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SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY AND DEMOCRACY —A RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

As environmental crises, most notably climate change, become ever more severe, voices are reappearing that call for authoritarian solutions: Democracy, so the argument goes, has proven to be too slow to respond to urgent threats, and so a stronger, authoritarian hand is needed to push through the necessary socio-political changes. In this paper, we respond to this charge by revisiting the role of democracy within a transition to sustainable prosperity. We argue it is not democracy as such that is the problem, but rather democracy in its current form is itself constrained by structural and discursive forces including the almost hegemonic status of capitalist politico-economic discourses and tendencies towards short-termism in political decision-making. Thus, instead of advocating further constraints on democracy, we explore new institutional and societal spaces that can revitalise democracy, ameliorating existing constraints and infusing sustainability politics with new ways of thinking. In particular we highlight the potential promise of participatory and deliberative innovations, prefigurative politics, reform of established structures and institutions, and deliberative systems and cultural change. The paper acts as an introduction to some of the political theory and political science aspects of the research programme of the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP).

Introduction

As environmental crises such as climate change are worsening, it seems to some straightforward to point to a failure of democracy to prevent and resolve such challenges, and thus to a need for undemocratic, if not outright authoritarian measures instead. Democracy must be suspended, so the argument goes, until the crisis is overcome and we can 'afford' such luxury again. In what follows, we show why this argument is mistaken. It rests on a misconception of sustainability as a momentary instance of survival, when it actually denotes an ongoing process of adapting to continuously changing environmental conditions; and it too readily accepts the limits of contemporary liberal democratic practice as the limits of democracy as such. In this paper, we explore the alternative view that whilst critics are right to diagnose a need for structural change in modern societies, it is not democracy that produces unsustainability. Rather,

democracy is itself constrained by the structural forces that generate unsustainability – most notably, a narrow capitalist political discourse and short-termism in political decision-making. Instead of further undermining dysfunctional democracy, the necessary structural change towards sustainability is more likely to emerge when democracy frees itself from these constraints, and can unleash more fully its capacity to induce reflection, inclusion, imagination and creativity.

The notion of sustainable prosperity (Jackson 2017; Jackson et al. 2016) provides an important starting point for an alternative, democratic vision of long-term sustainability. As a holistic and complex normative goal for modern societies, it challenges any appeal of authoritarianism, incorporating democracy as a fundamental component. However, democracy in its current constrained form remains insufficient as a basis for sustainable prosperity. Thus, in this paper, we make the case for a revitalised democratic route towards sustainable societies, engaging with innovations in democratic theory and practice that often point towards more participatory and deliberative forms of democratic action as ways of building more robust democratic responses to the sustainability challenge. Many of the ideas and practices explored in this paper will be interrogated in more detail as part of the political strand of the CUSP project, which focuses on the political and institutional foundations of new, post-growth forms of sustainable prosperity. Thus, the paper can be seen as mapping out a research agenda for this aspect of the interdisciplinary Centre, introducing relevant political innovations and setting them within a broader theoretical context.

The paper has three main sections. First, we make the case for a democratic response to the sustainability challenge, refuting the authoritarian case as well as its eco-optimist counterpart, and highlighting how democracy is both instrumentally and intrinsically necessary for sustainable prosperity. In the second section, we make the argument that our current *constrained democracy* is not sufficient as a foundation for sustainable prosperity: the practices of contemporary liberal democratic capitalist systems undermine the search for sustainability. We focus on two significant constraints related to liberal capitalism and short-termism that restrict the necessary communication, reflection, and participation. Finally, we introduce a number of different approaches to democratic practice that could have a significant role in moving us beyond these constraints. The potential of these novel forms of democratic organisation

and engagement will be the subject of further analysis as part of the research programme of CUSP.

Rejecting eco-authoritarianism

There is a long history of anti-liberal, if not outright authoritarian responses to environmental crises. As early as in the 1970s, in the wake of reports such as the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1974), a number of scholars and activists advocated eco-authoritarianism in response to resource scarcity. For instance, William Ophuls argued that environmental problems – in particular, resource scarcity – cannot be solved by liberal polities, and thus made the case for 'enlightened' non-democratic leadership (Ophuls 1977). If liberalism is incompatible with restricting the freedom to use resources, so the argument goes, only a non-liberal regime can provide the solution to a scarcity crisis. In a similar vein, Robert Heilbroner suggested the individualistic, selfish and profit-driven character of liberal industrial societies means rationally acting people will not be able to avert environmental catastrophe – or handle any economic downturn required to avert it. For him, a government 'capable of rallying obedience far more effectively than would be possible in a democratic setting' is thus the only option (Heilbroner 1974: 110).

The eco-authoritarian impulse appeared to dim with the collapse and exposure of the devastating environmental record of the centralised planned economies of the Soviet bloc (Shahar 2015). However, the growing recognition of more systemic challenges such as climate change increased the severity and urgency of the insights of *Limits to Growth* (Jackson 2009: 8-14). In this new context, it is not surprising that eco-authoritarian voices began resurfacing with renewed vigour (Beeson 2010). David Shearman and Joseph Smith (2007: 1) have argued that liberal democracy cannot 'grasp' the extent of the environmental crises, thus making the case for new authoritarian government models in which technocratic elites, as found for instance in Singapore, override democracy (pp. 124-6). Recent updates from the *Limits to Growth* team itself include some (in their own words) 'controversial' solutions (Maxton and Randers 2016: xvii, 104) that draw inspiration from Chinese policy and practice, in particular its 'centralized direction and control' (ibid: 207). This new call for authoritarianism is finding resonances particularly in the scientific community, in which there is a growing 'tendency to want to take

decisions out of the hands of politicians and the public, and, given the “exceptional circumstances”, put the decisions in the hands of scientists themselves’ (Stehr 2015: 449). The influential author of the Gaia hypothesis, James Lovelock, explicitly appeals to such a state of exception:

Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold for the time being. I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as a war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while. (Lovelock 2010)

Similarly, Lord Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal and former President of the Royal Society recently argued: ‘Only an enlightened despot could push through the measures needed to navigate the 21st century safely’ (Rees 2014).

