Critical Exchange

**Democracy in the Anthropocene**

*The Politics of the Anthropocene*

John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering

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The Anthropocene is an emerging epoch of human-induced instability in the Earth system. Our book argues that many of the signature problems of the Anthropocene are the product of dominant institutions that emerged in the previous epoch – the Holocene. These institutions remain stuck in ‘pathological path dependencies’ that decouple human institutions from the Earth system by systematically repressing information about ecological conditions and prioritizing narrow economic concerns. As an antidote to pathological path dependences, institutions need to cultivate ecological reflexivity, which refers to the capacity of an entity to: recognise and anticipate its impacts on social-ecological systems and listen to feedback from those systems; critically reflect on core values in light of this feedback; and respond by transforming its practices.

Ecological reflexivity requires rethinking the core social values that underpin political institutions, and in successive chapters the book explores how justice, sustainability and democracy need to be rethought in Anthropocene conditions. The book presents new arguments for democracy in the Anthropocene, focusing on the need for formative agents – those who are capable of giving meaning to social values that guide practice – to deliberate with one another. Formative agents include the most vulnerable, experts, discourse entrepreneurs and many others. While each type of agent has different strengths, they also have important limitations. Democratic conditions are necessary to overcome these limitations through deliberative interactions among different kinds of formative agents.

John Dryzek & Jonathan Pickering

**What is the Value of Deliberative Democracy in the Anthropocene?**

In *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering set out to re-evaluate not just environmental politics, but *all* politics (v). The very basis for all our political values has changed: It can no longer take for granted the Holocene conditions (the past 12,000 years or so of Earth history) of unusual stability in the Earth system. Now that humanity, as Dryzek and Pickering explain, has inescapably entered the Anthropocene, a new kind of politics is needed that takes seriously the fundamental, human-induced instability this new epoch stands for. The book discusses governance, justice, sustainability and democracy from an entirely new angle; one that understands human political actors and processes in the context of the wider, unstable Earth system, and sets them within the geological timescale.

In the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), humanity has begun to decisively influence core parameters of the Earth system (such as the global climate) in a way that causes instability to the point of posing a constant possibility for catastrophic state shifts in humans’ own ‘life support system’ on the Earth (Steffen et al. 2007: 614). Within the vast discussion this realisation has sparked amongst political scientists and theorists (see also, e.g., Biermann and Lövbrand 2019; Arias-Maldonado and Trachtenberg 2018), Dryzek’s and Pickering’s book makes a vital contribution: Against the Promethean stance that advocates dangerous geo-engineering, they argue we must listen to nature better (10-11). Against those who advocate only superficial reform effected by the same institutions that have caused the current crises, they stress the need to ‘rethink everything’ (12) on an ongoing basis – what they term ‘ecological reflexivity’ (35-36). And where some may see the Anthropocene as a state of emergency justifying top-down impositions of drastic changes, they call for deeper democracy: more inclusive and better quality communication across the entire Earth system (17). The book thus draws a wide range of both past and cutting-edge strands of research together to make a compelling case for a wiser, more deeply considered, more long-term oriented response to the Anthropocene than has become customary among some recent scholarly discourses.

The book, then, is valuable as a response to sceptics and critics of a democratic approach to environmental sustainability. What may not be immediately obvious, however, is that between the lines it simultaneously – contradictorily – *undermines* the very theory of democracy for which the authors’ intellectual home, the University of Canberra’s Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, is justly renowned. When viewed from the perspective of a sympathetic ‘internal’ colleague already on board with a democratic, inclusive, and ecologically holistic approach to (environmental) politics, the argumentative strategy Dryzek and Pickering pursue surprises by being defensive rather than passionate and treating deliberative democracy as merely instrumental rather than of intrinsic value – contradicting the ambitious and critical theory of deliberative democracy that has given John Dryzek nothing short of a global following.

