the pronouncements of scientists and to set meaningful limits to unsustainable economic forces and interests, these governments reveal indecision so deep seated that it amounts to a paralysis of political and moral will. The timetable of the challenges facing us and the timetable of our collective capacity to respond are tragically out of joint.

The second clear starting point is that whatever type and form of governance emerges, it will require normative legitimation to be sustained. Beginning in the 1970s, a number of social theorists began to maintain that ecological constraints will create a legitimation crisis for liberal democracy and that either a nondemocratic authoritarian state or at least a democratic regime with new nondemocratic power centers will emerge from that crisis. A future authoritarianism does not necessarily entail a military dictatorship or police state. Coercion alone, even if ethically justified, cannot sustain behavioral compliance across a large population and govern complex networks of economic activity under modern social conditions for a sustained period of time. Popular commitment and voluntary consent, not coercion, are the key to modern governance, certainly on the national level, let alone on larger scales than that. Hence whatever effective form of governance emerges in a future degrowth society, a new form of social contract will be needed as its foundation: a transformation within the political culture that will produce voluntary consent to the new forms of governance and to new reach of political authority.

Such commitment is brought about in one of two ways: by purchase or by persuasion: by deploying financial incentives and self-interested motivations, or by manipulating ideas, ideals, and arguments. If the growth of material consumption and affluence will not be the currency with which to buy the necessary commitment and compliance, then what form of persuasion can secure them?

A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT?

What would a social contract for a degrowth society be comprised of? For one thing, it would be based on the recognition that advanced industrial societies had finally encountered the natural limits to their expansion, and that henceforth they would have to make sweeping technological, political, and social adjustments in order to bring economic activity in line with the fragile and finite carrying capacity of the planet.

In addition, it would have to be based on new conceptions of justice because, without the continuing promise of an ever-growing pie to hold them in abeyance, claims for substantive redistribution from the most to the least well-off will inevitably arise, calling for potentially disruptive allocation decisions and, therefore, new principles of distributive justice to legitimize them.

Finally, it will have to involve an ongoing type of political education and cultural value transformation away from a political culture marked by unrealistic expectations and political demands about future prosperity and a growing consumerist orientation. Only thus can the preoccupation of future governance turn to something other than the successful management...
of material economic growth without losing normative legitimacy and social-political stability.

Commitment, especially in times of crisis or upheaval, may begin in fear, but ultimately commitment rests on contentment, and that is at bottom a question of identity, meaning, and cultural worldview. The new degrowth social contract must provide the transitional generation of citizens with a way to respond positively to the foreclosing of an unsustainable growth future they have been taught to expect. And it must teach future generations different lessons and nurture different kinds of expectations.

On the policy side, a new social contract for degrowth governance will need to navigate conflicting social and economic interests and blocking coalitions on many fronts. This is not a requirement peculiar to democratic governance, for an authoritarian regime will have its civil society to contend with also. There will be internal bargaining and positional politics in the bureaucracy of an authoritarian regime, and authoritarian bureaucracies are as adept as any electoral parliaments at generating blocking coalitions and “friction” to the point of slow-motion action and endlessly deferred outcome.

So democratic or not, the challenges of the new governance will be formidable. For example, in economic policy, pricing mechanisms will have to be restructured to reflect the true ecological costs on many fronts: the true cost of extracting scarce and non-replenishing raw materials; the costs of preserving the capacity of ecosystems to contribute value through naturally occurring processes; and the costs of mitigating the damage done to both biotic and human communities by the waste products of anthropogenic economic activity. Governance will not be conceptualized, as it is today in the ideological viewpoint of neoliberalism, as separate and distinct from the market. Working symbiotically, governmental regulation and market incentives must channel public and private investment into new, more efficient technologies and production processes, alternative energy sources, and the like.

Moreover, the key to success in this new realm of policy and governance is to find some way to deal with the fact that, even in a degrowth society, any government’s fiscal wherewithal (its ability to generate tax revenue) and its political stability will depend on a private sector which generates profits and provides employment income for the vast majority of the population. (Even in the welfare states of the aging advanced societies, where the ratio of the employed to the non-employed will be quite unfavorable later in the twenty-first century, social support is dependent on revenues generated by investment in private sector securities markets.) The question is this: what are the right forms of generating private capital and public revenue that will support the state and the non-profit sector without ecologically unacceptable modes of economic activity? The answer seems to lie in what some economists call “decoupling,” a situation in which productivity, which supports profit and the revenue upon which the state depends, increases but does so without concomitant increases in extractive and excretory activity that is ecologically out of bounds.

