The conflict...is within our own institutions and attitudes. It can be won only by extending the application of democratic methods, methods of consultation, persuasion, negotiation, communication, cooperative intelligence, in the task of making our own politics...an evolving manifestation of democratic ideas...We have no right to appeal to time to justify complacency about the ultimate result.

—John Dewey

Amid an outpouring of praise for President George H.W. Bush following his recent death, many quotations from his speeches and writings were highlighted, indicating his support for justice and a humanitarian orientation. Unfortunately, however, little was said about his position on climate change. For instance, in a campaign speech on August 31, 1988 Bush said: "Those who think we are powerless to do anything about the ‘greenhouse effect’ are forgetting about the ‘White House Effect’... The agenda will be clear: We will talk about global warming.”

Archival records from the Reagan and Bush, Sr. years document a clear awareness of the scientific findings and the need for action to curb greenhouse gas emissions. The seeds of uncertainty and denial planted in the American psyche for the past forty years concerning climate change were placed there with knowingly deceptive intent and disdain for the common good. This has been, in Alex Steffen’s apt term, “predatory delay” in order to generate profits, seemingly for as long as possible, from unsustainable and unjust systems.

As his presidency unfolded, Bush did not use the White House effect—the power and influence of the executive branch of the federal government—to full effect. Too bad, because 1988 could have been a pivotal moment to gain the upper hand on the greenhouse effect. Instead, he and presidents following him, at least until late in President Obama’s tenure, failed to deliver on the promise of the White House effect—and therein failed the land and people of America, and the world—in three principal ways:

First, successive White Houses did not use legal and regulatory authority to curb carbon emissions and biodiversity loss. Second, White Houses did not use the financial heft of the U.S. government to lead private investment and technological innovation toward a sustainable and renewable energy system. Finally—and I think no less importantly—our leadership and political system have monumentally failed to use the bully pulpit of the presidency to promote civic learning on the issue of how to live well within the tolerances and the safe operating margins of planet Earth.

An awareness is spreading that we face a clear and present danger as a result of the legacy of these failures of the White House effect, and that we are running out of time if we are to avoid or palliate the effects of global temperature levels toward which we are now racing headlong. The foreseeable (soon to be inevitable) changes will, in the words of climate scientist Radley Horton, be “transformative for all areas of human endeavor.” That about covers it. By the way, when he speaks of “transformation” here, Horton does not mean change for the better.

At the moment it seems laughable or perverse to mention the White House and civic learning in the same breath. Yet, more than other branches of government, the executive has the potential to build and nurture a public sphere of reasoned debate and civic dialogue within which compromise, consensus, and common ground can be found in a pluralistic society—as distinct from a broken and divided one—and upon which a viable democracy depends. Conversely, if the political system of legislation, adjudication, and execution is failing on climate change, on such a fundamental level of natural and human well-being, then it is up to democratic and communicative power, emanating from an active civil society and an aroused public sphere of moral discourse, to reshape law, public policy, and governance. As
Dewey noted in the late 1930s, facing the rise of fascism, America’s challenge is within our own institutions and attitudes. And so too it is today, facing climate change. If the greenhouse effect is shrinking the space necessary for abundant, resilient life, and when the White House effect is counter-productive as it is currently being used, then perhaps it is ecological democratic citizenship from the periphery of the polity to which we must turn. When governance fails democracy, democracy must begin to govern and to expand the space of civic learning, moral imagination, and transformational climate action.

BACKSLIDING INTO THE FUTURE

In Hamlet Shakespeare wrote, “When sorrows come, they come not single spies/ But in battalions” (Act IV, Sc. V). Indecisive Hamlets have been at the helm of most nations for too long. Climate action warnings describing present sorrows and foreseeing future ones are now coming in battalions, that’s for sure. At the climate meetings in Paris in 2015, most world leaders belatedly began to heed the scientific warnings. As yet, however, no country is really on course to meet the targets that were set. Some world leaders, like President Trump and Scott Morrison of Australia, have given up trying, while others, like Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, are on the verge of that particular kind of civic nervous breakdown as well. A few are actively striving to make things worse. Last December, in Katowice, Poland, as the nations of the world met again, for the twenty-fourth time, to hammer out rules and procedures for implementing the Paris pledges, some world leaders turned a deaf ear to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warnings, thereby fostering uncertainty that left other politicians and diplomats hedging their bets. In short, the political leadership of the countries with the biggest carbon footprints in the world are backsliding, as my protestant grandfather used to call it. When he said that, he meant something of profound significance and concern was happening. It is.