Whether accounts of ecological democracy are innately contradictory, necessarily mistreating democracy as an instrumental procedure towards seemingly non-negotiable, substantive environmental outcomes, is a very old debate (Goodin 1992). Only if environmental sustainability is understood as open in its meaning and normative in nature does it remain compatible with an intrinsic role of, and respect for, democracy (Hammond and Smith 2017; Hammond 2019). Dryzek and Pickering will be well aware of this (see, e.g., Dryzek 2000: 140-1; Dryzek 1995: 18), and yet they position themselves explicitly in opposition to such a view by arguing ‘sustainability cannot … be completely open’ (88). In their account, seeing sustainability as open-ended is ‘risky’: they argue it is necessary to insist on a substantive core of sustainability so as to ‘safeguard the values at stake’ and convey an urgency for collective action to defend them (88-89). On this point, they cite Manuel Arias-Maldonado’s insistence that

…[e]ven an open conception of sustainability cannot be free of substantive ecological content, not least because “some socio-ecological thresholds are not to be crossed, in order to avoid major imbalances that may render any possible version of sustainability unattainable in the future” (89 – citing Arias-Maldonado 2013: 439)

Unavoidably, a substantive definition of sustainability renders the role of democracy instrumental as opposed to inherent: Democracy is advocated *qua* instrument to realise sustainability as the desired outcome, making its value conditional upon its effectiveness in fulfilling this function. This has two problematic consequences. First, it shifts the focus onto problem-solving, and thereby reduces deliberative democracy – which Dryzek (1990; 2000) has previously presented as a comprehensive critical theory of democratic legitimacy – to a strategic tool. This may appeal to those who happen to be committed to both democracy and sustainability as core values, but it actually leaves democracy on fragile ground in case the two began to conflict, or should a more successful strategy than the democratic route be found. Second, the tools developed in the book could equally be co-opted towards much less noble causes. Dryzek and Pickering press for ‘discourse entrepreneurship’ (116-118) and the right kind of ‘formative agency’ (105) – for which deliberation is one tool amongst others (112) – to influence the discourse on the Anthropocene *in the direction of their own substantive account*. Without an inherent, necessary connection between a *democratic* agency and the desideratum of sustainability, what stops those committed to other substantive goals (say, geo-engineering) from applying the same entrepreneurial strategy to their own agendas? Let me develop the two points in turn.

The first point – the strategic treatment of deliberative democracy – is discernible in the book’s search for ‘effective’ governance in the Anthropocene (128), towards which it presents deliberation as one tool amongst others. While the old institutions of the Holocene (such as multilateralism) are proving ineffective at addressing the problems caused by the new instability (think of the recurrent failures of international negotiations to generate effective climate action), Dryzek and Pickering cite evidence of how designed citizen forums can make policy-making more reflexive (133). They argue that deliberation serves to promote learning and the take-up of (in their own evaluation) ‘successful’ ideas (145). One of the examples they offer is of how ‘intense deliberation encompassing all the institutions of government—and much of civil society— … in response to a great crisis of the state’ induced reflexivity in American political history (113). In these instances, they promote deliberation for its *effectiveness* as a governance tool in exerting formative agency towards a *substantive* goal. Even if all the arguments are correct, this treatment of deliberation ignores the importance – as stressed in much of Dryzek’s own previous work – of more spontaneous and diffuse forms of deliberation in the public sphere. The public sphere is of particular importance to deliberative democracy as a critical theory of legitimacy because this is where deliberative impacts arise from the bottom up – as opposed to potentially becoming another ‘soft-power instrument’ at the disposal of precisely these ‘institutions of government’, seeking to sway the public discussion their way (Freschi and Mete 2009: 41; see also Böker 2017). Tying its value to an instrumental purpose, supporting a substantive account of sustainability, leaves the normative concept of deliberation vulnerable towards such changes in meaning and character. Reiterating its *intrinsic* link with democracy, in contrast, would mean that even as the concept evolves further in its meaning, this occurs in the service of deeper democracy, not against it.

In their book, Dryzek and Pickering betray this intrinsic link with the democratic cause when they put deliberation to the service of ‘formative agency’ towards a particular substantive goal instead (105, 122). The *right kind* of formative agency is needed, they argue, for new meanings to be reflexively created where stubborn path dependencies would otherwise perpetuate the crisis of unsustainability. It can be exercised through language, including deliberation, as well as non-linguistic means (such as protest and initiatives that lead by example) (109-115). Calling for a deliberative form of formative agency could have been an intrinsic argument in favour of reflexive and thus open discourses over strategic, manipulative agency. Yet in an overall instrumental account, deliberation cannot be treated as so open; logic dictates that from the arsenal of different tools democratic ones will be chosen only to the extent they serve the substantive goal. Indeed, Dryzek and Pickering note, as deliberative forums are ‘not so good when it comes to the justification of positions and making of arguments’, advocates and ‘discourse entrepreneurs’ at a more formal level are still needed, too (138). Now, it is true that meanings are tied in with political ideologies, and, if found to perpetuate untenable structures such as Holocene forms of governance, democratic actors must change those meanings in order to break through such path dependencies. However, rather than drawing on deliberative theory to call attention to, and critically challenge, the way in which conceptual signifiers and entire discourses are permeated by strategic power, Dryzek and Pickering implicitly reduce deliberation to another tool at the disposal of those playing this power game. In this discussion of the arsenal of different tools, it reads like a side joke when they reassure their readers that ‘of course we do not endorse violence as a way of exercising formative agency’ (114). Yet the strategic tenor of their argument, with its focus on evaluating the possible tools through which meanings can be changed towards their new *substantive* goal, indeed makes it necessary to state this explicitly because the instrumental nature of their discussion has displaced the intrinsic normativity that would have innately ruled out violence.