The main alternative to this eco-authoritarian agenda has been one of *eco-optimism* – a confidence that policy and technological innovations, efficiency gains, and new forms of ‘green growth’ can economically ‘internalise’ environmental ‘costs’ and offset scarcities. A paradigm shift towards ‘ecological modernisation’ is ‘presented as a means by which capitalism can accommodate the environmental challenge. Rather than environmental protection being a threat to capitalism, it is seen as a spur to a new phase of capitalist development’ (Gouldson and Murphy 1997: 75; see also Weale 1992; Spaargaren and Mol 1992; Ekins 1999; Porritt 2005). In other words, sustainability can be achieved within existing liberal-capitalist frameworks without fundamental structural changes. Much ink has been spilt critiquing different aspects of the ecological modernisation storyline (Connelly et al. 2012: 73-79), not least the lack of evidence that the required *absolute decoupling* of growth from environmental damage is possible with increasing consumption (Jackson 2017, chapter 5). The continuing failure of contemporary democracies to make the difficult decisions necessary to move towards a low-carbon, sustainable future and the failure of ecological modernisation to attend to current weaknesses in the practice of democracy thus only play into the hands of the authoritarian alternative.

But the eco-authoritarian solution has major limitations as a political response to our current predicament and as a mode of governance to achieve sustainable prosperity. While structural change is needed, authoritarianism is a poor foundation for that change. Benevolent, ecologically-minded authoritarian leadership might be imagined

theoretically; yet in practice authoritarian regimes have a poor record not just environmentally, but at realising their own stated goals. Typically, authoritarianism engenders corruption and clientelism. As Carter (1999: 25) highlights, it is difficult to see how the kinds of structures that enable authoritarian leadership to come to power would then be able to prevent the exercise of this power from becoming corrupted and malevolent over time. There is no historical precedent for the sustainability of ecological benign leadership that eco-authoritarianism presumes; as elites in such position lack incentives to provide public goods, they are more likely to become rent-seeking for their own benefit (Ward 2008: 387; see also Burnell 2012: 823). At the same time, centralised power is always at threat from usurpers with less benevolent motives (Shahar 2015), if not attracting ‘the most competitive, most ruthless and least caring’ types of leaders in the first place (Carter 1999: 26). Questions can also be raised about how stable an authoritarian form of governance would be given the widespread commitment to liberal and democratic values, particularly in currently existing democracies. Citizens may be disillusioned and disenchanted with current practices of political elites and institutions, but their commitment to democratic ideals remains strong (Dalton 2004). Thus, whilst the eco-authoritarians’ diagnosis rightly points to the failure of democracy in its current form to bring about sustainability, it is unclear why the *kind* of structural change they advocate as an alternative – centralising power in the hands of a leadership strong enough to push through the required policies – would fare any better.

On the other hand, even if it remained focused on sustainability in the name of the common good, an authoritarian government might simply not get it right. Hierarchical structures are more likely to erode than to nurture the kind of reflexivity and experimental disposition that are key to preventing crises and adapting to changing conditions. Closed settings insulated from outside contestation are more likely to suffer from ‘group think’ (Janis 1982) and path dependency (Dryzek 2016), and are thus poor at learning and adaptiveness (Stehr 2015: 450). Hierarchy and authoritarianism stifle open communication, including with those lending a voice to the concerns of nature (Niemeyer 2013: 433-4). Hence, even if an authoritarian response might deal more effectively with the immediate climate crisis compared to current political arrangements, this would come at the cost of undermining the very foundations for anticipating, preventing, and adapting to ongoing and future social and ecological crises and changes. Insofar as sustainability consists not just in the solution of

one crisis, but requires ongoing learning and adaptation, it must therefore cultivate the foundations for open communication and engagement. At the level of political decision-making by the society as a whole, this means fostering an active public discourse that feeds a plurality of environmental views and concerns into government decision-making (Smith 2003). At the level of individuals, in turn, it implies a willingness to confront one's own views in an open-minded, reflective way, as the only pathway towards overcoming the mindsets and behaviour patterns that, not least according to eco-authoritarians themselves, have given rise to the environmental crisis in the first place (Bäckstrand et al. 2010: 5-6).

It seems, then, that eco-authoritarians have prematurely thrown the democratic baby out with the bathwater: Even though the existing political structures do reproduce unsustainability, and structural change is thus needed, it is not democracy that is to blame (Niemeyer 2014: 17). Rather, democracy is *itself* constrained by those structures in society that are primarily culpable, and removing those constraints – in other words, promoting deeper democratisation – is the very key to the solution. Thus, the same concern about unsustainable outcomes arising from existing political structures is recognised from an avowedly democratic outlook. The environmental philosopher Dale Jamieson, for instance, laments that 'sadly, it is not entirely clear that democracy is up to the challenge of climate change', yet concludes that rather than curtailing democracy, it needs to become 'more responsive' (Jamieson 2014: 100). In other words, following John Dewey, 'the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy' (Dewey 1927: 327).

