Ecological democracy and the rise and decline of liberal democracy: looking back, looking forward

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ABSTRACT

The critical environmental political theory (EPT) of ecological democracy emerged in the 1990s when liberal democracy and cosmopolitanism appeared to be on the rise. A quarter of a century later, as both went into decline in the western heartland, a new iteration of ecological democracy has emerged, reflecting a significant shift in critical normative horizons, focus and method. Whereas the first iteration sought to critique and institutionally expand the coordinates of democracy – space, time, community and agency – to bring them into closer alignment with a cosmopolitan ecological and democratic imaginary, the second has connected ecology and democracy through everyday material practices and local participatory democracy from a more critical communitarian perspective. The respective virtues and problems of each iteration of ecological democracy are drawn out, and the complementarities and tensions between them are shown to be productive in maintaining theoretical and methodological pluralism and enhancing the prospects for sustainability and a multifaceted democracy.

Key words: Ecological democracy, environmental democracy, liberal democracy, new materialism, cosmopolitanism, communitarianism, internal versus external critique

Introduction

The critical environmental political theory (EPT) of ecological democracy emerged in the 1990s during a period of triumphant liberalism following the end of the Cold War. These were relatively good times for democracy, with new waves of democratisation in Central Europe, a deliberative and cosmopolitan turn in democratic theory and the emergence of a mood of modest optimism about the prospects of a post-Westphalian order in a rapidly globalising world (e.g. Linklater 1996). This new body of EPT on ecological democracy was both radically critical and radically reconstructive in its aims. As a critical project, it sought to expose the complicity of 'actually existing liberal democracy' in perpetuating the ecological crisis. As a reconstructive project, it sought to expand the fundamental coordinates of democracy - space, time, community, and agency – to bring them into closer alignment with an ecological imaginary that transcended national boundaries. Yet this project presupposed the continuation of liberal democracy as a base from which to critique and extend democratic thinking and practice. A quarter of a century later the optimism of the 1990s has disappeared, liberal democracy and liberal tolerance are on the wane, while irreversible global ecological problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss have grown apace.

Here, I examine, compare and evaluate how critical EPT has engaged with liberal democracy during periods of relative ascendancy (particularly in the 1990s), and relative decline (since the new Millennium). I compare and evaluate how two different iterations of critical EPT have sought to connect ecology and democracy and respond to the democratic legitimation challenge of environmentalism against the longer history of environmental advocacy. I also offer some reflections on the virtues and drawbacks of each iteration, including their different approaches to external and internal criticism.

To guide the historical stocktaking, I distinguish a thin account of environmental democracy from a thick account of ecological democracy (in its first iteration). Proponents of environmental democracy are friendly critics of liberal democracy who seek to work with, and revitalise, the norms and institutions of liberal democracy to bring about environmental change. They seek greater transparency and accountability of policymakers to publics, including neglected communities suffering environmental injustices. They seek to make the most of the civil and political rights that are protected in liberal democracies by fostering greater public awareness of ecological problems and their consequences, greater public engagement and participation in environmental policy- and rule-making in all branches of government, including the courts.

Defenders of ecological democracy, in contrast, re-examine the democratic ideals, foundations and institutions of liberal democracy from a critical ecological vantage point to show how they license unjust and irreversible environmental harm. They seek to highlight the ecologically *and* democratically arbitrary character of state territorial boundaries, and reveal

how and why the institutions of liberal democracy have been so unresponsive to political struggles and representations that seek to protect the global commons along with regional, national and local public environmental goods. They seek to bring into view a wider range of communities that are systematically unrepresented, or poorly represented, in liberal democracies (marginal and minority communities, future generations, 'noncitizens' outside the polity who are affected by decisions made within the polity, nonhuman species and broader ecological communities). Finally, they offer new democratic imaginaries and/or practices that are defended as more conducive to local and/or global ecological sustainability.

The distinction between thin and thick is not meant to imply that the former is less desirable, that the thin and thick are necessarily always in tension (although sometimes they may be), that the former is a practical pursuit while the latter is a scholarly pursuit (they both have scholarly and activist champions), or that the distinction is hard and fast (it is more of a continuum). Rather, it is used as a heuristic to highlight the different purposes, virtues, and limitations of more situated, friendly, internal criticism of actually existing democracy and more radical forms of critique (which may be external or internal). For example, many cosmopolitan political philosophers critique social norms and practices from an ideal standpoint while communitarian philosophers are wary of grand norms and theories and defend the virtues of the connected, 'inside' social critic over the disconnected 'outside' critic (Walzer 1992). The Marxist method of immanent critique is also internal but more radical and cosmopolitan, and prepared to disrupt and 'denaturalise' rather than respect embedded meanings, practices and social structures by exposing their internal contradictions and unfulfilled promises from the standpoint of those who benefit the least and/or suffer the most. While the first wave of ecological democracy is avowedly cosmopolitan and engages in both

external and immanent critique, I show that the 'new materialist' approach to connecting ecology and democracy that has emerged in the new Millennium is more communitarian and methodologically (as distinct from politically) closer to realism than idealism.