As 2018 drew to a close, three sobering new reports were released. They comprise thousands of pages prepared by hundreds of governmental and academic scientists from all over the world. First, there is a Global Warming Special Report from the IPCC, written by ninety-one scientists from forty countries. In his review of it, Bill McKibben remarks that the latest IPCC report makes us weep, “not just for our future but for our present.” Then there is the second volume of the Fourth National Climate Assessment from the U.S. Global Climate Research Program (USGCRP), put together with the participation of experts from thirteen federal agencies. And finally, there is the Global Climate Budget Report 2018 from the Global Climate Project, a group of one hundred scientists representing fifty different academic and research institutions around the world.

These reports document surging greenhouse gas emissions and forecast ecological and social disruptions that will be more severe and will arrive sooner than previously estimated. The American climate assessment in particular stresses the dire effects on the national economy unless we decelerate carbon emissions now. Many trillions of dollars in future climate adaptation expenditures could be saved by an investment of many billions (or maybe a few trillion) now. But the investors today will not be the ones who will experience the full benefits tomorrow. We are stymied as we stew. As the comfortably inhabitable area of the world shrinks, something must happen to expand our horizons of what is reasonable and right. We need to lift our eyes up from the oil beneath our feet to a different plane of possibility. We need a true accounting of the value of life and the livelihoods that can be saved by investing in mitigation now rather than paying adaptation and disaster response costs later.

The guidance given by reasonable economics is becoming clear; it is the misdirection given by unreasonable politics that confounds our political will and makes our moral compass spin. What is unreasonable politics precisely? It is driven by short-sighted greed and the arrogance of power among many leaders. It is promoted by the outsized political influence of those with a vested interest in blocking sustainable energy system change—particularly those in fossil
carbon–producing industries. It is politics of an aberrant kind made possible by institutional breakdown in many liberal nation states (failures of civic democracy). And it is a politics fostering, and in turn feeding off of, an increasingly polarized and distracted political culture (failures of civic discourse and civic learning).

**CIVIC LEARNING FROM THE GROUND UP**

Can powerful and wealthy democracies in crisis adequately govern a planetary climate in crisis? This remains a pertinent question for two reasons. It is those countries that have the wherewithal to find solutions that will put both themselves and the rest of the developing countries of the world on a path of sustainable progress and well-being. Moreover, it is those countries that have the primary moral responsibility to lead and to act since they have historically benefited the most from fossil carbon–based economies. No one on Earth can completely escape the effects of climate change, but some have contributed to the problem much more than others.

The governance required involves law to reset expectations and behavioral patterns, financing for technological innovation and economic reconstruction, and civic renewal in the moral and political imagination of our time. Let me say more here about the last of these and about the norms and practices of civic learning and civic discourse.

When governance fails democracy, democracy must begin to govern and to expand the space of civic learning, moral imagination, and transformational climate action.

Democracies depend on the maintenance of institutional structures and cultural values that enable them to craft legitimate and effective policies. They do this in many ways: Through information gathering, inclusive debate, and deliberation conducted within civic discourse. Through fashioning compromise and building consensus. Through coming to policy decisions that will be viewed as acceptable, even by those whose interests are not served or who may oppose the decisions on ideological grounds. These kinds of discursive action are also learning processes. Civic learning is integral to the capabilities democratic citizenship requires. Through taking part in the practices of membership and association within a democratic civil society, 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.”

Civic discourse and learning are joined at the hip; they tend to flourish or founder together. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has argued, in times of crisis unofficial political activity can summon the substantive values of constitutional democracy against “the systemic inertia of institutional politics.” Civic learning is always possible and necessary because:

> the constitutional state does not represent a finished structure but a delicate and sensitive—above all fallible and revisable—enterprise, whose purpose is to realize the systems of rights anew in changing circumstances, that is, to interpret the system of rights better, to institutionalize it more appropriately, and to draw out its contents more radically.