The case for democracy

There are good reasons why many environmentalists have historically been committed to democracy, rather than authoritarianism; and parallel to new calls for eco-authoritarianism there have been renewed calls for 'green democracy' (e.g. Dryzek 1987, 2000; Dobson 1996a; Arias-Maldonado 2000, 2012; Smith 2003; Eckersley 2004; Niemeyer 2013, 2014). In this literature, democracy is seen as nothing less than 'one of the hallmarks' of environmental theory and practice (Latta 2007: 378) in that democracy is critical for ensuring that environmental concern is present in the overall political discourse. Only democratic systems retain a sufficiently open political agenda for the inclusion of all interests and voices, including that

of concern for future generations and nature itself (Ward 2008: 387; Dryzek 2000: 147-54; Goodin 1996; Dobson 1996b). The diversity of perspectives so represented helps promote flows of information, experimentation and learning (Smith 2003: 62; Burnell 2012: 823). In particular, processes of democratic deliberation, in which individuals are confronted with others' views and expected to justify publicly their own, encourages the rethinking of positions and the adoption of a broader, more public-minded perspective (Baber 2004: 332; Smith 2003: 60-6). The new perspectives opened up through such individual and societal reflection can be seen as a stock of resources for understanding the present and developing new visions for the future; thus, the more open, diverse and free the public discourse, the more learning is taking place, and the more pathways for continuous adaptiveness open up. In short, insofar as 'democracy is a matter of effective communication' (Dryzek 1995: 13) – open, inclusive and reflexive – it is democracy that facilitates the foundations for fundamental change to occur in societies, especially in a context of adapting to external conditions that are themselves in constant change (Barry 2012: 269).

Thus, authoritarian enforcement becomes unconvincing as a strategy once the focus shifts from considering isolated environmental problems, or the need to achieve one particular goal (such as reaching a certain lower level of greenhouse gas emissions), towards recognising that (un)sustainability is a more complex and unfolding social phenomenon, which must therefore be addressed at the level of the social, political and economic structures that drive it (Stehr 2015: 450). As a general societal characteristic and outlook, sustainability plays out over the long term; and it responds to a context of complex socio-ecological systems that are constantly changing. The constraints this sets for societies – such as resource scarcity, ecological feedback loops, and uncertainty over tipping points – are thus misconceived as isolated, abnormal threats akin to an 'emergency' or 'war' situation; rather, they constitute the general and permanent context in which human societies evolve over time, if not 'the *essence* of our dynamic situatedness' (Hilde 2012: 900, emphasis added).

In such a context, the challenge of sustainability becomes more intricate: Rather than 'just' having to enforce some sacrifices so as to *survive* in one moment in time, as the eco-authoritarian argument suggests, the challenge is to find ways to *flourish* as a society over the long term (Jackson 2009: 16). Whereas presenting the environmental context as one

momentary ‘life-or-death’ scenario, whose ‘no-real-choice quality’ (Saward 1993: 64) would seem to justify any means necessary to ensure survival, such justification becomes unconvincing as a constant, long-term vision for society, for which something more than mere survival is at stake. Here, democracy plays not just an instrumental, but an intrinsic role. Straightforward though it may seem to portray a necessity of technocratic leadership for the resolution of very specific environmental problems for which there is a clear-cut technological solution, such lines of argument are simplistic and superficial when it comes to unsustainability as a much broader phenomenon, and sustainability as a much more complex challenge, of a deeply normative rather than technical character. As John Robinson (2004: 379-80) puts it:

[S]ustainability is ultimately an issue of human behavior, and negotiation over preferred futures, under conditions of deep contingency and uncertainty. It is an inherently normative concept, rooted in real world problems and very different sets of values and moral judgements.

With such a value-laden and dynamic character, democracy becomes itself central to sustainability; for what is then needed are neither quick fixes nor defences aimed at restoring some pre-existing status quo, but rather normatively persuasive socio-political structures that help to *continually* ‘negotiate preferred futures’. In other words, sustainability becomes not a momentary state, but a never-ending ‘process of social learning’ (Arias-Maldonado 2000: 52). This goes beyond technical and scientific parameters, but requires engagement with the different possible (and thus contested) values, ethics and visions of what societies could and should look like – an engagement which, to have any chance of being equally inclusive of all members’ right to flourish, must involve all those affected by it. Sustainable prosperity in any normatively meaningful sense can then arise only if it is ‘discursively shaped and socially decided’ (Arias-Maldonado 2000: 49). This presupposes a socially inclusive form of governance that involves all citizens in its shaping such that outcomes are recognised as legitimate; a form of governance maintained by civic engagement and dialogue as opposed to force or manipulation (Brulle 2010: 91-2). Instead of enforcement, sustainability requires ‘deep political commitment’ to support the necessary adaptations (Niemeyer 2014: 16); a matter not of ‘rallying obedience’ for policies that would otherwise be rejected, but of creating the space for a collective search for alternative ways of living. Not only is democracy instrumentally necessary for determining what futures

are indeed ‘preferred’ in this sense, but as the necessary basis for people’s autonomy over their lives and thoughts, democracy becomes an intrinsic component of any vision of human flourishing.