The discussion unfolds in two parts. The first provides a broad-brush, retrospective stock-taking of the claims, achievements, and criticisms of environmental democracy (since the 1970s) and the first iteration of ecological democracy (since the 1990s), including a brief overview of, and rejoinder to, the liberal critique of ecological democracy. The second part tracks the decline of liberal democracy and environmental state capacity from the highwater mark of the 1990s to set up the challenges facing environmentalism and critical EPT in the new Millennium. The analysis then examines the new material response to the twin problems of democratic decline and the intractability of unsustainability. Instead of critically engaging with liberal democratic institutions or democratic theory, this approach has focussed on creating more sustainable material flows in everyday life, and building environmental 'resonance' with citizens from the standpoint of the sympathetic 'inside critic'. I draw out the virtues, drawbacks, tensions, and complementarities between these two different iterations of ecological democracy against the longer history of environmental democracy, and reflect on how the multiple connections between ecology and democracy might be further strengthened.

Looking back

Environmental democracy

It has been half a century since the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 (Carson 1962), the symbolic birthdate of the 'modern' environmental movement as a persistent and globally ubiquitous social movement concerned with reining in the accelerating production and maldistribution of the ecological harms and risks of modernisation. Looking back, we can see the many ways in which modern environment movements effectively *performed* environmental democracy by defending and utilising the rights, regulative ideals and institutions of liberal democracy to win legitimacy for their environmental claims. In so doing, environmental movements have enriched liberal democracy by increasing the amount and range of environmental information available to publics; exposed environmental injustices, discrimination and racism; widened and enriched democratic debate and policy choices; and enabled the strengthening of environmental laws, policies and practices that have protected the health and wellbeing of citizens and environments. In keeping with these practices, the ecopolitical thought that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s alongside environmental movements tended to diagnose the ecological crisis as a crisis of democratic participation (for an analysis, see Eckersley 1992, 8-9). By the time of the 1992 Earth Summit, one of the high-water marks of global environmental summitry, environmental protection had shifted from being neglected and/or peripheral to a 'normal' purpose and function of the modern state (Meadowcroft 2008).

Environmental movements were also a major current in the dissident movements that emerged behind the Iron Curtain, and these movements played a crucial role in the

revolutions that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War, the degree of ecological devastation revealed in the Eastern bloc was widely regarded as conclusive evidence of liberal democracy's superior ecological credentials vis-à-vis totalitarianism. Yet for economic liberals, it was also a vindication of capitalism and consumerism, despite the fact that these dissident movements had called into question not only totalitarianism but also militarism, technocracy, the materialist pursuit of progress, and human alienation from nature (Corry 2014).

The mutual synergies between environmentalism and liberal democracy are now internationally recognised in a range of international declarations and agreements. These include principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration which calls for access to environmental information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice on environmental matters; in the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters 1998; in the United Nations Environment Program's Bali Guidelines (UNEP 2010) and the Environmental Democracy Index (DICE Database 2016), an online platform that tracks and compares the state performance according to a set of indicators based on access to environmental information, the right to participate in decision-making, and the right to seek enforcement of environmental laws and/or compensation and redress for environmental harm.

These are welcome achievements for environmental democracy, but they are also paradoxical. Despite the significant growth in national environmental legislation and international environmental agreements since the 1960s, and some notable environmental

improvements, many of the most serious and irreversible global problems (such as biodiversity loss and climate change) had worsened by the 1990s, and continue to worsen. Emerging during the height of the globalisation debates in the post-Cold War period, the new wave of scholarship on ecological democracy took on the task of explaining this paradox by looking beyond the happy synergies of environmentalism and democracy and highlighting the many ways in which liberal democracy itself was complicit in perpetuating ecological problems.

Ecological democracy 1.0

Critical EPT scholarship on the relationship between liberal democracy and ecology, and the idea of ecological democracy, emerged in the 1990s (e.g. Dryzek 1990, 1992, Matthews 1995, Eckersley 1995, Doherty and de Geus 1996, Dobson 1996) and has since grown apace, with a particular focus on transboundary ecological problems (e.g. Eckersley 2004, 2011, 2017, Mason 2001, 2005, Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). This new body of scholarship highlighted how the systematic production of environmental injustices and ecological degradation is not simply the result of distortions in liberal democracy arising from inequalities in bargaining power and political participation, or political corruption. Rather, it is also an inevitable by-product of the limited temporal, spatial, epistemological, and community horizons of liberal democracies. These limitations include: short election cycles ranging from three to five years; territorial and electoral boundaries that bear little relationship to nested ecological boundaries; the fact that many transboundary ecological problems are not discernible by lay publics (which produces an unavoidable dependency

upon specialist and complex scientific expertise); and a reification of the nation-state as the primary subject and locus of popular sovereignty. In short, elected representatives are not institutionally obliged to answer to any community other than their electorates or their nation for the ecological consequences of their decisions, even when it can be clearly foreseen that other communities, now and in the future, will be seriously harmed.