Interpret rights and obligations in new and more just ways. Institutionalize them more equally and effectively. Face up to the radical change implications in today’s climate of the traditional democratic values we claim to cherish and profess. In America today, and in many other political democracies around the world, civic discourse and civic learning are not working effectively. The very idea of the civic—by which I mean associational membership, equal dignity and respect, and reciprocal rights and obligations—has been disrupted in several serious ways: first, by growing political polarization and violence around the globe; second, by deep social, economic, religious, and ethnic divides at home; and third, by the sometimes nefarious use of social media and internet communications media that fracture the citizenry...
into sub-groups according to excluding, rather than inclusive, identities, interests, and values.\textsuperscript{15}

Large numbers of citizens get most of their information from partial and univocal sources. And then, their identifying electronic signatures collected and sold, those same citizens are targeted by organized groups using computer algorithms designed to nudge political behavior and to reinforce pre-existing beliefs and narratives.\textsuperscript{16} Climate denial is a poster child for these techniques for undermining informed democratic opinion and consent.

Civic learning is a process that involves free and broad access to reliable information necessary for the responsible exercise of democratic citizenship. Such citizenship involves not only voting for candidates standing for elective office but also communicating with officials on an ongoing basis, taking part in civic affairs at local, state, and national levels, and taking part in a variety of voluntary associations, cultural and religious communities, continuing education, and social movements.

And did I mention trust? It is hard to overestimate the importance of trust as a main ingredient in each of these activities and relationships—democracy is composed in the key of trust. It is my sense that, on the whole, Americans have not lost the capacity to trust—which is a deep-seated need and has much in common with attachments such as empathy and biophilia—but they have been confused and disappointed by the lack of people or programs on offer that are trustworthy.

Democratic citizenship—understood as a civic practice, not a legal status—is demanding, but when neglected it can only run on its own steam for so long. To be sure, most of the time, people want to focus on their personal interests—family, work, leisure. Why, then, is it so crucial for citizens of a democratic polity to spend so much time and energy in the public sphere, to invest so much of themselves in their democratic lives? Perhaps the answer relates to civic learning. Investing in citizenship helps people learn to respect their neighbors, think about the common good, and understand why compromise is necessary. Moreover, civic discourse involving deliberation, which is an important component of democratic legitimacy, requires mutual respect among citizen-interlocutors. The actual practice of deliberation by members of the public is crucial, not only because it can improve local decision making, but because it teaches citizens how to choose representatives who at higher levels will genuinely represent the common good of their constituents and engage in deliberation themselves. Local institutions that encourage this type of interaction are a training ground for both democratic citizen leaders and democratic citizen followers.

Civic learning is a form of life that depends upon a supportive political, social, and cultural environment. Civic learning either shuts down or goes into hiding during the breakdown of social and political systems—under conditions of excessive fear, anxiety, widespread and reasonable suspicion and mistrust, criminal or military violence, and the arbitrary exercise of state power.\textsuperscript{17} Civic learning also falters in the face of economic destitution and marginalization and conditions of widespread discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. Supportive conditions, on the other hand, include hope and progress toward human rights, civil liberties, impartial justice, and equality under the law. These conditions, in turn, are sustained by well-functioning democratic representative and participatory institutions and practices—institutions themselves sustained by civic learning.

My thesis is that broken climate politics and policy are part and parcel of a broken democratic politics more generally. To pay close attention to the broader political trends and problems is not a distraction from environmentalism. We urgently require critical analysis and clarification of the moral values served by civic learning and the political challenges standing in its way. Upheavals besetting liberal welfare states provide an opening for nationalistic and racist forms of populism. But these upheavals are largely due to the imperatives of the political economy of global capitalism and neoliberalism. The relationship between neoliberalism and right-wing populism is more
multifaceted than it appears on the surface of their respective ideologies. These upheavals will be neither ephemeral nor self-negating, much as one might wish for a return to greater global stability as we inhabit the four walls of today. They will have to be met through civic innovations that recreate and expand the conditions for civic learning. This could be the silver lining of dysfunctional democracy, if only planetary geophysical fluid dynamics will grant us enough time.