As their overall recommendation for effective Anthropocene governance, Dryzek and Pickering conclude

…if deliberative conditions do indeed enhance ecological sensibilities, the challenge is to make systems of governance more deliberative. This can apply to the way parliaments work, to the content of electoral campaigns, to multilateral negotiations, to the role of civil society organizations in representing different ranges of concerns; in short, to the construction of a more *effective* deliberative democracy (148 - emphasis added).

This is a far cry from the vision of a *critical* deliberative democracy in the public sphere for which Dryzek’s previous work is known. Note that the ‘if’ reiterates the merely conditional advocacy for deliberative democracy, and that deliberation in the public sphere is missing from the list. Rather than a form of discourse that ‘rules out domination via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, deception…’ (Dryzek 2000: 2), deliberation itself becomes a tool for (albeit well-meaning) ideological domination: How to craft deliberative democratisation in such a way as to influence the political discourse towards the authors’ own account of sustainability to maximum political impact?

My second point, and the second problem, goes beyond the shift away from Dryzek’s earlier critical accounts of deliberative democracy that followers of the Centre – like myself – will find lamentable. An instrumental account like this is also politically questionable. Democracy matters in general because no-one, including the authors, can ever have a superior access to ‘truth’ over matters that are normative in nature. For this reason, any argument that subordinates democracy to a substantive normative account is problematic. As a normative concept, the meaning even of as fundamental a goal as sustainability is neither fixed nor obvious. For example, far from advancing an ideologically incontrovertible account, Dryzek and Pickering themselves discredit a rival representation based on the concept of resilience for having suffered from concept stretching (38), despite defending their own use of the concept of sustainability on the grounds that ‘[i]t makes no sense to abandon worthwhile values just because they have been abused’ (86). They are vocal in rejecting the ‘planetary boundaries’ framework (Rockström 2015) for naïvely suggesting safe conditions can be maintained such that ‘all will be well’ (7), yet the above-cited passage by Arias-Maldonado they draw on in insisting on ‘socio-ecological thresholds’ uses a very similar formulation, and comes from a strand of work that also stresses the possibility of crafting a ‘good Anthropocene’. These examples show that no matter how well-considered and well-intentioned Dryzek and Pickering’s account of sustainability is, it is not obvious or indisputable in a way that would make democratic debate about it redundant. Awareness of this should by no means stop them from putting forward this account as one contribution to the debate. It should, however, have deterred them from tying the value of democracy to its instrumental realisation, as opposed to precisely its critical, open-ended interrogation.

Because of such ambiguities around the meanings of the Anthropocene and sustainability within it, Dryzek and Pickering do specifically call for discourse entrepreneurship in the Anthropocene to be ‘critical and inclusive’ (139). They draw on Dryzek’s (2000) earlier work to highlight that ‘the inclusive, open, critical, and consequential engagement of discourses involving capable representatives, advocates, and citizens ought to be the critical essence of deliberative democracy’ (140). However, in the context of an instrumental account that insists on substantive values, these desiderata are in conflict with each other. Engagement must be critical, for Dryzek and Pickering, so as to expose manipulation of discourses and provide for ‘reflectively acceptable positions … [to] flourish’ (ibid.). Yet where is the line to be drawn between manipulative spin doctoring and the authors’ own notion of benevolent ‘discourse entrepreneurship’? Within a substantive account, do ‘reflectively acceptable positions’ not reduce to what *they* deem acceptable? One gets the impression the book wants to argue all the right things, but it ultimately skirts around this core tension without resolving it.

