

ADVANCED REVIEW

Climates of democracy: Skeptical, rational, and radical imaginaries

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Abstract

How will the theories and practices of democracy fare in a climate changing world? Are conventional democratic institutions ultimately doomed or are they able to become more responsive to a changing climate? Is there a need to reimagine democracy and how might it be reimagined? This article reviews the different responses to these questions by distinguishing between three “political imaginaries” in which the relationship between climate change and democracy takes distinct forms. I start by showing how the concept of “political imaginaries” can facilitate the comparison of the different ways in which the relation between democracy and climate change is constructed, before reviewing three such imaginaries. The *skeptical* imaginary, found in the “eco-authoritarianism” of the 1970s that is echoed by much sociopolitical analysis today, casts doubt on the possibilities of democratic mechanisms to respond adequately and swiftly to the problem of climate change. Those who resist such skepticism often defend democracy by arguing that institutions and processes of democracy can be made more “ecologically rational”—the *rational* imaginary of climate democracy involves improvements in political representation and participation. Finally, I present the alternative radical democratic imaginary, in which the crisis of climate change provides a moment for the rupture of existing sociopolitical structures and the formation of alternatives. The article concludes that although none of these imaginaries is able to capture the entirety of climate change politics around the world, the *radical* democratic imaginary is responsive to the inevitable and valuable plurality around the issue of climate change.

This article is categorized under:

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1 | INTRODUCTION

How will the theories and practices of democracy fare in a climate changing world? Will the frequent occurrences of extreme weather upset the sociopolitical stability needed for democratic institutions to function? Might electoral cycles become impossible to maintain when time is simultaneously stretched into geological cycles and tightened into knots of urgency? Are conventional liberal democratic institutions ultimately doomed or can they instead be reinvented in a way that is more responsive to a changing climate? Does the climate crisis, therefore, constitute a turning point for democratic politics? This article reviews the different responses to these questions by distinguishing between three political imaginaries in which the relationship between climate change and democracy takes distinct forms.

Imaginaries are constitutive elements of social and political life (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, p. 122); they facilitate the shared interpretations of reality that permit meaningful social interaction. *Political* imaginaries, as one form of imaginary, are the dynamic constructions of political reality that enable practices, orientate expectations, inform decisions and determine what is politically legitimate, feasible, and valuable—and what is not. Different political imaginaries underpin distinct forms of democracy (Adams et al., 2015, p. 34). To interrogate these political imaginaries is therefore to identify, compare, and critique the alternatives on offer to shape the trajectories of democratic life.

I argue that an analysis of “political imaginaries” is helpful for grasping and contrasting the different ways in which the relation between democracy and climate change can be understood. I delineate three competing imaginaries that underpin different conceptions and practices of democracy in a climate changing world: *skeptical*, *rational*, and *radical* imaginaries. The *skeptical* democratic imaginary is found in the “eco-authoritarianism” of the 1970s but also in much political analysis today that is doubtful of the possibilities of democratic mechanisms to respond adequately and swiftly to the problem of climate change. This imaginary is glimpsed in the suggestions to bypass the popular vote and to increase the role of expert committees in policymaking. Those who resist such skepticism often defend democracy by arguing that institutions and processes of democracy can be made more ecologically rational and responsive. This defense constitutes what I call the *rational* democratic imaginary, in which mechanisms for the representation of non-human nature and future generations ensure that their perspectives are included in environmental policymaking, and in which various forms of “mini-publics” are aimed at improving citizens scientific literacy and awakening their sense of responsibility. Finally, in the less dominant *radical* democratic imaginary, the crisis of climate change provides a moment for the rupture of existing social, economic, and political structures and the formation of alternatives, primarily through formation of environmental movements and the mobilization of new or previously excluded constituencies.

The intention of this review article, in short, is to highlight the challenges that climate change poses for democracy, and to juxtapose the different ways that democracy can be (re)imagined in the face of those challenges. It concludes that although none of these imaginaries is able to capture the entirety of climate change politics, and all contain valid and valuable insights, the radical democratic imaginary is the only one that celebrates the openness of democracy and the political plurality around climate change.

2 | IMAGINING DEMOCRACY

When we pay attention to the array of features that characterize the different manifestations of democratic politics, we notice that any rigid definition of “democracy” is reductive and that any attempt to condense democracy into a fixed set of components risks missing the way in which democracy is itself continually and inevitably politically contested, negotiated, and reinvented (Connolly, 1993, p. xv). My starting point for this review is that there is no precise formula for “democracy” and that the political practices and actors that are regarded as legitimate depends upon how well they correspond to an *imaginary* of democracy that is widely shared across societies.

“Imaginaries” can be understood as shared background understandings that orientate meaningful political and social action. Charles Taylor defines an imaginary as “that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding within which particular features of our world become evident” (Taylor, 2002, p. 107). Imaginaries delineate what is feasible, desirable and thinkable; they help us make sense of the world and our place in it; they tell us how we live and work and how we ought to live and work; they are what enable us to act and interact with others (Taylor, 2002, p. 91). Containing both descriptive as well as prospective elements (Jessop, 2012, p. 17), imaginaries guide the social activities in which they are reaffirmed: “if the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that the practice largely carries the understanding” (Taylor, 2002, p. 107). Imaginaries construct memories of the past and visions of the future; they inform rational strategies and mobilize emotions; they provide the basis for reflection and conversation but

ultimately exceed what can be put into in words (Arruda, 2015, p. 129). It is this strong connection to the visual and affective that distinguishes imaginaries, as I understand them here, from narratives and discourses. Our personal and collective identifications are bound up with imaginaries which map the boundary between “us” and “them.” Benedict Anderson describes nations as “imagined communities” that arose through a profound change in modern consciousness (Anderson, 1991) and Taylor explains that it is the bond created by these “imagined communities,” that underpins the sense of a collective agency and our acceptance in the legitimacy of democratic decision-making (Taylor, 2004, p. 190).