From the standpoint of ecological democracy, the territorial borders of nation-states are not only ecologically arbitrary but also democratically arbitrary. As the democratic boundary problem makes clear, the delineation of the boundaries of any democratic community (the demos) cannot be determined democratically because this presupposes the prior existence of a demos, the boundaries of which need to be determined (Whelan 1983). The same can be said for any political claim that is made in the name of 'the people', since this always begs the question: who determines the 'we' that constitutes the people? Liberal democracies are attached to nation-states, embedded in a system of sovereign states that was founded in the early modern, pre-democratic period on the principle of exclusive territorial rule. The revolutionary ideas of republicanism, popular sovereignty and rule by the people attached themselves to the new structure such that the boundaries of the people or nation became conterminous with the territorial boundaries of the state. Thereafter, 'the people', qua nation, was increasingly reified with the rise of modern nationalism. Liberal democracies were therefore not institutionally geared to manage increasing economic, social and ecological interdependence. The intensification of economic globalisation has therefore produced an increasing disconnect between those who make decisions that generate ecological harms and risks (such as states, investors, producers, consumers), those who have expert knowledge of them (scientists), the victims who are exposed to them (typically the most marginal and least

represented) and those who must take formal political responsibility for them (political representatives) (Christoff and Eckersley 2013, 12). As Ellis has lamented:

> It can seem as if the legitimating structure of democratic self-rule was invented for another world in which small, isolated groups of people made choices together about the self-regarding actions they would take (Ellis 2016, 512).

This critique prompted the formulation of an 'ambit claim' or cosmopolitan regulative ideal for ecological democracy according to which 'all those potentially affected by ecological risks should have some meaningful opportunity to participate *or otherwise be represented* in the making of the policies or decisions which generate such risks' (Eckersley 2004, 111, italics added). This was not an argument to obliterate or replace existing democracies and political identities or jettison the 'all-subjected' principle, according to which only those subjected to laws within a jurisdiction are entitled to democratic representation in the making of law. Legal systems need jurisdictional boundaries. Rather, it was more modest: that the 'all-subjected principle' should be *supplemented* (not supplanted) with the 'all-affected principle', at the very least in cases of serious and irreversible ecological harm, to avoid major deficits in the representation of, and accountability to, neglected environmental communities.

Ecological democracy is clearly a major provocation to liberal democracy insofar as it directly challenges liberal humanist norms as well as the conventional coordinates and boundaries of time, space, agency and community. It seeks to extend who or what should be recognised as having rights and/or entitled to political representation, to whom decision-

makers should be accountable, and over what spatial time horizons. Yet it is not just a theory: many countries have introduced institutional innovations in this direction, such as the inclusion of substantive environmental rights and norms in constitutions (e.g. Hayward 2004), the conferral of legal standing for non-human entities such as rivers (Charpleix 2018), the establishment of commissions for the future or the application of the precautionary principle in policymaking practices (both of which provide a proxy form of representation to future generations and nonhuman communities who cannot represent themselves). Moreover, the Aarhus Convention, while largely focused on procedural environmental rights (Mason 2010), also challenges conventional democratic coordinates by moving beyond the nationalist 'all-subjected principle' and applying the cosmopolitan 'all affected principle' to accommodate transboundary environmental problems. It does this by making the same procedural environmental rights available to all citizens of signatory states against all such states irrespective of where environmental problems originate or manifest.

Ecological democrats are also strong defenders of deliberative democracy because it is not contained by fixed borders, enables communication across the expert/lay divide, welcomes different kinds of knowledge, facilitates social learning and promotes generalisable interests by weeding out purely self-serving arguments through the requirement of answering to others and providing reasons that can be accepted by differently situated interlocutors (e.g. Dryzek 2002). Indeed, deliberative democracy is, for the most part (cf. Lepori 2019), welcomed by environmental *and* ecological democrats (in both iterations), albeit in different ways.

Of course, ecological democracy has not been immune from criticism. The all-affected principle faces challenges at the operationalisation level and invariably re-introduces boundaries (albeit protean rather than fixed ones, and they are merely supplemental). Moreover, representing those who cannot represent themselves (such as nonhuman species and communities or future generations) is by no-means straightforward since it breaks the traditional democratic nexus between authorisation by and accountability to citizens (although abandoning such efforts would leave them unrepresented) (Eckersley 2004, 2011, O'Neil 2001, cf. Whiteside 2013). However, here I focus on what I take to be the core critique from political liberals.