This is politically dangerous at a time when deliberative democratisation is needed more than ever to counteract precisely all the spin, ‘fake news’, and ‘alternative facts’ out there. Whether it is called manipulation or entrepreneurship, the strategic influencing of discourses is an exercise of power – in Rainer Forst’s terminology, ‘noumenal power’ or power over the ‘space of reasons’ (Forst 2015: 116; see also Curato et al. 2018). Dryzek and Pickering want to ‘pay less attention to powerful actors such as states’ (105), and advocate for noble aims such as keeping in mind the ‘most vulnerable’ (122-124) and even involving non-human nature in exercising agency (126). And yet, rather than fighting *against* powerful actors to keep the discursive space and the realm of meanings open and democratic (cf. Hammond 2019: 67-9), they present an account in which deliberation is itself used to exercise strategic power . By focussing their analysis on the most effective ‘forces of change’ in light of ‘the pressing need to change dominant institutions and practices for the better’ (105) – defined in *their* terms – Dryzek and Pickering play into the hands of those who would declare the environmental crisis a state of emergency sufficient to warrant relinquishing as luxury a principled commitment to normative political values, including democracy (see Hammond and Smith 2017: 3-6). The strategic nature of this account makes it vulnerable to co-optation by those pursuing less noble ends. For instance, Dryzek and Pickering argue the right deliberative spaces can be designed to elicit ecological concern over economic ends, including taking the deliberating citizens to the rain forest (148). Couldn’t the business lobby easily co-opt this strategy and design a citizen forum to take place, say, at the stock exchange – learning from Dryzek and Pickering how to orchestrate democratic spaces to bring about a certain desired outcome? Portraying deliberative democracy as a shortcut towards specific outcomes, bypassing more genuine, bottom-up meaning-making through public deliberation, may well prove a dangerous strategy.

The alternative resolution to the underlying dilemma of ecological democracy would be to define sustainability as an open-ended concept and fully ‘trusting’ the democratic process to bring about sustainable outcomes, provided the right conditions apply (see, e.g., Hammond and Smith 2017; Hammond 2019). This line of argument of course raises the opposite objection: Why should we be able to trust reflexive, deliberative processes to lead to ecological outcomes? What if people democratically chose the status quo over sustainability? Such concerns can be difficult to assuage, for the outcomes of open-ended processes are indeed uncertain. Yet Dryzek and Pickering, in this book, actually have an answer for them. They note:

…most individuals do not lack environmental sensibilities—it is just that these are crowded out by other sorts of concerns. … [I]n many societies environmental concerns are displaced by the deluge of advertising in market systems, by misinformation in the public sphere (reaching its worst in post-truth politics), by demagogues playing on fears of other categories of humans, and by the generally low quality of information circulating in the media and public sphere (148).

This sounds like exactly the kind of situation that a general, principled defence of deliberative democracy – one that would intrinsically rather than instrumentally challenge manipulative or narrow-minded uses of formative agency and other forms of power – could address. Dryzek and Pickering could have developed the argument that the more deliberative the process is, the less likely it is to contain strategic attempts at misleading the public (see 143), *and the more likely thus to intrinsically enhance sustainability*. In other words, this could have been their way out of the ecological democracy dilemma, rendering unnecessary their strategic line of argument that reduces deliberative democracy to an instrumental value. They could have drawn on Dryzek’s (1990, 2000) own theories to call for deliberative democracy as the norm that the discursive sphere ought intrinsically to be freed from power-based distortions, confident that once these distortions stop ‘crowding out’ innate environmental sensibilities, reflexive ecological values could spontaneously emerge. It is thus all the more puzzling that the authors choose to insist on substantive ecological values, thereby endorsing deliberative democracy only conditionally and instrumentally.

Marit Hammond

**Democratic Theory Must Escape the Holocene**

We will address the two issues on which Hammond’s critique focuses, namely the book’s arguments on deliberative democracy and sustainability, and follow with some reflections arising from this exchange on the conduct of political theory in the Anthropocene. However, it is important to underscore that the book’s overall scope is much broader. It contains some discussions of democracy, but that is not its main point (as we note on 128). Nor is it a book on sustainability, though that is what she dwells on; sustainability is the topic of one chapter. Still, Hammond is entitled to emphasize those aspects of the book that address her own preoccupations, and our reply will not contest her highly selective extraction of themes from the book.

