

# Handle with Care

## Transition, Translocalism and Experimentalism for a Green Democracy

**Luigi Pellizzoni**

*University of Pisa*

**Abstract:** Commentary to the Lecture “Ecological Transition: What It Is and How to Do It. Community Technoscience and Green Democracy”, by Andrea Ghelfi and Dimitris Papadopoulos (this issue).

**Keywords:** technofix; prefiguration; neoliberal governmentality; Anthropocene; Gaia.

**Submitted:** January 31, 2022 – **Accepted:** February 15, 2022

**Corresponding author:** Luigi Pellizzoni, University of Pisa, Department of Political Sciences - University of Pisa. via Filippo Serafini 3, 56126 Pisa, Italy. Email: [luigi.pellizzoni@unipi.it](mailto:luigi.pellizzoni@unipi.it).

The question of the ecological crisis is on the table for many years. It surfaced around 1970 as the “limits to growth” issue. The MIT report, together with other publications of major public resonance, such as Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* or Barry Commoner’s *The Closing Circle*, stressed the material impossibility of proceeding forever, or for long, with what retrospectively would be called the Great Acceleration in industrialization and economic growth. Yet, the post-Fordist restructuring of capitalism, supporting and at once supported by the impetuous development of life and information sciences, dovetailed with the rise and worldwide diffusion of neoliberal rule – according to which the market is the only resource-efficient social institution – in opening a season of “ecological modernization”, that is a technology-based and market-mediated reform of industrial economies aimed at transforming the limits to growth into the growth of limits.

This season, however, was showing signs of fatigue already at the beginning of the 2000s, due to two concomitant factors: on one side increasingly worrisome global threats (climate change, biodiversity loss, resurgent or insurgent epidemics...); on the other a new Great Acceleration, with a thrust – which continues to date – in extraction and dejection processes far outperforming any increase in resource-efficiency. Faced with that, calls to reform started to look incongruous. Not by chance ruling political, economic and intellectual elites' strategy for legitimizing the status quo began to change. Though climate denialism persisted, it was increasingly overtaken by a complex move. On one side an endorsement of the Anthropocene narrative, as calling for a "stewardship" of the planet allegedly based on the "decoupling" of society from its material underpinnings (Breakthrough Institute, 2015). On the other a backing of the Gaia argument, as originally developed by Lovelock (1979), whereby planetary forces are provided with self-reparatory or self-adjusting capacities, while constituting a "form of sovereignty, [...] a power that dominates the heads of state" (Latour 2018, 84), to which one cannot but bow. As a result, we are faced today with an awkward governmental arrangement, which combines a strongly technocratic approach – the one advocating fourth-generation nuclear power and geoengineering solutions like GHG capture and storage – with a gambling one, hedge fund managerial styles being increasingly extended to material assets (Cooper 2010) with the purpose of riding the unexpected and the unpredictable thanks to resilience, flexibility and "ongoing creative experimentation" (Clark and Yusoff 2017, 18). Where these apparently opposite governmental approaches – one hyper-agential and hence "responsible", the other hypo-agential and hence ultimately "irresponsible", in the sense of irrelevant to what happens – converge is in an unshakable faith in technofixes (though what is meant by "fix" diverges considerably) and in hollowing out democracy, both in its traditional representative forms and in the "enlarged", participatory modes that scholars in STS and environmental politics had been advocating as the only sensible reply to increasingly complex issues, often entailing "real life experiments" (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993; Krohn and Weyer, 1994).

Against this increasingly bleak backdrop, the proposal of Andrea Ghelfi and Dimitris Papadopoulos for a green democracy stands as a sort of anti-climax. Admittedly, the plea for a renewal of democracy is not new. Since the 1990s there have been plenty of attempts to devise institutional changes capable of addressing Ulrich Beck's diagnosis of the ecological problem as the result of the inability of modern political, economic and scientific arrangements to tackle the consequences of their own operation. The very term "green democracy" has contended the academic and public space with other expressions, like "environmental democracy", "ecological democracy", "green politics", "global environmental governance", "earth system governance", "environmental state" and others, each of which conveys partly different meanings, referring to dif-

ferent understanding of the type and scale of institutional change supposedly needed to address the ecological challenge, from the reformist to the radical, from the local to the state, to the planetary (Dryzek 2016; Eckersley 2020; Pellizzoni 2020; Pickering et al. 2020).