This is what is implied by the term sustainable *prosperity*: Sustainability as not just the mere physical survival of human beings in the face of a specific crisis, but the capacity of all individuals, social groups and communities to lead lives that are meaningful to them, despite the general context of ecological limits. Inasmuch as leading a prosperous and meaningful life goes beyond fulfilling people’s material needs only (Jackson 2009: 36), it cannot be simply instituted *for* individuals, groups and communities from the top down. Rather, the autonomy and freedom embodied by democracy are not only critical capabilities for flourishing, but meaningful elements of flourishing itself (Sen 1993; 1999). For this, only democracy can provide a political foundation, for only democracy respects this freedom and autonomy, and allows for collective action to be shaped through fair and inclusive political processes.

Thus, in summary, the complex and systemic nature of the ‘new’ environmental crises highlights the inadequacy both of eco-authoritarians’ portrayal of the sustainability challenge as a ‘life-or-death’ scenario, an ‘exception’, or even a ‘war’, and its portrayal by eco-optimists as a mere ‘externality’ that can be ‘managed’. If the underlying causes of unsustainability are structural, only a socio-political response that addresses these can be successful. Whilst eco-optimism fails in this regard by suggesting *no* structural change is necessary, eco-authoritarians suggest the *wrong* kind of structural change: one that is oriented towards too narrow and indeed too short-term a goal as surviving a particular environmental crisis, as opposed to laying the foundations for a lasting and holistic sustainable prosperity. Rather than moving away from democracy, our governing structures and practices must be centrally rooted in democratic participation so as to facilitate a genuine, inclusive dialogue; one that is reflective enough to both negotiate across different values and ideas and to make possible new future visions for society. From this perspective, the unsustainability reproduced by current government structures is more likely to be due to a lack of democratic engagement rather than too much.

Sources of democratic constraint

A critical part of CUSP's research agenda is to better understand the factors that constrain sustainable prosperity and thus to consider interventions that might overcome or at least ameliorate these constraints. For our research stream, the question is more specific: How is *democracy* constrained such that it undermines the potential for realising sustainable prosperity? According to John Dryzek, all we have today is 'a minimally authentic liberal democracy', as a result of capitalist forces imposing structural 'antidemocratic constraints' on our societies that get in the way of deeper democratisation (Dryzek 1996: 9-10). We highlight briefly two broad sources of constraints that are worthy of further investigation: the narrowness of a capitalist-dominated public discourse and practices and the short-termism inherent in political decision making. These (and other) constraints are mutually reinforcing. Breaking through some of these constraints, so as to nurture a deeper, more authentic form of democracy, can present new pathways towards sustainability that harness democratic reflexivity and engagement.

Critical analysis of the unsustainable characteristics of current patterns of production and consumption has been widely explored (see for example Jackson 2017). We do not need to rehearse the ways in which contemporary capitalism in its myriad forms (consumer, financial, globalised, etc.) threatens environmental and social viability. Rather, our interest is in better understanding how ideas and practices of contemporary capitalism constrain the potential of democracy to respond to unsustainabilities (see Rocheleau 1999; Dryzek 2000: 142-3). This is part of a broader literature on the myriad ways that capitalism subverts democracy. Constraints take a number of forms, but particularly problematic from a sustainability perspective is the narrowness of political discourse nurtured by contemporary capitalism. Although 'capitalism' comes in a variety of forms and modes, at the discursive level they are united by ideas associated with economic growth and consumption that have become hegemonic to the point of 'lock[ing] us in to an "iron cage" of consumerism' (Jackson 2017: 104). Governments dependent on the capitalist growth dynamic cannot but perpetuate 'a particularly materialistic individualism' as the general culture or 'governmentality' (Jackson 2017: 196-7). As a result, governmental structures and practices undermine a broader-minded, critical public discourse, and alternative ideas and practices become difficult to articulate and envision. Democracy as a cauldron and competition of ideas

is undermined and prospects for new innovations impoverished as alternative ways of organising social and economic life are not entertained (Dryzek 1996: 12).

For instance, political scientists have long recognised the ways in which the structural advantage enjoyed by the wealthy undermines any meaningful sense of democratic pluralism. A recent study by Martin Gilens (2014) provides empirical insight into the extent to which policies of the US track the interests of the wealthy: the interests of the poor and vulnerable are only serviced when they happen to elide with those of the most privileged in society. Gerry Stoker (2016), moreover, offers evidence of the extent to which citizens tend to understand politics in the same way that they attend to consumption. Contemporary capitalism thus reinforces forms of individualism and self-interested competitiveness within not just the economic, but also social and political spheres. This kind of discourse undermines the democratic necessity of developing *collective* responses to critical *public* problems, such as the need for sustainable prosperity.

Concretely, what democratic theorists bemoan about capitalism, despite its variability in form, is the dominance of an economic, instrumental rationality in political discourse (Habermas 1984), treating individuals as economically rational, self-interested ‘social isolates’ (Dryzek 1996: 108). In contrast, democratic politics rests on a ‘communicative rationality’ (Habermas 1984) that is realised in democratic collectives of people that are ‘competent, reflective, critical, and social’ in nature (Dryzek 1996: 108). Whereas a model of politics based on instrumental rationality is tied to the reproduction of a narrow consumerist culture, the greater reflexivity of communicative rationality brings to the fore a diversity of voices, viewpoints and concerns. Not only is this broader focus necessary in the face of problems as complex and difficult to coordinate as environmental ones (Dryzek 2000: 143), but by nurturing an ‘enlarged’, less individualistic and materialistic kind of discourse, it is able to give room to visions of sustainability that would otherwise remain suppressed – including the voices of future generations and nature themselves (Dryzek 2000: 152; Niemeyer 2013: 435).