A parallel question concerns the relationship between the private and the public sector in degrowth governance. Starting from our current institutional formation of state and market, can we evolve into something more closely resembling the classical notions of polity and household (polis and oikos)? Many tend to think of the market as an autonomously operating, impersonal “system” or structure that needs no intentional agency of governance and no deliberately governing subjects. That is a fiction of conceptual and mathematical modeling and libertarian rhetoric. (In actually existing capitalism, there is very significant and deliberate governance exercised in both the public and the private or corporate sectors.) Be that as it may, the issue at the moment involves what does look like a systemic or structural aspect of historical capitalism, namely, its cyclical pattern of expansion and recession, boom and bust.

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF CAPITALISM?

The concept of degrowth seems to require, if not the abandonment of capitalism, then at least a transformation of capitalism so as to escape that cycle into something more closely resembling a steady-state system that fluctuates only within planetary boundaries and ecosystemic tolerances over time. Hence the dialectical relationship between impersonal system and intentional agency—structure and subject—will be central to political theory, constitutional formation, and law in the decades ahead. This poses yet anoth-
er intellectual challenge for us since we are not very well equipped to theorize that relationship adequately. Aside from Marx, few in classical political economics devoted careful attention to it, and in the modern transition to marginalism in the work of Jevons, Marshall, and Pigou economic theorizing moved away from this set of questions decisively. Today, however, we face the prospect that a new transnational structure of political economy accommodating limits and operating on something like closed-system, steady-state mechanisms will have to be brought about at least partially through deliberate agency and political decisions. The alternative is to see a steady-state system as emerging spontaneously as an evolutionary stage or an outcome of the logical systemic dynamic of capitalism, which seems to have been John Stuart Mill’s progressive hope. But Mill, like nineteenth century liberal thought generally, tended to conflate the systemic logic of historical process with the moral agency of individuals, thereby rendering the problem of the relationship between them conceptually opaque. Future governance and policy in a degrowth society may be able to float on the underlying dynamics of a steady-state economic system once it is institutionalized, but the transition from the system dominated by the logic of growth and the steady-state logic will have to be forged through political action and normative will.

One final point. If it is useful to differentiate between a transitional period from current to new, on the one hand, and a post-transitional period, on the other when theorizing historical change, it is also useful when discussing governance options. This is not to say that the eventual post-transition society is going to be static or outside of history. It is merely that the institutional formation of governance necessary in the transitional period and the governance formation of the post-growth political economy need not be the same. Both may be democratic, or neither may be. And the scenario of a relatively more authoritarian, less democratic transition that leads to—and gives way to—a more democratic governance eventually is also a possible and a plausible story to consider. It is attractive for democrats currently in despair, for it has a desirable long-term prognosis. But this two-step scenario—sacrifice important political values temporarily out of necessity, only to realize them more authentically and fully than ever before later—can be seductive and is not without problems and blind spots, as we shall see.

What then are the prospects for democratic governance in a degrowth society? Answering such a question adequately is of course out of the question in a few pages, but in what follows I aim to assist what must be an ongoing reflection by laying out a kind of road map or anatomy of degrowth governance. This anatomy consists of three heuristic types of governance orientation, which I shall refer to as ecological authoritarianism, ecological discursive democracy, and ecological constitutionalism. Although the work of many theorists could be mentioned, I take as representative theorists of these three orientations William Ophuls, John A. Dryzek, and Klaus Bosselmann and J. Ronald Engel, respectively. I give each of these types of governance the epithet “ecological” because I am interested only in theories of governance that take the reality of ecological limits to growth as their starting point and adopt what might be thought of as an ecocentric normative and epistemological stance (as opposed to an anthropocentric one).

