

Reconciling Ecological and Democratic Values: Recent Perspectives on Ecological Democracy¹

The idea of ecological democracy is a promising one, a combination of two sets of appealing core normative values – environmental concern and engagement on the one hand, and democratic legitimacy and procedure on the other. Yet, these two sets of values are quite different, and not so easily reconciled. Theorists of ecological democracy have long struggled with this dual (and duelling) set of promises, and have always had to address the obvious potential for conflict between them. As Goodin (1992: 160) clearly laid out, long ago, ‘to advocate democracy is to advocate procedure, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes: what guarantee can we have that the former procedures will yield the latter outcome?’ There is no guarantee that democracies will necessarily bring about ecological and sustainable ends, and more authoritative processes of attaining those ends could undermine democratic ideals and legitimacy.

Ecological democratic thought in the past quarter-century since Goodin’s warning (including in the pages of this journal; see for example Bulkeley and Mol 2003) has been consistently mindful of this very real tension; most theorists have focused on finding, developing or promoting synergies between these two core and ideal sets of values. On the one hand, some theorists – more in line with what Eckersley (2017) defines as *environmental* democracy – have focused on reforming existing democratic institutions to better represent environmental values or attain environmental goals. On the other hand, advocates of a more thorough *ecological* democracy argue for a radical break with the neoliberal state and transformation toward decentralised, organic and grassroots democratic practices that embody ecological values and give greater weight to the interests of nonhumans and future generations.

Even within the realm of those more radical forms of ecological democracy, dedicated to enriching and representing deep ecological values and deep democratic ones, approaches have always been broad and diverse, especially as theorists moved beyond responding to the early attraction of environmental authoritarian thinking in environmental political theory (Ophuls 1977). As environmental political theory developed as a field in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of different frameworks for ecological democracy were proposed, from Dryzek’s (1987) early work on ‘ecological rationality’

1. Earlier versions of the papers in this special issue were given at a workshop on Ecological Democracy held at the University of Sydney’s Sydney Environment Institute in February 2017. The workshop was co-sponsored by the University of Sydney, University of Canberra and Stockholm University, as well as the Ecological Democracy Working Group of the Earth System Governance Project. A more extensive overview of the literature on ecological and environmental democracy can be found in a companion editorial for a special issue of *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* that emerged from the same workshop.

and openness to the communicative contributions of the nonhuman world, to Eckersley's (1992) democratisation of ecocentrism. As the field matured, proposals for a more deliberative ecological democracy became an increasingly important focus for exploring the interface of ecological and democratic values (for example, Smith 2003, Baber and Bartlett 2005).

More recent work in the field has brought a more thorough focus on the redesign of participatory institutions (Bäckstrand et al 2010), more radical and grassroots politics of practice (Schlosberg and Coles 2017, Schlosberg and Craven 2019), and democratic forms of global environmental (or Earth system) governance (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014, Eckersley 2017). These efforts have expanded the theory and practice of ecological democracy and governance across scales, ranging from the very local with a focus on material life to broader transnational engagements of stakeholders beyond the borders of sovereign states. In addition, the field has enlarged to address questions of the participation of nonhuman actors (Bennett 2010, Disch 2016), and to recognise and respond to non-Western conceptions of democracy and the nonhuman (Kothari 2014, World People's Congress 2010). Overall, there has been a pluralisation of theorising on ecological democracy in scale, across jurisdictions, and in conceptions of the core values of environment and democracy. All the while, each of these diverse and expanding conceptions of ecological democracy continues to grapple with the core conflict between ecological and democratic values, norms, processes and outcomes (Wong 2016). Goodin's quandary endures.

The essays in this special issue offer five new and original contributions to these more recent debates, with a focus on decolonising the language of ecological democracy, radicalising the design of everyday activities, reframing the role that culture plays, redefining the core issue of praxis as a way to engage both environmental and democratic values and practice, and making the inclusion of affected actors authentic, both nationally and internationally. The essays take quite different approaches, but they share the common goals of pluralism and inclusiveness that can be found in both sets of normative foundations of ecological democracy – a broader way of understanding, recognising and engaging with 'nature' *and* 'democracy'. Another similarity across the essays is a focus on the meaning of the everyday practice of ecological democracy at a variety of levels and with a variety of populations and scales – including a growing concern with how to address human, nonhuman, material and ecological entanglements and agency.