As such, the discursive hegemony of capitalism has not just led to a retreat of government from collective public action on sustainability, but also diminishes the public spaces in which new visions might otherwise flourish. The attractiveness of ecological modernisation thus becomes clear in the way it attempts to deal with environmental challenges through existing

capitalist structures and practices. It is precisely these structures, however, that at a deeper level undermine not just democracy itself, but also the richness and reflectiveness of its public discourse, including on sustainability.

A second source of constraint is short-termism. Again, there is an intimate connection between short-termism and different forms of capitalism. We have already indicated how national income accounting and other public accounting practices have come to limit our political imaginary. But they also reinforce short-term decision-making. Whether we are thinking of the way in which governments respond to quarterly GDP figures or that the fate of publicly owned companies are tied to quarterly profit reports, such economic practices discipline the judgements of political and economic elites to the short-term. The idea of long-term planning is too often lost in the response to immediate financial indicators. Equally if we focus on everyday social practices, we see how contemporary societies prioritize immediate consumption over longer-term rhythms and time scales. The way that social practices are 'locked-in' to unsustainable systems of provision such as energy, transport, food systems that prioritise short-term returns makes alternative approaches difficult and unattractive. The carbon-based nature of these practices means that the future is 'colonized' as a 'resource for the present' (Pahl et al. 2014: 379).

But it would be folly to hold capitalism up as the single cause of a lack of long-term thinking – rather capitalist practices reinforce other structural tendencies towards short-termism (MacKenzie 2017a). At the level of the political system, we can highlight three dynamics that undermine the long-term. The first is the way in which four-to-five year electoral cycles incentivise more immediate and strategic party-political motivations amongst the political class, running counter to issues that transcend a number of such cycles. Short-term costs are avoided and burdens shifted beyond the current electoral cycle. Second, the structural advantage that powerful interests enjoy enables them to protect the status quo. Economic actors embedded in the carbon-based economy have a strong interest in resisting low carbon transitions; older generations tend to have their short-term interests protected as they vote in higher numbers. Reflecting on the challenge of taking forward climate policy that clashes with extant interests (within and without government), John Ashton, one time UK Government's Special Representative on Climate Change, has stated: 'Where there is a contradiction, the forces of incumbency start with a

massive advantage’ (Klein 2014: 151). Third, there is a lack of political representation of future generations within our political structures: those who will be most affected by long term environmental damage are unable to make their voices heard and to hold current generations to account (Dobson 1996b).

These structural political factors are complemented by psychological dynamics that reinforce short-termism. Psychologists and economists highlight how individuals’ perceptions, judgements and decisions are affected by positive time preferences and discounting of the future (Frederick et al 2002). The lack of salience of structural challenges such as climate change increases psychological distance for decision makers and citizens alike.

Recognising these diverse sources of short-termism is important because the focus of critique within green political thought is often primarily towards forms of capitalism. Our brief analysis suggests that there are political, social and psychological dynamics aside from the discourses and practices of contemporary capitalism that need to be recognised in contemplating a democratic response to sustainable prosperity. Constraining capitalism alone will not bring about a long-term orientation in democratic politics – although it would make it easier! A key theme for CUSP, then, is to better understand the interplay between these various democratic constraints in order that relevant democratic responses can be articulated. It is to these ‘democratic cures’ that we now turn.

Democratising a constrained democracy

Existing unsustainability is reproduced through the structures and practices of political decision-making in contemporary Western societies; and so its solution lies in transforming these underlying structures and practices into more sustainable alternatives. We have already established that authoritarianism does not present a convincing alternative, that democracy is key to sustainable prosperity, but that in its current form it is too constrained to play its critical role. This final section explores tentatively the potential of different approaches towards democratisation that might open up new pathways towards a democratic vision of sustainable prosperity. A more robust analysis of these approaches will follow in future work within CUSP.

A. Participatory and deliberative democratic institutions

Progressive ecological politics has long been associated with participatory forms of democratic organisation. Through direct engagement of citizens, advocates aim to realise fundamental principles of democracy – political equality and popular control – and more environmentally sustainable decisions as citizens come to recognise and take responsibility for the ecological limitations we face and develop creative solutions. But often the call for more participation lacks specificity. Participation can take many forms, with the design of institutions having a significant effect on the capacity of citizens to craft more sustainable outcomes (Newig et al. 2017).

Take for example participatory budgeting (PB), a practice that emerged originally in Brazil and now has spread worldwide. While many recent manifestations of PB lack the radical edge of the original Porto Alegre model, the principle of local citizens taking control of decisions about the allocation of budgetary resources has remained (Sintomer et al 2016; Ganuza and Baiocchi 2012; Smith 2009). There is no question that PB can enhance political equality and popular control (particularly amongst politically marginalised and poor communities) leading to significant resource redistribution; all key elements of sustainable prosperity. But its annual cycle can act as a constraint to embedding long-term thinking. Suggestions have been made as to how PB might embed a more ecological consciousness: a proposal for participatory emissions budgeting (Cohen 2012) for example, would entail participants not only taking into account the financial cost of projects, but also the embedded carbon. There would not only be a financial budget, but also a carbon budget.

A completely different form of participatory governance, direct legislation (citizens' initiative and popular referendums), gives citizens direct control over agenda-setting and final decision making through the ballot. While there is evidence that such institutions have been used by environmental groups to raise environmental issues on the agenda in countries such as Switzerland, questions are raised about the extent to which the binary nature of ballots can capture the nuances of sustainable prosperity. Equally, the power of money to influence outcomes requires careful attention to the rules and regulations that enable direct legislation (Smith 2009).