Let us start with Hammond’s critique of the book’s position on democracy. Hammond says our book ‘*undermines* the very theory of democracy’ for which our Centre ‘is justly renowned.’ She believes we have abandoned an intrinsic form of deliberative democracy in favour of an instrumental form. We would note that our Centre has no common party line, least of all the one for which Hammond suggests we are renowned. Moreover, in this context it makes less sense to talk about ‘instrumental’ justifications for deliberative democracy, particularly if ‘instrumental’ is misconstrued as meaning ‘strategic’. Rather it makes more sense to think in terms of ‘problem-solving’ or ‘epistemic’ justifications.

There have long been two main kinds of justifications for deliberative democracy. The first is intrinsic, stressing that inclusive, meaningful, and consequential deliberation constitutes democratic legitimacy. The second is epistemic, that deliberation produces better collective decisions. These two justifications do not necessarily map onto different *forms* of deliberative democracy. Instead, multiple forms of deliberative democracy can draw support from both justifications simultaneously. The stark contrast between two approaches that Hammond draws is therefore unwarranted. It also leads her into some dubious intellectual history, in which we have allegedly abandoned an earlier intrinsic justification/form. If she went back still further, she would find that Dryzek’s (1987) original justification of what can now be called deliberative democracy in an ecological context is entirely epistemic. The real intellectual history intertwines intrinsic, critical, and epistemic moments.

Nevertheless, Hammond’s distinction does point to an important source of tension in theories of deliberative democracy, namely between the procedural and substantive values that underpin democratic legitimacy. A key challenge for theories of ecological or environmental democracy is that incorporating ecological parameters (e.g. the right to a healthy environment) into those theories may place undue constraints on democratic processes and debase democratic values by ‘instrumentalising’ the latter in the service of contestable substantive values (see Goodin 1992; Schlosberg et al 2019). However, Hammond’s concerns about our account of procedural and substantive values are misplaced on four counts.

First, and crucially, any normative theory of democracy must be able to protect its own foundations (as Hammond 2019 recognises). That is a standard way of justifying, for example, rights to free association and expression that no democratic process should be allowed to override, as those rights are essential to furthering democracy itself. Democracy likewise has ecological preconditions that no democratic process should be able to trump. There are certain basic requirements – including access to clean air and water and adequate food, all of which depend on a healthy Earth system – that are necessary both to safeguard people’s physical capacity to participate meaningfully in democratic processes and also to underpin societies’ ability to function. What constitutes a healthy Earth system can itself be deliberated, but unless we are willing to countenance the possibility that societies may legitimately decide through democratic processes to doom themselves to extinction – and thereby extinguish the very possibility of democracy – it follows that certain ecological preconditions remain essential for democracy’s survival. Despite Hammond’s (2019) argument to the contrary, these preconditions are not simply ‘meta-values’ but substantive values, ones that are widely accepted rather than being tied to a narrow ideology of what she terms ‘ecologism’.

Second, even highly procedural accounts of democracy (such as Hammond’s) make important but often implicit assumptions about ecological values, if only to reject them. In an ecologicaldemocracy we need to recognize that non-human entities cannot speak in the same way that humans can, but still merit standing as subjects of democracy. In contrast, conventional procedural accounts limit political standing to humans. This anthropocentric bias is not ecologically value-neutral but requires substantive judgments about the moral superiority of the human species over all others, and so has substantive (anti-) ecological content.

In other words, proceduralist accounts of democracy can only avoid substantive judgments about ecological values at the cost of self-defeat or self-delusion. Hammond could readily have conceded that both of our positions depend on recognising some substantive ecological values, albeit to varying degrees. This would help to shift the debate onto more fertile ground, addressing the *content* of the substantive values that should serve as parameters for theories of ecological democracy, though it would require her to drop her charge that we have abandoned an earlier open-ended theory of democracy.

Third, Hammond overlooks the distinctively *hybrid* character of theories of ecological democracy, which fuse ecological and democratic values. Some theories of this kind may well (with Hammond) consider democratic legitimacy as the paramount value under which all other values are subsumed. But a hierarchical ordering of values is not the only logical possibility. As we emphasize with respect to both ecological democracy and ecological reflexivity, democratic and ecological values can be kept in a constructive tension that ‘opens up space for contestation and rethinking within broad ecological parameters’ (57; see also Pickering 2018). Judging a hybrid account of ecological democracy against a generic ideal of deliberative democracy involves a category mistake on Hammond’s part. Even so, for the reasons we have outlined, the theory of ecological democracy presented in the book remains consistent with the theory of deliberative democracy that Dryzek has presented in earlier work.