At the leading edge of change will be what may be called “civic place making”—that is, building the conditions under which civic discourse and democratic values can be strengthened through community-based social practices. It is often said that state governments are the laboratories of national democracy. Yet today many state houses are as divided or univocal in their majoritarian partisanship as the federal government is. We need to, and we can, find living laboratories of democratic citizenship and civic learning in more local and regional venues, and even in non-governmental associations and public/private partnerships now functioning effectively in many social domains.

Deliberative participatory forums at the community level provide settings in which conflicting interpretations encounter one another and are corrected and revised. Similar vetting and refinement of social and political interpretations and judgments takes place at leadership levels of policy expertise. Such refined expertise can interact with community-based perspectives in a communicative circuit of civic learning that relies on both bottom-up and top-down exchange, and on informational checks and balances within a conversation braiding strands of facts and values.

DEBATE AND DELIBERATION, CONTEST AND CONSENSUS

Well aware of the daunting prospects for a soft transition to a coming climate, McKibben nonetheless argues that “We could move quickly if we chose to, but we’d need to opt for solidarity and coordination on a global scale... The possibility of swift change lies in people coming together in movements large enough to shift the Zeitgeist.” He goes on to note that people are becoming more receptive to the revelations of corporate and ideological manipulation behind the narratives of climate denial.

I also believe that grassroots social movements, leavened by scientific and technical expertise, can shift the spirit of the times. And I am gratified that the long-suppressed story about how the climate change deception of the people has been carried out and by whom is receiving more serious attention. Yet there is an additional level of democratic dysfunction at work that also needs to be grappled with. Suppose the malfeasance of many corporate executives, think tanks, and wealthy political donors is widely publicized. The ensuing result ideally should be a reaffirmation of civic consensus around the norm of well-informed, truth-seeking political debate and civic discourse. This is the result we need. This is the foundation of democratic legitimacy and justification upon which the rights of citizens and the institutions of political representation rest.

Yet under current conditions, the result may not be that at all, but rather simply one more occasion for reinforced dissensus. Those already predisposed to condemn the manipulation behind climate denialism will use these revelations to do so, but even without this information their negative judgments were already active. The same syndrome, to the opposite effect, informs the value judgments of those predisposed to favor climate denial as an icon of respect and concern for them and their perceived interests.

What I would add to McKibben’s point is that the change strategy behind the work of social movement building needs to be supplemented by civic place making: the work of creating discourses and institutional spaces for civic learning. So I propose to think through the distinction between movement advocacy and civic learning—debate and deliberation, contestation and consensus—by way of contrast, even though, in the final analysis, I think these are not antithetical but symbiotic practices; both will be vital in a new climate democracy.

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. Direct democratic action 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 of deliberation.

TROUBLED CITIZENS IN TURBULENT TIMES

These reflections on social movements and civic learning lead by a short route back to climate action politics. The building of a politically efficacious and sustainable climate democracy also lies in starting at the level of rooted communities animated by a sense of care and place and moving to more regional and larger-scale networks. Using the democratic tools of both social movement activism and deliberative planning and policy analysis, this inductive, bottom-up politics can be one vital component of a new climate governance, domestically and transnationally. If this is true, then it is incumbent on us to understand how public spheres for civic discourse and civic learning can be oriented toward climate action in such communities and larger networks or, if such public spheres don’t presently exist, how to design and animate them.

Who are the ecological democratic citizens that would have the capability to orchestrate these contrapuntal modes—contestation and consensus—of political action? The answer is suggested by what Strachan Donnelley used to refer to as “the troubled middle,” by which he meant a group of genuinely open-minded people of good will, who may be uninformed, but who are receptive to new perceptions of reality and are available to the unforced force of the better argument. This category of citizen is not the same as those called “independents” who profess no membership in any political party, and whose votes in tightly contested elections are crucial. Independents are directly involved in the ideological and rhetorical dynamics of political discourse at any given time; the troubled citizen is someone who has an ideal of what civic discourse and democratic citizenship should be like, but who does not perceive a home for himself or herself in the ruthless political language game that so much of our politics has become.