A set of institutions that has generated particular interest in recent years are randomly-selected mini-publics, such as citizens' assemblies, juries and panels (Grönlund et al. 2014; Setälä and Smith 2018). A defining

characteristic of mini-publics is their capacity to promote democratic deliberation through the combination of a diverse membership and active facilitation. As such mini-publics are recognised as a form of deliberative democratic governance that may be particularly well suited for dealing with issues of environmental sustainability (Niemeyer 2013; 2014). Forms of random or stratified sampling (also known as sortition) ensure a diverse group of citizens (far more diverse than any other existing political institution) and thus the likelihood that a plurality of environmental and other values will be articulated. Further, deliberation is perceived as being particularly sensitive to ‘other-regarding’ or ‘public-spirited’ preferences and perspectives and as such is taken to be more likely to orientate attention to the long-term impacts of policy choices and considerations of non-human nature. Such deliberative environments are seen as creative spaces in which new ideas and options can be fostered. Evidence from experiments with mini-publics provides support for these claims, showing that they outperform more traditional democratic institutions in the ways in which they consider future generations and non-human nature (Smith 2003; Hobson and Niemeyer 2011). It is on this basis that advocates have built the case for using sortition more extensively, including within legislatures (MacKenzie 2017b).

One area where more extensive research is needed is the role that emerging digital technologies can play in enhancing democratic participation and deliberation in shaping and creating sustainable prosperity. Our understanding of the contribution of digital technologies to democratic practices remains nascent: the variety of affordances of the myriad tools, technologies and platforms makes it incredibly difficult to make generalisations beyond the fact that digital brings with it opportunities to overcome traditional barriers of time and space that have constrained democratic participation. Certainly this perspective is prevalent in the articulation of ‘smart’ and ‘eco’ cities, although how much this moves beyond rhetoric is questionable (Joss 2016).

The tendency within democratic theory has been to focus on a fairly traditional conception of the political, but our concerns with the democratisation of organisations can be extended to other realms. Perhaps the most challenging is the economic sphere in which hierarchical forms of organisation have dominated. Cooperatives, mutuals and other forms within the social economy have long stood in opposition to contemporary corporate structures and behaviours – and have democratic principles at

their core; often along with commitment to environmental sustainability. The emergence of new forms of social enterprise and alternative forms of stakeholder organisation (such as B-Corps) offer the potential for a further democratising force within the economy. Our interest in the potential role of democratic forms of economic organisation overlaps with other parts of the CUSP research agenda that has a particular focus on alternative social enterprise and business models to address social and environmental issues.

PB, mini-publics, new digital platforms and social economy organisations provide explicit examples of the forms of democratic organisation on which a sustainable transition might be built. That said, the evidence of their effectiveness tends to focus primarily on their internal practices. What is lacking is an analysis of how such participatory institutions can be integrated meaningfully into political and economic systems. Too often participatory processes such as PB and mini-publics are organised at the whim of political elites (Böker 2017). If social economy organisations are to thrive, then market conditions need to be structured such that they no longer advantage for-private-profit forms of organisation (Smith and Teasdale 2012). What we lack is systematic reflection on the nature of the regulatory regimes that would recognise and indeed prioritise the democratic preconditions for participation in production and political decision making.

B. Prefigurative politics

One response by environmentalists to the absence of such democratic preconditions has been the adoption of prefigurative strategies aimed at building alternative forms of production and consumption. This is a strategy focused on the development and implementation of typically small-scale, local, concrete projects such as alternative food systems or community energy projects (Yates 2015a). Like practice-based activism more generally, it realises those solutions in the here and now, yet the prefigurative approach distinguishes itself by having in place some strategy aimed at ensuring that small-scale solutions eventually lead to more general social change (de Moor et al. 2017). It ‘seeks to create the new society “in the shell of the old” by developing counterhegemonic institutions and modes of interaction that embody the desired transformation’ (Leach 2013: 1).

Due to the small-scale, practical nature of prefigurative projects, the position of prefigurative politics in democracy is not straightforward. In many cases, prefigurative strategies are motivated by a disenchantment with the willingness or ability of liberal democratic institutions to get things done and a preference for ‘do it yourself’ activism instead (de Moor et al. 2017). In this sense, prefigurative politics more generally might be seen as an ‘exit’ strategy from the institutional democratic process (Hirschman 1970).

However, this ‘exit’ is not generalisable and often not permanent. While some strategies to ‘diffuse’ prefigurative projects, like ‘scaling up’ and ‘replication’ (Seyfang and Longhurst 2016), can remain outside the institutional democratic process, they clearly engage with the wider public sphere. Secondly, rather than asserting closed solutions to ecological and social problems, the ethos of these projects is more often experimental and designed to accommodate social justice concerns. The deliberation, dialogue and negotiation between conflicting values and interests that we have argued are essential to sustainability are evident in the way that those pursuing these projects seek to resolve strategic dilemmas. For example, a cooperative committed to retrofitting older houses to reduce carbon emissions, which is staffed by activists whose CVs show them to have many years of experience in protests, worries that they mainly connect with those who are already committed to this goal and have resources to invest in property. They therefore devote time to trying to reach low income groups and to thinking about strategies for adapting to climate change, which are more relevant to the needs of these groups, even if doing this runs the risk of seeming to acquiesce to climate change.