For political liberals, the liberal democratic state must stand as a neutral arbiter over ideas of the good, given the fact of pluralism. While they are happy to support environmental *procedural* rights, the elevation and entrenchment of *substantive* environmental rights, goals or goods is seen to offend liberalism's anti-perfectionism and respect for political pluralism (Wissenburg 1998). Environmental protection is seen as a public and private good, not an individual right, which means it must not override individual rights essential for democracy and it can also be traded-off against other goods, of which there are many. The upshot of these trade-off is that irreversible environmental change must be accepted as an inevitable and necessary price of liberal democracy given the fact of competing political preferences about goods (Wissenburg 1998). On this account the institutionalisation of ecological democracy leads to the curtailment of liberal democracy.

Yet this conclusion is misleading for what it obscures, on two counts. First, the suggestion that ecological democracy is seeking to infect 'neutral' democratic procedures with substantive ecological norms assumes that liberal democracy does not do this, that majoritarianism is procedurally neutral, respectful of pluralism and anti-perfectionist, and this is the key to its legitimacy. Ecological democrats accept the principle of political equality and the necessity of civil and political rights. But they would point out that the democratic institutions that produce majorities are hardly neutral, as the practices of candidate pre-selection, electoral boundary drawing, and wide variety of different voting systems make clear. One must therefore be careful not to conflate the basic principles of democracy (e.g. rule by the people, and political equality) with the techniques of decision that seek to instantiate that rule (Rosanvallon 2011, 8). All such 'techniques' invariably load the dice in different ways and ought to be subject to ongoing critique and revision.

Second, the liberal critique assumes ecological democracy is an encroachment on democracy because it seeks to impose ecological constraints on democratic decision-making, as if ecological democrats are seeking to impose their will on an unwilling majority. While this is the position of eco-authoritarians, it finds no support among ecological democrats. As previously noted, many countries have adopted legal, institutional, or constitutional environmental rights and procedures to provide recognition of future generations and non-human others, but none of these initiatives subverts the democratic principle of future revisability. Indeed, contestation, deliberation, reflexivity and revisability are not only desirable for social learning but also essentially linked to sustainability. As Hammond (2019, 68) has argued, sustainability is not an end state but rather a perpetual process of (ideally,

reflexive) adaptation to socio-ecological change; indeed, 'cultural transformation is a meta-condition of sustainability that implies a necessity of democracy' (2019, 68).

The key challenge for ecological democracy, then, is not to win over political liberals. Rather, it is the real-world cultural and political challenge of how to build popular support for the extension of democratic practices of representation and accountability through space and time that would address the democratic and ecological deficits of liberal democracy. For cosmopolitans (e.g. Archibugi and Held 1995, Held 1995, Beck 2009), and for ecological democrats (Eckersley 2004), globalisation was supposed to make global and/or ecological democracy both practically necessary and more normatively compelling. However, looking back more than two decades later, globalisation appears to have had the opposite effect.

Political realists would be the first to grasp this irony. They understand that *political* legitimacy and hence rightful political authority for any course of action is achieved not by reference to abstract ideals but rather only when the legitimation stories of those seeking or holding political power resonate with a sufficient number of citizens in the relevant community (since there can never be unanimity) (Hall 2015, 473; Williams 2005). From this standpoint, environmental democracy clearly faces an easier legitimation hurdle than ecological democracy because it works with the political grain of liberal democracy, yet its achievements are modest. So how should this legitimation challenge be approached by ecological democrats when the stars of both globalisation *and* liberal democracy are fading?

Looking forward

We have seen that the project of ecological democracy emerged during what appeared to be a triumphant period of liberal democracy. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, this triumph appears as a minor blip in a much longer narrative of general democratic decline, including in membership of, and support for, mass political parties, voter turn-out, and trust in politicians and general interest in engagement with national politics, especially among younger citizens (e.g. Mair 2013, Howe 2017, Foa and Mounk 2017, 6). There have been no new waves of democratisation in the new Millennium and scholars of democratisation are now focussing on democratic 'backsliding' and deconsolidation (e.g. Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017). Since 2016, the rise of nationalist populism and authoritarianism signals a major backlash against liberal tolerance and the human rights of strangers (Freedom House 2017).

This period of democratic decline has also coincided with an overall decline or stagnation in levels of expenditure and staffing of environmental ministries and agencies across OECD countries since the 1990s, including an overall weakening of environment laws (Mol 2016). This rollback has taken the most spectacular form in the USA since 2016, following the inauguration of President Trump (Adler 2018), and is reminiscent of the major environmental rollback orchestrated by the Reagan administration in the 1980s when economic neoliberalism was taking root. There has also been a significant rollback of climate regulation in Australia in 2014 (Crowley 2017). In both cases, climate change denialism has formed a significant plank of the political legitimation of the rollback.