We start with perhaps the most challenging approach, one which lays out the importance of thinking about decolonising the very language of democracy, and what that means for inclusion and the ethical basis of democratic practice. Christine Winter's article is about what it means to rethink 'dignity'—a concept and value at the core of both democracy and justice—to include a broader set of subjects and agents. Winter argues that such an approach expands the

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principles and practices of inclusion and decolonisation, while embracing core ecological and democratic values. She discusses the way in which legal personhood for nonhuman subjects – not just individual animals, but river systems and mountains as well – can decolonise Western democracies and provide a clear method for including various environments (again, not simply animals) in democratic thinking and practice. It is a decolonised response to the dilemma at the heart of ecological democracy – one that deconstructs the imagined conflict (see also Murdock 2018).

Winter's central argument is a call for the pluralisation of the concept of dignity, and in particular an expansion beyond its current liberal restriction to individual humans. Such a move expands on the meaning of representing the nonhuman in current institutions (see Donoso 2017). If we are to be inclusive of, for example, Maori understandings of human–nonhuman entanglements, democratic inclusion must place dignity, respect and reciprocity at the centre of a relational ontology. In this view, the entire world possesses a vitality, an identity, a dignity; a truly decolonising discourse of democracy and justice would expand the understanding and application of these terms to include entities and ontologies that live among, and are entangled with, classic Western notions.

Winter argues that a conceptualisation of dignity that does not decolonise, that does not include broader concepts and ontologies of inclusion, results in a political theory that is itself unjust. Such a democratic theory undermines inclusion and participation. The approach demonstrates simply and eloquently why and how core terms in our ethical vocabulary must and can be decolonised. It is a powerful argument for reclamation of a core value at the basis of not only ecological democracy, but justice as well.

Next, Damian White argues for the cultivation of more critical, ecological, and transition-oriented *design* as key to a 'redirective' environmental democracy and a necessary transition in the face of our ecological dilemma. Here the focus is on everyday experience and prefigurative practice – 'a politics that is concerned with the material, social, political and ecological assembling of our material culture' (p. 40). White insists on the development of more engaged social-ecological imaginaries necessary for designing impactful transition design, and brings critical theories to this focus on the remaking of our everyday surroundings. Here, ecological democracy is ongoing and iterative – not only a political process, but also one of everyday life and interactions.

White offers a critique of the deliberative turn in scholarship on ecological democracy, contending that it often results in inauthentic 'release valves' for public concern in the form of participatory processes. White offers another form of agent-centred ecological democracy for the necessary transition – one that encompasses critical and social design, and is focused on the actualisation, making and co-creation of sustainable lives, places and futures. This is explored

in the context of facing the power of the fossil fuel industry and its backers to limit ecological transition.

As White accurately notes, a ‘common desire’ in the (varied and pluralistic) project of ecological democracy has been ‘to push back against the range of illiberal traditions in ecologism’, including technocratic ecomodernisation and, more recently, ecomodernism. In developing his own argument, White engages more radical cultural and political ecologies critical of Western liberal approaches, rather than forms of bureaucratic institutionalisation emerging in other literature on ecological democracy. His argument focuses on more ‘hybrid’ political ecologies, based in broadening the actors and processes necessary to repair the social-ecological divide, both ontologically and pragmatically.

Marit Hammond offers yet another innovative and engaging approach to redefining ecological democracy, one based on the understanding of cultural processes and the creation of new meanings of sustainability and prosperity. Hammond moves beyond the classic question of whether democratic structures and processes will yield more ecologically sustainable outcomes, to engage the relationship between culture and environmental politics. Cultural transformation, she argues, is more central to the ecological ends of democratic change than the basic institutional structure of democracy. This is, for Hammond, a more productive and pragmatic answer to the question of how democracy can be tied to ecological ends. The claim is that citizens would democratically demand such ends only with the development of a more ecological everyday culture.

Hammond offers an original application of the idea that cultural shifts can be a creative and subversive avenue leading to new forms of both democracy and environmentalism. Culture here is bottom-up and reflexive – a ‘value-guided vision’ of ecological democracy. Sustainability, then, becomes dynamic and inclusive; the idea of sustainability is redesigned as something that is normatively meaningful, a cultural transformation of what is seen as valuable.