Here prefigurative projects can be seen as democracy’s practical laboratories where citizens can collectively come up with solutions, similar to the way deliberative publics do, and where citizens can explore and demonstrate the practical viability of solutions. The evidence generated can serve as exemplars for others, including governments. As such, prefigurative strategies can be about strengthening citizens’ ‘voice’ when entering the participatory arena.

Indeed, an important notion in prefigurative politics is the idea of ‘means-ends equivalence’; that is, that if alternative practices are to prefigure the world one wishes to see in the future, means should reflect ends, broadly speaking (Yates 2015b). For progressive prefigurative collectives this has had important implications for the democratic organization of their

projects, motivating the use of horizontal and consensual decision-making structures (Maeckelbergh 2011). This not only underlines the importance of prefigurative politics as a ‘tool for democracy’, but the egalitarian, open-ended way of experimenting with alternatives also supports the notion of sustainability as flexibility and reflexivity. When organized according to such principles, Smith and Stirling (2018: 91) argue, prefigurative projects have the potential to democratise sustainable innovations, thereby ensuring they are ‘truly effective in addressing the needs of society’.

In sum, prefigurative politics can play several roles in strengthening democracy to advance sustainability. It presents citizen-led and democratically organized forms of experimentation and implementation of concrete solutions. It offers a starting point to diffuse those solutions to the wider society, whether by engaging with political institutions or not. It can involve, or keep involved, citizens in politics in an off-putting political context until political opportunities emerge. And in prefigurative projects, participants often experiment with sustainability and democratic forms of organisation at the same time.

C. Reforming established political structures and institutions

Beyond this ‘grassroots’ level, there is scope for democratic innovation also at the level of political systems, where there is strong evidence that highly centralised regimes are less effective in responding to the demands of ecological and social sustainability. Not only do democracies outperform authoritarian regimes, but devolution, with its creation of multiple veto points, appears to act as a break on the power of vested interests (Jacobs 2011; Klein 2014). Social democratic culture also appears more supportive of long-term thinking (Stoker 2014). That said, Peter Christoff and Robyn Eckersley (2011) were unable to isolate any particular set of factors that correlate with action on climate change.

The centrality of elected legislatures in the democratic imaginary has meant that a number of proposals have emerged for reform. There has been some enthusiasm for the idea of guaranteed legislative representation for future generations and even non-human nature (Dobson 1996; Ekeli 2005) to ensure consideration of their interests in the legislative process. Practical questions arise, however, as to how such representatives would be selected; what aspects of the future and non-human nature are to be represented; and whether political will could be

mustered for such a dramatic change to the representative principle (Smith 2003: 114-118).

An idea that has gained particular traction within deliberative politics has been that of a randomly selected second (or even third) chamber (Thompson 2010: 31; MacKenzie 2017b). This is not a purely sustainability-orientated design proposal but one that has broader pedigree amongst democratic reformers (Barnett and Carty 1998). The case for a randomly selected chamber extrapolates from the evidence from experiments with mini-publics that indicates that in such deliberative contexts, citizens tend to orientate themselves towards the long-term and give due weight to broader environmental and social concerns. Whether or not such a chamber were explicitly charged with specific consideration of future generations and/or non-human nature in their policy and legislative activities, it is argued that sustainability-oriented thinking would emerge. There are opportunities to promote such an idea in places where the constitution of the second chamber is under debate (e.g. the UK House of Lords) or where we find unicameral systems (such as the devolved legislatures and assemblies in the UK). Such a proposal deserves attention, but the differences between the practices of a legislative chamber and the experience of deliberative mini-publics must be recognised: can we generalise from individual experiments to a permanent body that has such extensive political powers; and what other reforms of the institutional architecture would be needed to support its effective working (Owen and Smith 2017)?

Not all proposals focus on changing the composition of the legislature. Ekele (2009) has offered an interesting proposal for how parliamentary procedures might be reformed to better protect long-term interests: sub-majority rules to delay and/or require a referendum on a bill that threatens serious harm upon posterity. Since such a suggestion does not undermine the status and decision making power of existing representative institutions, it is arguably more politically feasible. Less politically acceptable given the current lack of confidence in political elites, is the proposal for longer terms for representatives: Timo Järvensivu (2012) suggests 15 years as a way of counteracting the structural dysfunctions associated with short electoral cycles. Even more controversially, Philippe van Parijs (1998) proposes methods for reducing the electoral power of older generations, either by removing their voting rights or giving greater weight to the votes of young people.

Finally, in relation to legislatures, we can point to the actual practice of the permanent Finnish Parliamentary Committee for the Future that has a specific remit to consider the long-term within the work of the assembly.¹ The Committee consists of 17 parliamentarians from all political parties. There is work to be done to explore the effectiveness of such an arrangement and to understand why the Committee seems to work well in Finland, but its equivalent in Germany is much less well respected and influential.

Beyond the legislature, constitutional clauses that embody considerations of future generations (including those focused on environmental sustainability) have been a site of particular attention, not least because they have proliferated in the development of new constitutions for emerging democracies (Hayward 2005; Tremmel 2006). Proposals for embedding procedural environmental participatory rights (such as promoted in the Aarhus Convention) and the precautionary principle (Eckersley 2004) followed in their wake. But a quick look at the evidence of the environmental records of polities that have embedded such constitutional clauses indicates the challenge of working at this level: while constitutions embed principles and values, this does not guarantee or ensure their considerations in day-to-day politics and policy-making. How the distance from constitutional principle to political practice can be overcome needs to be the subject of further investigation. One option is to further empower legal courses of action.