Clearly, there has been a break down in the mutual synergies between liberal democracy and environmentalism. This has also loosened the foothold for both environmental and ecological democracy. But which dimensions of decline are most troubling for ecological democrats? Is it the increasing virulence of nationalist and authoritarian populism, which is antipathetic to cosmopolitanism, climate science and environmentalism (Brown 2014, Lockwood 2018)? Is it the more general public disillusionment and disengagement with democracy, which makes it harder for progressive advocates of all stripes to mobilise citizens around collective concerns? Or is it simply the general lack of salience and visibility of environmental problems relative to other pressing political problems, which suggests that conventional environmental advocacy is failing to cut through? As we shall see, the new materialist turn in critical EPT provides a response to the second and third problems. As John Meyer has put it, '…environmental concerns are too big and too important to be addressed only by self-identified environmentalists. If a populist perspective has much to recommend it, then transcending the limitations of such identification will be at the core of new strategies to address climate change and other awesome challenges' (Meyer 2008, 232). The point is not whether environmental concerns can be made to resonate with liberalism, but rather whether they resonate with citizens. Indeed, he singles out the lack of popular connection with environmental problems (which he calls the 'resonance dilemma'), as a major impediment to effective environmental action, and a far greater impediment than environmental/climate denialism (Meyer 2015, 3).

Ecological democracy 2.0: new materialism

The central preoccupation of the new materialist iteration of ecological democracy is the redirection of the material practices of everyday life to create counter-flows of democratic power and more sustainable systems and flows of food, energy, water, and materials through local communities and environments (e.g. Meyer 2008, Meyer 2015, Coles 2016, Disch 2016, Meyer and Kersten 2016, Schlosberg and Coles 2016, Lepori 2019, Schlosberg and Craven 2019, White 2019). This growing body of work is diverse, ranging from the examination of real-world sustainable materialist movements, transition towns and eco-villages (Schlosberg and Coles 2016; Fischer 2017; Schlosberg and Craven 2019; White 2019) and action research in creating new movements (e.g. Coles 2016), to fresh critical normative reflection on the predicates or meaning of ecological democracy (Lepori 2019; Hammond 2019) and how to build resonance between ecological concerns and a democratically disengaged public (Meyer 2008, 2015). For Meyer, a critical re-examination of the material practices of everyday life offers fruitful spaces where resonance with disengaged publics might be built, and his focus is local land-use, private automobile practices, and household provisioning.

Unlike the first iteration of ecological democracy, this new iteration seeks to connect ecology and democracy in everyday life by creating new and more ecologically responsible material practices in collective, embodied, and prefigurative ways. This is a marked shift in focus away from representative democracy 'from above' and towards more radical and participatory forms of democracy 'from below' through the creation of 'publics' and self-organising movements. Accountability politics remains present, but it is less focused on states. For Lepori, in particular, emerging *demoi*, in this case the coming together of ordinary people to address disempowerment around ecological concerns, are the essence of authentic ecological democracy whereas institutionalised democracy is mostly simulated and excludes ordinary people; it is 'where democracy goes to die' (Lepori 2019, 87). In a similar vein, Romand Coles' 'visionary pragmatism' (2016) pairs a radical democratic habitus and a new

materialist politics of ‘tending’ that is self-organising and potentially catalytic. While locally based, his account of ecological democracy includes imagining, theorising and physically enacting an alternative politics of circulation in relation to food, energy and other larger material flows.

Likewise, Meyer’s contribution draws on Deweyan pragmatism for guidance because it is grounded in experience and focuses on practical consequences. The contours of Dewey’s idea of public and its relationship to the private can never be known in advance, and are constantly shifting. The public, at any given time, consists of all those who are affected by, or who experience the consequences of, particular decisions or practices who come together to publicise such consequences and to seek public judgment and accountability (Meyer 2015, 85). Of course, the concerns that produce publics may be environmental or anti-environmental. However, Meyer sees publics as having the most critical environmental potential to connect ecology and democracy when they take the form of a counter-movement in Polanyi’s sense of the term, that is, when they are ‘activated by the indirect consequences of actions otherwise construed as private’ (Meyer 2015, 90).

Meyer’s account also represents the most explicit attempt to address the resonance dilemma by reaching beyond those who are already committed to sustainability. This entails respecting ‘the complexity and sincerity of people’s values and everyday experiences’ (2015, 171) and finding ways to practically engage with these experiences rather than simply resort to persuasion. He shows how the many constraints and frustrations experienced by citizens in their daily material practices, such as the time lost in lengthy commutes by private transport and the trials and tribulations of running a household, provide the grist for building resonance by politicising and redrawing the boundaries of the private and the public in environmentally and democratically productive ways. In the case of land-use practices, he

shows how counter-movements of the affected can expose the inconsistencies between absolutist claims to private property and actual practices based on extensive public delineation of appropriate use through regulation, which can undermine these absolutist claims as myths that bear no relationship to practice.