This stipulation obviously puts brackets around many of the types of governance studied by mainstream political theorists and political scientists. Discursive democracy is not usually taken to be a practical form of democracy at all. But I think we must take it seriously as an option for a degrowth society. Its democratic rival, variously called liberal democracy, interest group democracy, or pluralistic representative democracy, is considered to be the only viable form of democracy in the modern world. It is certainly the most widespread form of democratic governance in operation, but it does not have, in my view, an ecological variant as such and therefore will not figure in my schema of types of degrowth governance. For reasons alluded to above and discussed in more detail in a moment, interest group democracy is not succeeding and is structurally incapable of presiding over the transition from a growth to a degrowth political economy. Within the authoritarian and constitutional types, we must single out an ecologically oriented variant as well, since pro-growth technocratic variants of these formations certainly do exist and even predominate in the world today. Technocratic elitism is not the kind of authoritarianism—
and a growth-oriented technocratic corporatism is not the kind of constitutionalism—envisioned here. They are not part of the degrowth solution; they are part of the problem.

Before turning to the three types of ecological governance, consider further the contrasting benchmark of pluralistic interest group democracy. All of the ecological types of governance I identify have one thing in common, namely, their critique and rejection of interest group democracy. Interest group democracy is concerned with aggregation and accommodation of interests among individuals and groups in societies where religious differences, ideological diversity, social competition, and conflict are widespread. This is the political system of the Western world, certainly in the bicameral presidential system of the United States, but also in parliamentary systems, systems with proportional legislative representation rather than single-member districts, and so on. Pluralistic democracy is 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. Unlike discursive democracy, in which the citizen role is actively and extensively participatory at multiple levels, in pluralistic democracy citizenship consists essentially in the right to vote, with a relatively small number becoming directly involved financially or personally in the process of electoral competition. Candidates and parties vie there for the support of self-interested voters, which is increasingly determined by media advertisements and exposure.

Interest group democracy is a kind of negative system of governance. It is set up to form compromise among conflicting interests in that no one group bears the cost of policy. This makes a win-win type of growth scenario very attractive and deters policy makers from setting clear priorities, making trade-offs, especially sharp ones that have been called “tragic choices,” such as rationing and redistributing resources (wealth and power) explicitly. It has multiple veto points in its governing process that ensure these features. It is prone to incrementalism and bias in favor of preserving the status quo.

Against this backdrop, I now turn to the three modes of governance that I think are reasonable options for a degrowth transition and eventual steady state.

**VARIETIES OF ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE**

**Ecological authoritarianism.** Ecological authoritarians maintain that the successful governance in a degrowth era will require centralized, elitist, and technocratic management at least in the areas of economic and environmental policy. Mindful of the internal contradictions plural democratic governance faces as it attempts to cope with problems of productivity, capital accumulation, and growth, ecological authoritarians stress the need for policy makers and planners to be insulated from democratic pressures and granted an increasing measure of autocratic authority if they are to steer the economy on an ecologically rational and efficient course. Ecological authoritarians are impressed, perhaps overly so, by the popular demand in pluralistic democratic systems for democratic rights and material affluence. They speak of democratic overload in reference to those pressures and demands: democratic overload of policy makers leads to economic overload or overshoot of the carrying capacity of ecosystems. The former has to be broken free from in order to prevent the latter.

Indeed, ecological authoritarians see a vicious cycle, a destructive feedback loop in this. As pluralistic democracies succeed in their aim to increase economic prosperity for the population, the democratic assertiveness of citizens for more growth and prosperity also increases. As the economic management of ever-higher levels of affluence becomes more complex, the tension between democratic politics and “scientific” planning comes to a crisis point.

The ecological authoritarians here make an important point. The fact that pluralistic democracy has demonstrated its inability to perform ecologically precautionary governance in a consistent or timely way is not fortuitous; it is built into the deep structure and political logic of this type of system as such. If pluralistic democratic governments follow the dictates of ecological science and planning, they will restrict growth in ways that risk losing their popular base of support. If, conversely, such governments attempt to maintain...
their legitimacy by bowing to short-term democratic pressures, they will not be able to take (and require the private sector to take) the steps necessary to protect the environment. Eventually economic downturn, inequality, and hardship will result from ecological degradation, and again the governments will lose their popular support and legitimacy. Note, however, that the political costs of the first prong of this dilemma are more immediate than those from the second prong, so pragmatism in a pluralistic democracy counsels the first course of action. Such pragmatism is ecologically insane.