The realisation of constitutional clauses along with specific sustainable development legislation has been a driver for the creation of Commissioners (or Ombudsmen) responsible for promoting and defending aspects of sustainability. Such commissioners are a relatively novel form of political organisation, some charged specifically to defend the interests of future generations; others with an explicit environment or sustainable development remit. Children's commissioners can also be seen to fit within this family. The few examples of specific Commissioners for Future Generations have had some effect but have proved politically vulnerable: the Israeli Commissioner was decommissioned with a change in government; the powers of the Hungarian Commissioner were weakened as a right wing nationalist government dismantled much of the infrastructure of oversight. It is the relatively new Welsh Commissioner

¹ <http://web.eduskunta.fi/Resource.phx/parliament/committees/future.htx>

that is currently seen as an exemplar of this particular class of organisation, with its powers to require action on the part of other public bodies being of particular interest. It has also been active in attempting to engage the public in its programme of work – arguably a significant development in strengthening the democratic legitimacy of these often fragile institutions (Smith 2015).

D. Deliberative systems and cultural change

The analysis of democratic innovation at all levels tends to focus on single institutions, be they forms of participatory and deliberative engagement or more established and traditional democratic institutions. In comparison, the *deliberative systems* approach emphasises the need to move beyond the focus on single institutions to understand deliberative democracy as an emergent property of the interaction between different societal actors, sites and institutions that together make up the polity (Mansbridge et al. 2012). While, for example, experiments with mini-publics have been useful for gathering insights about how deliberative effects play out in practice under different controllable circumstances (Dryzek 2010: 9), fundamental to their ‘real-life’ impact at the relevant scale will be their integration into wider societal systems (Curato and Böker 2016). A deliberative systems approach resonates with the demands of sustainability, which requires democratic reflexivity not just at the level of human systems, but socio-ecological systems (Dryzek and Pickering 2017).

Much of the work on deliberative systems to date has been fairly conceptual in nature, but its orientation towards understanding the implications of how institutions and practices are ‘coupled’ or integrated is crucial for an effective democratic response to sustainability challenges. The approach has been applied to environmental sustainability by a small number of authors. Niemeyer argues that it is the ‘deliberativeness’ of the democratic system as a whole that is decisive for sustainability (Niemeyer 2013: 434); Hayley Stevenson and John Dryzek (2014) have used the approach to show how authentic, inclusive and consequential deliberation is often thwarted in global politics. Similarly, Tobias Böhmelt et al.’s (2016) empirical work shows that inclusivity at the level of the democratic system can indeed be linked with better climate outputs, but their translation into tangible outcomes is limited by the countervailing effects of the largely symbolic efforts associated with current liberal-capitalist polities.

Thus, what remains an open question is how applicable the theoretical constructs of systemic deliberation are to the complexity of sustainability governance at these larger scales. How deliberative democracy can be enabled at this level is unclear, and thus we are not in the position to generate conclusive insights (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014: 25; Böhmelt et al. 2016: 1283). Moreover, even in their theoretical descriptions, deliberative systems leave considerable room for different interpretations – at worst no longer incorporating any actual deliberation between citizens – of the type that has been linked to sustainability thinking – at all (Owen and Smith 2015).

In contrast to an institutional or actor-centric interpretation of deliberative systems in a functional sense, an alternative view with a wider societal focus considers the extent to which a ‘deliberative culture’, or ‘deliberative thinking’, can emerge within society at large. Stevenson and Dryzek highlight the role of deliberation in promoting a type of ‘ecological citizenship’ that includes recognising obligations to others in relation to environmental sustainability (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014: 15). Similarly, Niemeyer speaks of the need to develop a wider ‘deliberative capacity’ and ‘deliberative cultures’ (Niemeyer 2013: 445-6). Indeed, in the systemic, society-wide sense, deliberative democracy can be conceived of as a political culture (Böker 2017: 33): It is effectively realised not when selected citizens are specifically prompted to adhere to deliberative norms for the purposes of a one-off experiment, but rather when the society at large endorses and internalises these norms as part of their general, self-driven culture. A central concern within our research agenda is to better understand how these different articulations of deliberative systems and cultures can better inform a transformational democratic project of sustainable prosperity.

Conclusion

The governance of environmental sustainability has long been associated with both authoritarianism and democracy as necessary foundations. Our contribution to this ongoing debate is the argument that although it is true that the necessary structural changes towards sustainability have not emerged within liberal democracies, the problem is not democracy as such, but the properties of the narrow political discourse and a short-term orientation that characterise politics within this particular democratic

model. Replacing democracy with authoritarian forms of government is unconvincing as a solution; rather, the innately sustainability-enhancing features of democracy must be freed from these entrenched properties that have so far constrained its true potential.

This argument informs our research within CUSP on the political foundations of, and new avenues towards, a vision of sustainable prosperity. All the more if environmental sustainability is connected to notions of prosperity, it becomes clear that democracy – as the only form of government that secures citizens’ liberty, autonomy, participation, and thus socio-political well-being – must be central. Against the new surge of eco-authoritarian voices, we have therefore outlined a number of possible new directions for the democratic governance of sustainability. Both small-scale experimental and large-scale institutional and legislative innovations have the potential to induce greater consideration for environmental concerns and a long-term perspective in our political decision-making; while emerging deliberative cultures and prefigurative movements can bring the necessary critical and imaginative impulses into the political arena. Exploring these avenues further is not just an exercise in political utopia when the harsh realities simply no longer afford such luxury. It is for the sake of *both* human and environmental well-being that a democratic way forward is not just desirable, but necessary.

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