Fourth, Hammond’s commentary misrepresents our accounts about the democratic functions of discourse entrepreneurs and formative agency. Contra what Hammond says, we do not propose discourse entrepreneurs as instruments for manipulating politics in the interests of predetermined ecological ends. Rather, we see their activity as being redeemable only in the context of a deliberative democracy that can act as a check on their problematic deployment. Social movements can be discourse entrepreneurs and formative agents. Formative agency is an analytical category, not a normative one. Formative agents exist, whether we like it or not. Formative agency can be deployed to normatively good or bad ends, just as it can undermine as well as enhance deliberation. That is why it is hardly a ‘side joke’ to point out that formative agency should not be exercised through violence.

Where we would concede a normative element is in our argument that an *ecologically reflexive* kind of formative agency is necessary to overcome the pathological path dependencies of Holocene institutions. To this extent we would readily agree that deliberation should be put to the service of ecological reflexivity (just as it should be put to the service of democratic legitimacy). But ‘service’ should not be understood as purely strategic use of deliberation. Hammond latches onto elements of chapter 6, where we introduce various categories of formative agents, but she ignores the main lesson of chapter 7, where we look at the necessity for locating them in a democratic system.

Hammond associates an ‘intrinsic’ or ‘inherent’ approach to democracy with an open-ended conceptualization of sustainability that she favours, such that sustainability is construed as ‘the unending construction of future society that is normatively *meaningful* to its members’ (Hammond 2019: 60). A corollary of her critique is that the concept of ecological reflexivity would need to be stripped back to a purely procedural notion of reflexivity, thus overlooking again the hybrid character of our account. Her radically open-ended conception of sustainability empties the concept of any ecological content, or indeed any substantive content. Her supposed resolution of the tension between environmental and democratic values is achieved only by redefining sustainability so that it is barely distinguishable from democracy; indeed she concedes as much when she says that sustainability ‘*is* democracy’ (Hammond 2019: 71).

Hammond’s critique rests in part on two misinterpretations of our stance on sustainability. First, she quotes a passage where we say that ‘sustainability cannot … be completely open’ (88) and argues that this places us ‘explicitly in opposition’ to the view that the definition and value of sustainability must remain open to debate. However, there is a nuance missed here, because the opposite of completely open is completely closed, but as we make clear we do not subscribe to the latter view. As we point out, ‘openness remains vital for imagining new options and criticizing existing practices’ (89), but the multi-dimensional account of reflexive sustainability that we present includes openness as one of five qualities (the others being that such a conception should be integrated, far-sighted, dynamic and ecologically grounded). In our view such an account strikes a conceptual balance that can address the shortcomings of other accounts that are either – like Hammond’s – too open (lacking ecological content or decisiveness) or too closed (lacking room for democratic debate).

A second nuance that her critique misses – although we concede we could have been clearer on this point in the book – is that the importance of openness and closure varies depending on whether we are talking about the public sphere or the exercise of governmental authority. We would agree with Hammond that a culture of sustainability requires vigorous, inclusive and ongoing debate about different conceptions of sustainability. Robust contestation also remains essential in the empowered space of collective decision-making. But a culture of sustainability means little unless societies actually reach some decisions about what should be sustained. Those decisions inevitably require closing off some options (e.g. freedom to pollute) while keeping others open (e.g. freedom to breathe clean air). Hammond appears to worry that any departure from completely open-ended sustainability means shutting off public debate, but this does not follow.

There are at least two further reasons why a completely open-ended idea of sustainability is problematic.

First, a purely procedural account of sustainability fails to address the problem that discourses of sustainability can be co-opted or manipulated to undermine ecological values. In Hammond’s ideal democracy of omnicompetent and ecologically-aware citizen-expert deliberators, there might be little to worry about here. In our real world, sustainability must have ecological substance, without which it is easy to see how her open-ended process could be co-opted by dominant interests seeking to minimize disruption to the political-economic status quo.