The work of William Ophuls, one of the early political theorists to focus on ecological issues and the limits to growth in a serious and sustained way, is still significant in this regard. In his devastating critique of American environmental policy, Ophuls lays out the logical contradiction of plural democracy and interest group liberalism in detail. Ophuls is not an ideological authoritarian as a matter of political philosophy or principle. He is driven to it by an embrace of what Hans Jonas later called “the imperative of responsibility,” and by the force of both eco- and political-systems logic. Alluringly, Ophuls holds out the possibility of a highly decentralized, communitarian society for the distant future, one in which individuals would enjoy what he calls “micro-freedoms” within a framework of “macro-constraints.” However, during the transition era, and even in the eventual steady-state era, he is quite clear about who will decide what these “macro-constraints” will be and who will impose them: “The ecologically complex steady-state society may . . . require, if not a class of ecological guardians, then at least a class of ecological mandarins who possess the esoteric knowledge needed to run it well.”

Ecological discursive democracy differs from interest group democracy in fundamental respects. It challenges the primacy of a materialistic and consumptive notion of interests as the basis of the psychological and moral dimension of a democratic polity. It also argues for both the feasibility of—and the normative justification of—direct participation and direct engagement in governance issues, at least in the fundamental value choices and priorities, if not in all the technical details of regulation and enforcement. Its conception is that democratic citizens should act, not as passive electoral consumers, but as dialogic partners in an attempt to discern the common good and the responsibility of the democratic community for the integrity of the biotic community of which it is a part.

Ecological discursive democracy is committed to the strategy of creating counter-publics in order to bring about change and to challenge the hegemony of mainstream culture and politics. In a transition, it will exist side by side with interest group democracy, and eventually could very well coexist with ecological constitutional democracy. Discursive democracy shares strategy and tactics with mainstream politics and mixes in real-world political activism and large-scale protest movements. It does not have to rely on direct action or small-scale participatory decision making alone; it can work with layered systems of representation from local to national and even to global scales. It can find expression not only in electoral mechanisms but in the work of civil society and non-governmental organizations as well. Ecological discursive democracy does not have to supplant mainstream politics, it just needs to set cultural and social forces in motion that will alter perceptions and change the parameters of what is considered realistic in elite policy circles.

Ecological constitutionalism. This type of governance involves building new ecologically oriented norms and values into the basic structure or constitution of a mode of governance. Ecological constitutionalism may continue to resemble the representative form of interest group democracy, perhaps with a rather more robust deliberative and participatory element at the local levels and in the periodic electoral process. The institutional structure of ecological constitutionalist governance would involve the creation of several elite governing entities that can check and balance the more representative institutions such as the presidency or legislature. These elite entities would be insulated in various constitutionally sanctioned ways from the pressures of interest groups that do not ben-
eft in the short term from policies and decisions consonant with the limits of growth and the protection of ecosystem resilience.

The most prominent example of such a democratically insulated governance structure is the judiciary. Environmental courts are being created and given substantial governance authority in various parts of the world today. Another example is the creation of relatively autonomous regulatory agencies and commissions that have the legal authority to determine policy in some areas independently of the executive or legislative branch. Another important example is an independent and scientifically based professional civil service, selected in accordance with a meritocratic system and protected from politically motivated interference or dismissal. I think some of the best examples of what I have in mind by ecological constitutionalism exist at the international level and in the domain of environmental “soft law,” such as the Earth Charter process and movement.

Constitutional and institutional inventions such as these are the historical legacy of past times in which the operations of free markets or interest group democratic politics was seen to be detrimental to the public interest, and a more professional and expert type of elitism was turned to for a powerful role in governance. But the spirit of ecological constitutionalism is not deference to expertise or meritorious authority per se. At bottom it rests on a normative and psychologically powerful commitment to the rule of law and the exercise of power that is governed by norms of judicial interpretation or scientific verification. These norms are still in need of interpretation, but they are generally clearer and more settled than the ideological values and self-regarding interests that hold sway in the interest group competitive political system. Like ecological discursive democracy, ecological constitutionalism looks to a form of governance based ultimately on persuasion, consensus, and decisions that are viewed as legitimate by the governed. Ecological authoritarianism rests more straightforwardly on respect for authority, trust, prudence, and, sometimes, fear of penalty for failure to obey. If discursive democracy places its hopes on the communication process of fair, impartial, and respectful give-and-take of ideas, ideals, and reasons, ecological constitutionalism relies on the cultural formation of an animating worldview and sense of attachment to place.