The new materialism provides a productive response to a number of developments: the increasing 'professionalism' of many established environmental NGOs at the expense of direct engagement with local communities; the failure or limitations of value-based, moralistic, apocalyptic or technocratic environmental advocacy; general frustration with the toxic environmental politics and deep polarisation on the national political stage, especially in the USA and Australia; an attentiveness to the wide diversity of environmental concerns, knowledges, and life-worlds; and a quest to break down old environmental stereotypes in practical and meaningful ways that can resonate with citizens. Insofar as new materialism represents an expression of ecological citizenship, it goes well beyond individual acts of voting or buying sustainable products to embrace voluntary and collective efforts to create new sustainable systems of production and circulation (Schlosberg and Craven 2019).

The 'materialist' label attached to this new wave of EPT is highly significant not only in practice but also in theory. Philosophically, it aligns with the vitalism of the philosophical movement of new materialism in recognising agency in nonhuman nature, including the liveliness of matter, and the ontological entanglement of humans, nonhumans, technologies and ecosystems (e.g. Schlosberg and Craven 2019, Chapter 6). For Meyer (2015) and Schlosberg and Craven (2019) in particular, it is a repudiation of Inglehart's influential categorisation of environmentalism as one facet of the '*post*-material' values of affluent and educated classes, in this case, the valuing of an abstract nature or an expression of lifestyle.

From a practice perspective that sees meanings embedded in, rather than separate from, material practices, Inglehart's categories are criticised as philosophically incoherent because they reduce environmentalism to nothing more than a set of subjective post-material *values* (as if there is no material dimension to our daily interactions with ecological systems and nonhuman others) and leave those who are located on the materialist side of the binary trapped in objective material dependencies (with no subjectivity because it is assumed that they cannot value environmental protection ahead of basic needs satisfaction). Post-materialism is therefore condemned for categorically failing to capture the diversity and materialist dimension of all environmental movements, especially the 'environmentalism of the poor' and the rich variety of movements for environmental justice (e.g. Meyer 2015, 49-62, Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 167-68; Schlosberg and Craven 2019, Chapter 2). Focusing on everyday material practices and flows in household, transport, and land practices (Meyer 2015), food and energy systems and 'making' practices (such as repairing and remaking clothes) (Schlosberg and Coles 2016) highlights pathways for building local democratic engagement and ecological connections through the quotidian activities that literally sustain all communities, rich and poor.

Evaluating ecological democracy 1.0 and 2.0

The first and second iterations of ecological democracy provide different, historically situated, answers to the question of how to connect ecology and democracy and, by implication, what it means to be an ecological citizen. These differences are both substantive and methodological: they invoke different models or traditions of democracy and they

approach the task of critique and reconstruction from very different perspectives. As we have seen, new materialists have sought to connect ecology with more direct forms of democracy (of the radical, participatory and voluntary self-organising kind) rather than with representative democracy, where political participation is mostly confined to voting and calling *others* to account. Building new movements, 'publics,' and *demoi* around ecological concerns in everyday life is an enactment of ecological citizenship as political responsibility-taking, and a demonstrative rejection and critique of systems of 'organised irresponsibility' (after Beck): markets and states.

However, there are also continuities on both sides of the ecology-democracy equation. On the ecology side, the vitalism, and emphasis on ecological systems and material flows, of the new materialism is philosophically compatible with the relational ontology and inclusive ethics of ecocentric philosophy that animated the first iteration of ecological democracy (e.g. Matthews 1995). Both challenge human chauvinism and human-nature dualism, underscore human embodiment and embeddedness in ecological relations, and promote an ethic of care for nonhuman others. However, the new materialism has also brought technology into the human-nonhuman ontological entanglement and it places more emphasis upon environmental adaptation than protection.

On the democracy side, both iterations support deliberative democracy, although new materialism seeks to tilt deliberative democracy away from institutions or larger deliberative systems and towards the building of local publics in civil society (e.g. Lepori 2019, 95). Moreover Meyer's development of the Deweyan public based on the 'all affected principle',

and the general new materialist focus on building counter-movements and publics, both hark back, in different ways, to the all-affected principle defended by ecological democracy 1.0. Yet counter-publics can also emerge at the national, transnational and global levels (cf. Bray 2011), and local and transboundary publics are institutionally enabled by liberal constitutions (which guarantee civil and political rights) or by international regimes such as the Aarhus Convention, which builds on decades of democratic engagement by environmental movements, primarily at the national level but increasingly at all levels of governance, a lesson that both waves of ecological democracy ignore at their peril.