Second, purely procedural accounts of sustainability – like purely procedural accounts of democracy – undermine their own foundations. Without some substantive content, we have no reason to conclude that sustainability should be morally important at all or why we should value it over, say, evanescence. If the idea of sustainability is to be more than merely vacuous or indistinguishable from democracy, some substantive assumptions are unavoidable. Even Hammond’s (2019) account of sustainability contains substantive assumptions of its own, as where she states that sustainability ‘implies the continued existence of human societies in the face of ecological change’ (61) and constructing a ‘biologically possible’ future (62).

Finally, it is necessary to address a line of argument that Hammond directs at our stance on normative political theory. She argues that ‘any argument that subordinates democracy to a substantive normative account is problematic’ because ‘no-one, including the authors, can ever have a superior access to “truth” over matters that are normative in nature’. Of course no responsible political theorist would claim to have ‘indisputable’ knowledge of right and wrong. But what Hammond appears to object to is that democratic theorists invoke anything other than ‘ideologically incontrovertible’ values when arguing in favour of democracy, since ideologically contestable values should always remain open to democratic debate.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are three problems with Hammond’s objection.

First, Hammond’s scepticism about access to truth would surely undercut her own confidence in the procedural values she espouses, and indeed in her account of sustainability. Second, Hammond’s position on ideologically contestable values would apply to all substantive normative concepts in political theory, including justice, equality, toleration, and recognition, such that normative political theory would reduce to democratic theory. Notwithstanding the importance of democratic theory, few political theorists would be willing to countenance such an impoverished vision of their field. Third, Hammond’s view surrenders to a common anxiety among democratic theorists about endorsing particular substantive values. This anxiety stems in part from a fear that doing so somehow circumvents or overrides democratic debate. Political theorists, like any other scholars, should remain conscious of the discursive power they hold as experts in their field. However, the degree of political influence that they wield is often vastly overstated. Political theorists are not, *pace* Shelley, the unacknowledged legislators of the world, much less its unacknowledged dictators. In any case, this does not entail that they refrain from endorsing any substantive values. Even if they are not omniscient arbiters of the right and the good, political theorists have much to offer to public debate about substantive values, including an ability to clarify the arguments and assumptions at stake in a given context, and to identify their implications and inconsistencies (Swift and White 2008). This role should be seen not as short-circuiting democratic debate or rendering it ‘redundant’, but rather as enriching the plurality of discursive resources upon which participants can draw. Indeed, we would welcome robust public debate about the ideas in our book.

Democratic theorists can work quite consistently in a dual register whereby they proceed from a commitment to democratic deliberation while offering perspectives on substantive values that can serve as inputs into deliberative processes. This is a far cry from the ‘ideological domination’ or the subordination of democracy that Hammond suggests our account entails. The real challenge for theorists working in this register is not to refrain from exercising discursive power by self-censoring all substantive claims, but instead to exercise *responsibly* whatever discursive power they may have. This means ensuring that any substantive claims that they make are argued clearly, consistently and sincerely.

Allowing latitude for this mode of political theory is all the more important because the public sphere is hardly short on actors who are willing and able to exercise discursive power – often irresponsibly – with a view to embedding their own values and prejudices in public policy. The most powerful of these actors, as we argue in our book, are those who are ecologically unreflexive or, even worse, anti-reflexive. If those who hold a dual commitment to democratic and environmental values are simply silent about the latter set of values, anti-reflexivity will win out.

Hammond’s radically open-ended idea of sustainability essentially detaches sustainability from the Earth system and its precarious condition. Her stark dichotomization of intrinsic and instrumental approaches to ecological democracy could make some sense under Holocene conditions, in which ecological systems are treated as an ‘environment’ external to human politics that humans can deliberate about if they see fit, or ignore if that is their preference. In the Anthropocene, that easy dichotomization of the human and non-human no longer applies. An unstable Earth system and its component entities become political subjects, meaning that a truly ecological democracy must have ecological substance and not just democratic procedure. The injustices of the Anthropocene, Wapner (2019: 224) argues, call for a more engaged and normatively committed role for political research: value-neutrality, he contends, ‘represents an intellectual posture for a world undisturbed by moral injury.’ If democratic theory relies on procedure alone it will only reinforce the pathological path dependencies of the late Holocene that the world so urgently needs to escape.

John Dryzek & Jonathan Pickering

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1. Her arguments on this point contain some factual inaccuracies. For example, we do not reject planetary boundaries altogether (see 152-53) nor do we seek to discredit resilience but welcome it as a discourse – just not as a concept that can be defined with any precision (38). However, space precludes a detailed rebuttal here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)