Ultimately ecological constitutionalism relies on a transformative process of moral and political imagination at the pre-political cultural level that ecological discursive democracy hopes to achieve through democratic political life itself. That is a transformation of our “soul” as a political community, turning us from being a people of competitive consumption into a people of sustainable ecological responsibility.

DILEMMAS OF ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE

I have attempted to sketch these three modes of governance in a way that brings out their respective strengths and insight. I turn now to some critical reflections on their characteristic problems and weaknesses.

Ecological authoritarians are exceedingly pessimistic about the current state of ordinary moral sensibility and political judgment in Western society. They rest their assessment and theory of governance on a belief in the widespread cultural dominance of excessive individualism and materialism, and seem to think that consumerism has thoroughly triumphed over every competing cultural or ethical value system. As an account of the logical tendencies at work in a particular form of economic system and society, this argument has validity, but not as a complete empirical description of currently existing culture and politics. It underestimates the remaining moral capital in a growth-oriented society that can be channeled in future degrowth directions, thereby making a different form of democracy compatible with ecological requirements. Many still quite powerfully held values compete with individualism and materialism in the attitudes and motivations of contemporary citizens. Furthermore, it is far from clear that massive numbers of people will withdraw their allegiance from democratic governments even if they fail to produce high levels of economic prosperity. Indeed, it is not at all clear that a democratic system would not be able to survive even a period of considerable austerity, if the need for such measures were clear and if the burdens and hardships were shared in a truly just and equitable way. These are large ifs. The relationship between economics and political legitimation is complex.

As a matter of intellectual history, this equating...
of all forms of democracy with materialism and a narrowly self-interested individualism is overly selective. Even in the modern period, democratic governance has rested on more than simply the ideology of growth and expansive capitalism. While possessive individualism has certainly been one important strand within Western democratic societies, it has not been the only strand, and it has not gone unchallenged from within democratic thought itself. Thus it is misleading to argue that democratic governance cannot honestly appeal to any sense of public purpose larger than throwaway consumption. Believing that democratic governments could neither call for nor obtain popular support except on the basis of a promise of more economic growth, ecological authoritarianism turns to nondemocratic governance out of a sense of despair. But, so far at least, neither the sociological nor their historical arguments of this theory are sufficient to warrant that conclusion.

The dilemmas of discursive democracy are rather different. It is designed to thrive on pluralism of belief and difference of opinion. But it must inculcate at least a minimal set of value commitments to the procedures of debate and deliberation. Realism, reason, and integrity preserving compromise are its creed. Toleration and diversity are its lifeblood. Discursive democratic governance has been shown to function well on a medium to small scale, in population units of 100,000 or less, and when its political relationships are closely embedded in nonpolitical social or civic relationships within the community. Under these conditions, it is alert to natural, social, and historical place. It can be attentive to ecological resiliency and social justice at the same time.

On the other hand, discursive democracy is extremely vulnerable to forces that disrupt the fabric of communities, are socially divisive, undermine trust, and drive people to close ranks into postures of defensive resentment. The global and domestic economic dislocations of the past twenty years, the sharply rising inequality in the distribution of wealth and income, the churning of the job market, and the marginalization of those without marketable skills are some of the many factors that tatter civic society, privatize self-consciousness, and undermine the possibility of the kind of citizenship that discursive democracy in its proper form and function requires. Are these factors temporary aberrations? Or perhaps they are becoming the normal institutionalized patterns of global capitalism. If they are, then we have a perfect democratic storm: humanity is exceeding the safe operating margins of planetary systems at precisely the historical moment when the political economy of the world makes it least likely that democratic governance, especially discursive democratic governance, will be able to respond.

I turn finally to problems with ecological constitutionalism. It is a form of democracy that strives to bring into being and to express deep cultural and ethical commitments. It offers not just a new direction of governance but a new form of life, a new understanding of human well-being, and a new story concerning nature, its laws, and its meanings. If this is a vision that leaders actually try to instill in the masses of people and if they can do so, then democratic change can bubble up from below without ecological danger, and in any case there are constitutional checks on ill-advised democratic decisions to fall back on if need be. And this deep cultural foundation of worldview and values will support this from its patriotic allegiance to the norms enshrined in the ecological constitution (some version of the Earth Charter) itself.