Ghelfi and Papadopoulos's argument builds on three basic features: 1) the authors make a case for a green democracy from below, the level of everyday practices and of a technoscience made by and for communities; 2) this is for them implied in the need for taking into account more than human constituencies; 3) yet they also contend that, for having any efficacy, these broadened constituencies need translocal coalitions, namely around the goals of decelerating carbon intensive activities and of engaging in reparative actions, away from mythologies of pristine nature. Let's have a look at each claim.

Democratization from below is the workhorse of supporters of prefigurative politics (Yates 2015), frugal and DIY innovation (Khan 2016), new materialist mobilizations (Schlosberg and Coles 2016) and new peasantry (van der Ploeg 2009). In different ways and from different perspectives, this scholarship argues that change is possible (and indeed is already taking place) only starting from the bottom, in a sort of revamp of the old anarchist claim that to change the world you have first to change yourself and your way of living, acting as if the new world was already there and avoiding to engage in an open conflict with institutionalised powers. This case seems no doubt fit for a situation where, as Ghelfi and Papadopoulos argue, democracy is caught between the Scylla of regressive, hyper-extractive nationalism and the Charybdis of green, hyper-regulative globalism.

Taking into account more than human entities as constitutive of an enlarged political community is a case made by philosophers and ethicists since at least Aldo Leopold's "land ethic". Recently, anthropologists have been especially prominent in conveying a sense of more than human communities, as their work on non-western cosmologies has shown how naturalism, with its sharp division between humans and the rest of the world, clashes with other ontologies for which there is continuity, kinship and mutual exchange between animal and vegetal species, and even with the inanimate world (Descola 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2014; Kohn 2013; Haraway 2016). Bruno Latour (2004) has made an elaborate attempt to translate such acknowledgment into the refashioning of democratic institutions.

Finally, the issue of scale has increasingly taken the forefront in reflections over the way global capitalism works to extract value and how human and more than human arrangements survive and develop in response to its devastations (Tsing 2015; Papadopoulos 2018). The issue of scale is moreover for long time at the centre of debates over the scalability of "real utopias" and new materialist arrangements up to challenging the ruling order (Wright 2010; Schlosberg and Coles 2016). Ghelfi and Papadopoulos's case for an intermediate level of coalitions of local expe-

riences, based on the recognition of affinities between differences, is relevant to escape the lure of localism or of a “climate Leviathan”, that is an overarching technocratic governance necessarily authoritarian even if formally respecting democratic rules (Wainwright and Mann 2018).

Taken on their own, the pillars of Ghelfi and Papadopoulos’s argument have thus been developed at length in recent years. What makes it promising, however, is the stress on their reciprocal implication. I say promising as it is obvious that the space of an article prevents from a thorough development. The paper, in my understanding, is a first outing in the troubled water of (re)thinking green democracy in the post-Liberal era. In this sense, the sketchy character of the new institutionalism the authors propose should not be regarded as a detractor. Indeed, even book-length elaborations, like Latour’s (2004), remain at quite an abstract level of development. Of course, a more precise account would and will be welcome of how, say, prefigurative practices can translate into institutional set ups, or translocal initiatives like Via Campesina can come to really challenge the ruling order. But beside and before this, it is worth considering a few issues, paying attention to which I believe can be beneficial for the development of Ghelfi and Papadopoulos’s argument.