What Hammond demonstrates is that the ‘conceptual puzzle’ of the supposed conflict between sustainability as a ‘specific set of substantive outcomes’ versus democracy as an ‘open-ended procedure’ can be deconstructed or avoided if sustainability itself is also seen as open-ended. Hammond offers ‘a pathway not just out of the ecological democracy puzzle, but also towards a more comprehensive, inclusive and deep-seated politics of sustainability’ (p. 64). Meaning-making in an ecological democracy, she argues, is reflexive, inclusive and disruptive.

Matt Lepori’s contribution contrasts a deliberative approach to ecological democracy with a more grassroots or ‘demos’-based set of values. He begins with a critique of some ecological deliberative democrats for their supposed focus on ‘creating an eco-democratic people’. Lepori is suspicious of the crafting, cultivating, managing, or even imposition of deliberative ideals and practice in such democratic theorising. While some deliberative theorists

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might deny the accusation that their main focus is on improving the public, the larger point for Lepori is to turn attention to what it is that catalyses democratic action from the grassroots. His focus is on the way that an ecological democratic demos forms out of a combination of ecological and democratic values on the one hand, and grassroots social movements on the other.

Using the work of Wolin to craft his argument about an ecological demos, Lepori follows a long line of less statist ecological democrats who focus on radical and democratic ‘collective self-organisation’ (p. 84). Lepori argues that such a demos arises in response to political exclusion and disempowerment, not as a result of institutional and/or deliberative design (compare Vargas et al, 2017). However, Lepori does recognise that there are deliberative approaches to ecological democracy that bridge the divide between formal institutions and social movements. One such example is Dryzek’s (2000) ‘insurgent’ form of deliberative ecological democracy which is based initially in activism and social movements. Lepori offers a hybrid proposal of his own, where everyday praxis is key, and local lived experiences and movements can illustrate a convergence of demos and deliberation. Ultimately, the idea illustrates an ecological democracy focused on everyday life and actors, and on deliberation focused as much on building publics as on building institutions.

Finally, Ayşem Mert examines an idea of ecological democracy that attempts to transcend the local, and the liberal state; here, she critically examines the trend toward more global and transnational sustainability governance. It is a cautionary tale. The problem with such structures, Mert argues, is that participation can be co-optative rather than empowering; global participatory practices in environmental diplomacy simply do not ensure inclusiveness of people or their values.

Mert’s argument is striking and crucial. Proponents of both democracy and environmental values want to believe that there has been a gradual improvement in global participation and inclusion. That inclusion is recognised as important for both empowerment and ecological ends. However, the reality is the familiar story of an originally radical idea, with much potential – a global ecological democratic practice – being co-opted and diluted when put into practice. As such, Mert argues, transnational governance of environmental issues has implications for pluralism, representation and inclusiveness.

A core question in Mert’s article is how we can avoid inauthentic and symbolic inclusion, or ‘pseudo-activity’, in participatory processes. Participatory processes are normally finely controlled, with predetermined results, limited to implementation of previously decided policy, and, more often than not, civil society groups are denied real critical ability or authority. If the focus is on policy implementation, participation is not going to be effective, emancipatory or democratising. For Mert, however, the central problem is that participation lacks the core principles and ethics of ecological democracy. Participation in global institutions and environmental negotiations has only helped to promote

intimations of ecological democratic governance, she argues. Core institutionalisations of such practices have left behind ecological and democratic ideals.

This special issue of *Environmental Values* offers a broad range of engagements with the idea and values of ecological democracy, from more radical proposals for decolonising and transformational conceptualisations and design, to more cautionary concerns about the limits of democratic institutions at both the discursive and global levels. While there are wide differences across the articles – most strikingly, perhaps, concerning the role of the nonhuman in democratic processes – they illustrate the rich set of responses and proposals that continue to be generated out of the central quandary of ecological democracy. There is a plurality of proposals – and cautions – about realising the core normative values of ecological recognition and democratic authenticity, in ways suitable for the crises that shake and destabilise our current political and ecological landscapes.

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