If this cultural transformation of hearts and minds does not proceed well, however, leaders will be tempted to assume interpretative and expressive authority for themselves. They will become the guardians of the truths and values of the worldview and the agents of its enactment in the world. Democratic citizenship will become an unnecessary step in the process. The temptation to become a transformational leader/prophet in this more authoritarian sense is particularly strong when circumstances make one pessimistic about the willingness or the capacity of the masses to internalize new values and support change. Ecological constitutionalism may be theoretically (if not sociologically and historically) unstable. If it works, then so can a spreading kind of ecological discursive participation. If it falters, it can slip into ecological authoritarianism. It is prone to centrifugal forces to both its left and its right.

TOWARD A DEMOCRACY AS YET UNTRIED

How should we assess the relative merits of these distinct approaches to future governance? How does each orientation comport with the idea of a degrowth society? My own goal and broader project is to find a form of democratic governance in a sustainable, degrowth world that remains liberal in its respect for human rights and the rule of law, but is more deliberative and civic in its orientation than interest group liberal-
ism has been. In order to achieve this, ongoing work is needed to develop key concepts and principles for a new political theory and public philosophy, concepts with which to establish a social covenant of ecological governance and trusteeship.

The purpose of such a political theory is multifaceted: to move us toward the ecological self rather than the extractive self and toward individuality rather than individualism—a new form of identity; to move us toward relational liberty rather than possessive negative liberty—a new form of freedom; to move toward deliberation as distinct from bargaining—a new form of governance; toward dialogic judgment as distinct from monologic assessment of interests—a new form of reason; and toward practicing trusteeship instead of practicing consumerism—a new form of living.

At the moment I conclude that the form of governance best suited to a degrowth society will be one that is democratic and discursive in its substance but not necessarily completely direct or representational in an electoral sense in all of its institutional forms. This takes from ecological discursive democracy the key idea that reasoning and the orientation of individual citizens and public officials must be toward an attempt to discern the common good. Doing so ultimately rests on their capacity to see the connection between the common good and their individual good. Because the social and cultural forces blinding one to that connection are too numerous and powerful, some measure of insulated power by carefully selected officials will be necessary, faute de mieux. This departs from the activity of popular rule, but it does not depart from the requirement of deliberation, which actually cuts across popular and elite functions in a system of governance. In this way, ecological discursive democracy can be linked to ecological constitutionalism. There is more, then, to constitutionalism than deontological rights and rules that are prior to a calculus of utility and that protect individuals and minorities from the control and coercion of popular majorities. Ecological constitutionalism must also be discursive, and within its tenets (again the Earth Charter provisions provide an instructive example) must be provisions to empower and promote the social conditions and capabilities necessary to make active participation and citizenship possible and meaningful to all.

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NOTES
2 G. Speth, The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
4 I am assuming here, perhaps prematurely, that history has passed its negative judgment on the experiment of state socialism and complete public ownership and control of the entire economy.
12 Ibid., 163.
14 It is more common to refer to “deliberative democracy” in this kind of discussion. I don’t think that deliberative and discursive have quite the same meaning, although they are often used as synonyms. In choosing to develop discursive democracy here I follow the work of John Dryzek, who argues that discursive democracy denotes a political practice that is “…pluralistic in embracing the necessity to communicate across difference without erasing difference, reflexive in its questioning orientation to established traditions…” and “…transnational in its capacity to extend across state boundaries into settings where there is no constitutional framework, ecological in terms of openness to communication with non-human nature, and dynamic in its openness to ever-changing constraints upon and opportunities for democratization.” (J. Dryzek, Deliberative Democracy and Beyond, 3.)
19 An analogue of ecological constitutionalism can be found in Jürgen Habermas’s notion of “constitutional patriotism,” a concept he developed in the context of post-Nazi Germany to side-step the dangerous kind of nationalist loyalty that had proved so disastrous in the past, without abandoning the necessary motivational commitments that any form of
governance needs because it cannot rely for solidarity or obedience on purely impersonal, transcendental moral arguments alone. In addition, unlike the nation state, the notion of a constitution or a governance structure embodying certain substantive and procedural norms and rights can lend itself to both more micro-governance at local or ecosystemic levels and to macro-governance at the international level, such as the European Union. See J. Habermas, The Post National Constellation (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) and The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). See also J-W. Müller, Constitutional Patriotism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