One is the problem of voice. Who is going to speak for nonhumans? On the basis of what kind of entitlement? These are recurrent questions in environmental political theory (see e.g. Dobson 2010; Eckersley 2011; O’Neill 2001). Whatever the reply (scientific knowledge, moral intuition, empathy, indigenous culture and so on), “the authority of nature’s representatives depends primarily on their claim to know something about nature”, with ensuing temptations to “shut down democratic debate with claims to speak for nature’s objective interests” (Brown 2017, 33). Even worse, one may add, if an understanding of representation as correspondence, whereby representatives directly talk for pre-existing constituencies, is replaced with a constructivist approach, whereby “the process of making representative claims shapes both the representatives and those they represent” (Brown 2017, 35), as the scope for dominative outcomes is likely to grow proportionately. In any case, connecting democracy – an eminently human notion and enterprise – with nonhumans is anything but simple. Whatever the solution one envisages, one should clarify beforehand the type of relationship between humans and nonhumans one has in mind. There is ostensibly a major difference between a commitment to caring and building kinship (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Haraway 2016), to which Ghelfi and Papadopoulos subscribe, and, say, Latour’s most recent take on environmental politics, according to which, faced with terrestrial forces, “there is no other politics than that of humans and to their own benefit”, and no possibility of living “in harmony with so called ‘natural agents’” (2018, 86-87). The kind of “non-identity” relation between humans and nonhumans envisaged by Adorno possibly points to yet another direction. In other words, green democracy can be conceived, and institutionally developed, having in mind quite different

ontologies and related politics.

Another issue demanding attention is whether a green politics from below, even aimed at building translocal alliances, is capable of escaping the risk of ineffectiveness – or worse. Indeed, one of the major criticisms of prefigurative mobilizations is that, especially after an initial, more confrontational phase, they tend to boil down to lifestyle politics, that is personal choices concerning “dress, diet, housing, leisure activities, and more” (Portwood-Stacer 2013, 4). This is something that has long proven inoffensive and even welcome to capitalism, which reads it in terms of market differentiation and of diversion of energies from open contestation (Pellizzoni, 2021). Even intimately oppositional experiences like Genuino Clandestino, or comparable “alternative value practices” (Centemeri 2018) one encounters especially in the primary sector, from participatory plant breeding to flour compacts, are not immune to this risk. On this view, the locality of initiatives raises not only the question of their scaling up and coordination but also a question of how they can translate into something more straightforwardly political and antagonistic, and whether this translation is actually needed (Mouffe 2013).

A third point worth considering is solicited by the anti-climax character of Ghelfi and Papadopoulos’s case for an encompassing, more than human democracy, when it is set against the *Zeitgeist*. Recent years have been characterised by a growing sense of urgency, insecurity and pending catastrophe. Many indicators tell this: post-9/11 “wars on terror”; the securitization of everyday life, with an unprecedented extension of surveillance; the worsening of climate change indicators, from GHG concentration to weather turbulences; the accelerated pace of new and resurgent epidemics; the very rise of climate movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, which build their case on the lack of time and impending disaster; the diffusion of dystopian narratives and of collapseology, a literature and public discussion over how capacities for survival after the fall of technologically organized society, deemed inevitable, can be developed (Allard et al. 2019; Centemeri and Tomassi 2022). Faced with all that, one is reminded that democracy is time and energy consuming. Growing voices claim in fact that it is a luxury increasingly hard to afford – most recently in relation with the Covid-19 pandemic. If one compares the Latour of *Politics of Nature* (2004, first published in 1999) with the Latour of *Down to Earth* (2018), the change in tone is striking, showing how, at least for a progressive *intelligentsia*, the situation has changed in twenty years from serious to dramatic. In the first book we find a case for diplomacy, a cautious, patient negotiation, an ongoing reassessment of which entities have to be admitted to the world in common. In the second book we meet a case for the need to act now, in haste, with very simple and clear objectives in mind: struggling for human survival in competition with all the organisms present in the “critical zone” a few kilometers thick between the atmosphere and the source rocks. In this framework the rise of a “climate Leviathan” or, at the opposite side

of the spectrum of reactions, the flourishing of groups self-organized around survival skills and emergency stockpiling may seem a more likely future than a further enlargement of democracy. Said differently, the time for a truly radical green politics might be already over.