However, the methodological differences in approaching the tasks of critique and reconstruction are more striking. Indeed, many of the new materialist contributions, and especially Meyer's, resonate with the so-called 'new realist' critique of abstract ethical and political philosophy (e.g. Rossie and Sleat 2014), but without the political conservatism of realism. This includes a rejection of abstract normative theorising, a rejection of paternalism and moralism (as distinct from morality), an embrace of pluralism, a philosophical acceptance of political disagreement (rather than seeing it as something that must be overcome in the name of collective action), and (in the case of Meyer) a preoccupation with the conditions for the possibility of winning political legitimacy. There is also a communitarian strain in new materialism, with its focus on everyday life in communities, albeit redirected in ways that are attentive to larger material flows and social consequences. Meyer's approach to social criticism directly draws on Michael Walzer's account of the 'inside critic', which Meyer positions in-between 'outside critics' and 'inside players' (2015, 5). This approach starts with the lived experiences of particular communities, and then seeks to achieve critical distance by making connections between the everyday frustrations and

constraints experienced by citizens and the unsustainable structures and flows in which citizens are embedded. Democratic practice and ecological issues are connected by publics formed out of practical, placed-based experiences of the indirect ecological consequences of actions otherwise construed as normal and private. This stands in contrast to friendly inside criticism of environmental democracy, which focused primarily on advocacy and worked strategically with the grain of liberal democracy to mobilise citizens through critical exposure of ecological problems coupled with advocacy for reform.

It is also different from the first wave of ecological democracy, which provided both an external and immanent critique of liberal democracy from a global ecological vantage point that was more idealist and cosmopolitan and more radical in its focus on institutional reconstruction. Launched on what seemed a rising tide of democracy, and during the heyday of the globalisation debates in the 1990s, it seized the opportunity to open-up new democratic horizons. This more globalist and institutionally-focused wave has morphed in different directions in the new Millennium. This includes critical investigations, in a more sombre register, of the daunting democratic challenges of navigating the Anthropocene, (e.g. Lövbrand, Stripple and Wimand 2009, Niemeyer 2014, Dryzek 2016, Eckersley 2017). Clearly, the radical form of immanent critique of liberal democracy faces much stiffer political headwinds in winning political legitimacy than the different types of 'inside criticism' of the new materialism and environmental democracy.

The great virtue of new materialist movements in the contemporary context of democratic disaffection is that they open-up new 'circuits of legitimation' for environmental action that are at once material, discursive and demonstrative rather than value-based, moralistic, apocalyptic or technocratic. Although this new wave of ecological democracy is technically

not populism, in the sense of making demands against the state or elites in the name of the people, it shares with populism of all stripes a disillusionment with, and rejection of, democratic representation by mainstream political parties and technocratic elites (Caramani 2017). Many professional environmental NGOs have found themselves on the technocratic side of the elite/populist divide, which has put them out of touch with the particularistic preoccupations and grievances of local communities, environmental and otherwise.

Yet there are two, related limitations to this direct democratic response to complex, global ecological problems: durability and the challenge of scaling up. The problem of durability relates to the low levels of institutionalisation that arise from voluntarist and localist movements, which raise questions regarding how far prefigurative politics can create the conditions for their perpetuation through time. Deweyan 'publics' and *demoi* are even more ephemeral or 'fugitive' (Wolin 1994) insofar as they appear as episodic responses to particular grievances that punctuate routinised practices of conventional representative democracy. Moreover, the weaker the institutionalisation, the harder becomes the processes of scaling up sustainable materialism so that it has an appreciable impact (both ecologically and democratically) on the two most powerful and integrated social steering systems that are driving ecological destruction: markets and states.

However, insofar as new materialist movements create routine material practices and shared normative understandings, then they may be understood as examples of local, polycentric democratic governance, just like local regimes for the protection of common pool resources. Both are highly desirable and authentic expressions of ecological democracy. But as Ostrom has shown, these initiatives are bounded, 'slowly cumulating' and not a panacea; national, regional and global regimes become necessary, especially for global ecological problems

(Ostrom 2010). Thus far, however, movements have focused less on orchestration and 'joining up' to achieve larger system change and more on setting an example to enable replication elsewhere at an appropriate scale via networks (Schlosberg and Craven 2019, Chapter 7). The point is to maintain a 'community economy' and thereby avoid the risks of co-optation into the logic of the neoliberal market economy. These risks are very real. But if avoiding them means that new materialist movements must operate in small and parallel universes, outside unsustainable neoliberal economies, then this could become self-defeating if unsustainability becomes more rampant in the global economy. And there is a worst case democratic scenario to contemplate: if the representative and accountability practices of liberal democracies continue to decline, political corruption increases and human rights protection weakens then the opportunities for the creation of counter-movements and publics also become imperilled. Povitkina (2018) has shown that the presence of corruption cancels out the advantages liberal democracies have over authoritarian states in addressing ecological problems. Clearly, more general democratic vigilance and the maintenance of the synergies between environmentalism and liberal democracy remain necessary conditions for ecological democracy 2.0.