Nor is the troubled citizen necessarily a “middle of the roader,” or a “moderate.” The usual notion of what it means to be a moderate rests on an image in which there are two static positions, one on one end of a spectrum, and the other on the opposing end, so that the moderate stands midway between them, accepting some elements of each. The citizen of the troubled middle does not fit this model at all. The interesting thing about the mentality of the troubled citizen is that it is highly tolerant of ambiguity, complexity, and dynamism in the realms of politics and ethics, no less than in the realm of scientific knowledge. At bottom, the notion of citizenship at work here, and what I am sure Donnelley was after, is ecological, interdependent, and relational. The essence of the political moderate in American politics for years has been the person who is a “social liberal” and an “economic conservative.” The troubled ecological citizen would begin by seeing that this stance is untenable because it posits a separation between the social and the economic spheres that cannot exist. This kind of “moderation” is inherently unstable and eventually will disillusion its partisan.

Impressed by the holistic and symbiotic character of the natural world, and by the multifaceted human world of power and morality, the troubled citizen tends to be pluralistic and polycentric. This way of thinking is prone to pragmatism in philosophy and politics more than to idealism or...
utilitarianism. This citizen does not want a charismatic demagogue providing answers about how to live, nor does she want a kind of cultural relativism in which it is fine to frack in a community that wants it, but also fine to ban it in a place that favors conservation.

What does the troubled ecological citizen want? What does such a citizen ask of their communities, and what do their communities ask of them? To begin with, three things:

First, to promote a democratic civic culture and a civic sense of place. To contribute to forming and sustaining a political culture with a democratic ethos. Deliberative forums reinforce and build a democratic political culture by actualizing the potential within individuals and groups for holistic and relational understanding, and by providing an interactive experience that can travel from the public sphere into the larger society and culture to combat institutionalized, structural forms of dehumanization, discrimination, and oppression.

Second, to promote democratic community formation and structural justice. To contribute to sustaining political institutions that have the cohesion and stability needed to support the effective and just practice of political representation. Deliberative forums play an important role—and could play a larger one—in forming the communities that representatives represent, and political institutions serve. Just representation and deliberative participation have a symbiotic relationship in a strong democracy.

Third, to promote civic ecological minds and hearts. To contribute to the development of a moral psychology for individuals so that they can fulfill the ethical obligations of the role of citizen in a climate democracy. Deliberative forum participation can be a practical experience with a psychological impact that normalizes diversity and promotes tolerance of difference, solidarity, empathy, and the capability to see something from another’s point of view.

Cultural framing and social power set the terms and possibilities of civic learning. They inform the convictions and contentments that individuals pursue in their everyday lives. But frames are changeable, power is fluid. America’s capacity for practical and institutional civic learning determines how wide a gap there will be between its normative ideals and its actual practices. With civic learning that gap will narrow; without it, in a time of disagreement and conflict-generating communications and worldviews, the gap will widen. Indeed, at such times the content of those normative ideals—freedom, equality, justice, and mutual respect and care—may itself erode and morally degrade, as when freedom becomes exclusionary or when mutuality embraces only those who are alike.

The problem is not disagreement per se. Reasoned disagreement is essential to any kind of learning, including civic learning. The democratic problem is the gradual loss of the capacity to disagree constructively; or worse, the unwillingness to engage enough with fellow citizens to truly disagree or debate with them at all. Indifference feeds upon itself, privatizes, and discourages would-be civic participants. Our conflict-generating discourse today is bringing about a kind of civic deafness. Democratic citizens who will not hear, cannot listen. Yet listening is at the core of democracy as a form of government and a way of life.

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NOTES


11. New approaches to ecological economics alter their conceptual models to integrate biophysical limits on excessive resource exploitation imposed by key planetary systems with social justice limits imposed on inadequate resource utilization imposed by powerful social systems. See K. Raworth, Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a Twenty-First Century Economist (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017).


19. New approaches to ecological governance can alter their conceptual models to take into account of the synergies between public legal governance and private corporate and entrepreneurial governance in the transition from a fossil carbon economy to a sustainable one. See M.P. Vandenbergh and J.M. Gilligan, Beyond Politics: The Private Governance Response to Climate Change (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