Finally, one has to consider the very notion of transition. As a term, transition has been increasingly replacing others, like revolution or transformation, to convey a sense of change. Concerning climate, for example, claims from social movements and workers organizations (Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Smith 2017) talk of “just transition” (towards sustainability). Concerning socio-technical change, successful approaches like the “multilevel perspective” also talk of transition (Geels and Schot 2007). Yet, are revolution, transformation and transition just synonymous? The issue would obviously require an extensive treatment. At face value, however, one can say they are not, to the extent that they entail different ontologies. Revolution literally means “turnaround” – turning things upside-down. A certain stuff is reversed, usually abruptly. Yet, it is just *that* stuff, only organized differently. Transformation, instead, suggests a more substantial change: a variation in structure, texture, assemblage, look or form by which something becomes something else. This may happen quickly or slowly, even imperceptibly. However, the end result cannot be completely different from the point of departure, at least if it is to be successful. Transformations can be monstrous and monstrosity consists in an unmatching combination of parts: some of them have changed while others have not. This affects and, according to countless dystopias, ultimately undermines the functioning of the thing. Said otherwise, transformation has to keep an inner consistency; one cannot become *anything*. The ontology of transformation is thus more dynamic than the ontology of revolution, but it keeps a fundamental stability. Compared with both, then, transition conveys the idea of a subtler, smoother, yet at once more radical morphing. It implies an ontological fluidity unknown to the other types of change. Step by step the original assemblage is led to become something radically *else*.

This ontological “freedom”, however, comes at the cost of opening avenues to unprecedented forms of domination. As I have argued elsewhere (Pellizzoni 2016), ontological fluidity is the cypher of both cutting-edge social theory, which sees in it an emancipatory claim and opportunity, and of neoliberal governmentality, which builds on it to expand and strengthen its appropriative, exploitative hold on humans and nonhumans. Just think of how corporate storytelling depicts biotech as the continuation of what humans did for thousands of years, or nature always did, “the ‘technology’ in these practices [being] nothing more than biology itself, or ‘life itself’” (Thacker 2007, xix). In this account nature is technology and technology is nature, through and through. The result is that GMOs are claimed to be indistinguishable (no specific regulation needed) yet simultaneously different (more usable, valuable, hence patentable) from natural entities. Or just consider how experimental poli-

tics, as advocated by Ghelfi and Papadopoulos and a host of scholars in STS and political theory, is advocated as well since the 1980s by neoliberal managerial and policy literature, in terms of accepting and indeed riding and enjoying unpredictability, surprise, insecurity, volatility, disorder, as “at the heart of what is positive and constructive” (O’Malley 2010, 502; for an example of this literature see Taleb, 2012). In this framework the recipe for good politics is trial and error and non-predictive decision-making. The result is a de-responsibilization of policy-makers and, consequently, a depoliticization of issues, including those fraught with major social implications like climate change (Swyngedouw 2010). The result is also an “administrative” take on all sorts of crises, from financial to biological, no longer seen as amenable to solution but as a permanent condition with which to come to terms (Pellizzoni and Sena 2021).

In short, one may ask, is experimental politics compatible with democracy? In a broad historical sense certainly yes, as democracy builds on no pre-existing certainties but proceeds through collective reasoning and dialogue. The affinity between science and democracy has not by chance long been stressed, by the likes of Popper and Dewey, among the others. However, in another sense, closer to the present situation, the reply is uncertain. It much depends on how one conceives of experimentalism, who are those that apply it, and for what purposes.

To conclude. Notions like transition, experimentalism and translocalism are hardly innocent and self-evident in their meaning. A case for a green democracy like Ghelfi and Papadopoulos’s needs a careful disentanglement of the different, even opposed implications these notions carry with them. Their article is an excellent starting point for such an endeavour.

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