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(Contemporary Political Theory – reply to Marit Hammond)

Critical Exchange

Democracy in the Anthropocene

The Politics of the Anthropocene

John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, ISBN: 978-0198809623

Marit Hammond, John Dryzek & Jonathan Pickering

The Politics of the Anthropocene: main themes

The Anthropocene is an emerging epoch of human-induced instability in the Earth system. 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.

Reply to Hammond

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 on the criticisms she levels at our approach to political theory. 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 p.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.

Democratic justifications and values

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, we reject the terminology of 'instrumental' justifications for deliberative democracy in favor 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 ecological democracy 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' (p.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. Saying (as Hammond does) that we 'put deliberation to the service of formative agency' makes no sense. 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.

Sustainability – open or merely vacuous?

Hammond associates an 'intrinsic' or 'inherent' approach to democracy with an open-ended conceptualization of sustainability that she favors, such that sustainability is construed as 'the unending construction of future society that is normatively *meaningful* to its members' (Hammond 2019). 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).

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' (p. 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' (p.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 omniscient 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' and constructing a 'biologically possible' future.

Normative political theory in the Anthropocene

Finally, it is necessary to address a line of argument that Hammond directs at our practice as political theorists. Employing our own terminology to characterise us as discourse entrepreneurs, she argues that the kind of discursive practice we engage in is a 'politically dangerous' one, and asks 'where is the line to be drawn between manipulative spin doctoring and the authors' own 'discourse entrepreneurship'?' She goes on to accuse us of exercising the kind of 'strategic power' that is inimical to an open democratic space, and

even suggests that we have joined forces ('albeit in disguise') with those who would be willing to sacrifice democracy in the interests of responding to a climate emergency.

Readers who are familiar with our work may find these accusations extraordinary, but that should not distract from addressing a more fundamental misconception that these views convey about the practice of political theory. We readily acknowledge that the book engages in a form of discourse entrepreneurship, albeit a very modest one when it comes to our expectations of political impact. However, it should be quite clear from the foregoing how one can distinguish spin doctoring from the kind of discursive practice we seek to conduct in the book, namely one that is ecologically reflexive and consistent with standards of good deliberation in a democratic society.

Hammond's misconception about proper roles for normative political theory is evident when she poses the following question: 'How can the authors, or anyone else for that matter, conclusively know they have the right substantive values in mind?' Of course no responsible political theorist would claim to have 'ideologically incontrovertible' knowledge of right and wrong. But what Hammond appears to object to is that we even state a preference for some substantive values (e.g. reflexive sustainability or planetary justice) over others (e.g. greenwashing or anthropocentric justice).¹ There are three problems with Hammond's objection.

First, it is unclear why Hammond's scepticism would not undercut her own confidence in the procedural values she espouses. Second, Hammond's position 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

¹ Her arguments on this point contain some factual inaccuracies. For example, we do not reject planetary boundaries altogether (see pp. 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 (p.38). However, space precludes a detailed rebuttal here.

surrenders to a common anxiety – one that is particularly prevalent among democratic theorists – about theorists stating a position on 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 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’ that Hammond suggests we are complicit in. 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/inherent 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) 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' (p.224). 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.

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