New materialist movements and scholars are mindful of this problem. Coles' account of visionary pragmatism (2016) addresses the longevity of sustainable materialism by rightly noting that new movements may need to expand the modes and sites of democratic engagement but without losing their decentralised democratic dynamism. Drawing on complex system dynamics, he suggests that the risks of co-optation could be minimised and possibly reversed if movements can catalyse broader publics that intersect with the larger unsustainable structures they are seeking to transform (Coles 2016, 156). Meyer also sees

publics as the means for connecting local grievances with broader structures, which inevitably leads to questioning the local and/or national regulatory environment that inhibits more sustainable practices. If there is to be an ecological democracy 3.0, then durability and joining- and scaling-up are areas where more work needs to be done.

One line of inquiry is to think about how joining- and scaling-up work might be polycentric. It is possible to have democratic orchestration without hierarchy, and without the state, if it works as a 'soft' form of governance that entails building voluntary connections through demonstration, persuasion, material support and ideational affinity (e.g. Abbott et al. 2015). We are already seeing this with the spontaneous emergence of a variety of 'orchestration platforms' that aggregate and evaluate the effects of polycentric initiatives while also creating opportunities for coordination, social learning, convergence, and reflexive adjustments towards continuous improvement (e.g. van der Ven et al., 2017), but these are often highly specialised counter-publics and, like local initiatives, are unlikely to be a panacea without significant shifts in national policies and laws.

Transitioning from unsustainable to more sustainable practices is an ongoing process that will require, among many other things, stronger and periodically recalibrated environmental regulation, especially (but not only) at the national level. This is more likely to happen, and more likely to endure, in democratic states if there is mobilisation of national publics including building broad political coalitions with sympathetic environmental NGOs, businesses, political parties, and other organisations. States are powerful social steering systems that can thwart, co-opt, or facilitate the sustainability transition process, including

polycentric ‘joining up work’ from above and below. Yet states are contradictory and divided entities, and there are many sympathetic sites inside states, including in ministries, independent agencies, and new party formations dedicated to sustainability (whether green parties or other parties). But realising the state’s facilitative potential presupposes more basic repair and renewal of representative democracy.

Ecological democracy 1.0 and 2.0 do different and valuable work; they need each other if they are to flourish, and they also depend on the continuation of environmental democracy. Ecological democracy 2.0 can also offer new resources and ideas to help reinvigorate environmental democracy, particularly national environmental advocacy, not only by building local support for broader regulatory change but also by prompting reflection on new ways in which environmental NGOs might engage the public. This may, in turn, help to reinvigorate liberal democracy or at least keep it afloat for the purposes of deepening and extending representation and accountability institutions of the kind defended by ecological democracy 1.0.

Conclusion

I set out here to examine the evolution of ecological democracy during a period of democratic expansion and retraction, set against a longer history of environmental democracy. Whereas the first iteration of ecological democracy sought to challenge and expand democratic horizons through a radical ecological and democratic critique and reconstruction of the regulative ideals and institutions of representative democracy and a vigorous defence of the ecological virtues of deliberative democracy, the second has focused instead on connecting

ecology and democracy by building resonance between environmental issues and publics via the material practices of everyday life. We have seen that both iterations carry their own virtues and drawbacks, and insofar as there are tensions they should be understood as productive and necessary to maintaining democratic and methodological pluralism. Radical external and immanent critique can be revelatory and illuminating precisely because of the degree of critical distance it can take on deeply entrenched institutions and social understandings, but it necessarily faces a tougher democratic legitimation challenge in real world politics. More sympathetic forms of internal criticism are more attuned to the democratic legitimation challenge precisely because they are more respectful of citizens concerns in the here and now; and the new materialist turn has opened up a new and productive line of inquiry that can enliven local democratic and ecological engagement. This is valuable in its own right but can also help prepare the ground for policy transformation at higher levels of social aggregation. Yet the challenges of joining and scaling up such democratic efforts to make a national and global difference are formidable. In between scanning and opening-up the furthest possible ecological and democratic horizons and reflecting on how to build ecological resonance with democratically disaffected citizens, there is clearly much more democratic work ahead.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to David Schlosberg for inviting me to participate in the Ecology and Democracy conference organised by the Sydney Environmental Institute at the University of Sydney in February 2018, where these ideas were first presented. I'm also grateful to Ian Manners for prompting me to work up my notes into a conference paper for his ISA panel in 2018, and to Ian and the panel members and audience for their feedback. Finally, thanks to

my colleagues in political science at the University of Melbourne for their comments on a revised version of this paper, and to Sophie Reid for her valuable research assistance.

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