Over the last decade or so, investigations into imaginaries have expanded to a point where they constitute their own, albeit heterogeneous, disciplinary field (Adams et al., 2015, p. 16). While Taylor discusses imaginaries as widely shared across societies, more recent work emphasizes that imaginaries are both multiple and competing (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, p. 123; Jasanoff, 2015; Jessop, 2012; Death, 2022). As Shelia Jasanoff highlights, imaginaries are inherently political, and policy strategies and priorities will differ according to imaginaries that inform them: “the political life of societies is ... a joint and several imagining of the purposes and the potential of living and working together on an Earth that is at once malleable and constraining” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 338). Political transformation therefore hinges on the emergence of alternative political imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 342). New imaginaries can “defamiliarize” the present and expose the possibility for “being otherwise” (Death, 2022, p. 244). This is not to say that imaginaries are deliberately or consciously chosen or that they are easily enforced or manipulated by those in power; they are rather shaped, sustained, and contested by many different actors and institutions—government agencies, social movements, artists, journalists, and scientists (Milkoreit, 2017, p. 9). For example, some contemporary environmental movements apparently share a particular form of political imaginary, in which grassroots democratic participation and passionate protest are key features (Machin, 2022).

Scholars have attended to political imaginaries to fill gaps in the traditional accounts of political science and political sociology (Browne & Diehl, 2019, p. 393). They have studied imaginaries in order to understand different social responses and collective visions of environmental crisis and the possibilities for sustainability and energy transformations (Dibley & Neilson, 2010; Jessop, 2012; Levy & Spicer, 2013; Milkoreit, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2010, 2018; Tozer & Klenk, 2018). Some of this work suggests that mainstream climate politics, dominated by Eurocentric imaginaries with assumptions of linear technological progress, can potentially be disrupted by the imaginaries of “othered” regions and indigenous peoples; such imaginaries offer valuable understandings of temporality; of human and non-human life (Death, 2022, p. 246); of territory (Thompson & Ban, 2022); of crises (Whyte, 2018); and of sociopolitical organization (Steinberg et al., 2015, p. 8). The circulation of these sorts of alternatives however is itself regulated by dominant social and political imaginaries.

In this review, I suggest that in relation to climate change there are three different “political imaginaries” of democracy that compete to define which political processes, actors, and rules are valorized in environmental politics. They appear in academic texts, social commentary, and political rhetoric which I have used as source material to find and analyze the ways that democracy is (re)imagined in response to climate change. These three imaginaries, I will show, illustrate some of the alternatives on offer as well as the stakes of those alternatives. But they are not the only political imaginaries around climate change, nor, it should be emphasized, are they rigidly fixed. They are not supposed to be reductive categories nor normative ideals but rather analytical tools that can be used to approach the different assumptions, expectations, fears, and desires that circulate around the politics of climate and configure the possibility of its transformation. Elsewhere, accounts have helpfully separated a reformist “environmental democracy” from a more radical “ecological democracy” (Eckersley, 2020; Pickering et al., 2020) but I make a distinction that cuts through this reformist/radical distinction to pick up instead on the different ways in which democracy *itself* is reimagined in the context of ecological disruption. Below I map out the three imaginaries, paying attention to who, what, and how they empower and exclude and their strengths and limitations for the politics of a climate changing world.

3 | THE SKEPTICAL DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARY

Numerous voices decry the lack of progress in climate governance, which has led to a diagnosis of a “widespread pessimism” with regards to global collective action on this issue (Bernauer, 2013, p. 423). The ecological challenges and the political capacity to respond to them are said to be “tragically out of joint” (Jennings, 2013, p. 9). It can appear that the fault lies with democracy; held hostage to corporate interests, uncertainty about the future, public ignorance, short-term electoral cycles, the materialistic greed of individuals, and outdated conceptions of agency and sovereignty, democracy

seems ill-equipped to cope with a complex, long-term wicked problem (See generally Stehr & Machin, 2020, p. 163; Fiorino, 2018; Held & Hervey, 2009; Taylor & Minter, 2002). Not only are democratic institutions and processes unable to play a role in solving climate change, but also they are actually regarded as a part of the problem (Blühdorn, 2011, p. 3; Di Paola & Jamieson, 2018). The environmental critique of democracy thus resonates with earlier criticisms that saw rule by the demos as rule by the unruly, and were pessimistic about the ability of ordinary citizens to restrain their selfish appetites: “it is as though the natural environment has come to embody, through its deterioration and destruction at the hands of democratic societies, the very flaws critics have always assumed to be endemic to democracy” (Taylor & Minter, 2002, p. 5).

The empirical evidence does not in fact confirm that authoritarian systems implement stricter environmental policy and uphold higher environmental standards. Democracy actually seems to have a “non-effect” on environmental policy (Bernauer, 2013) or a potentially positive correlation (Bernauer & Böhmelt, 2013, p. 202; Hanusch, 2019; Neumayer, 2002) especially in the absence of corruption (Povitkina, 2018).¹ The reasons given for this include the fact that liberal democratic states are more likely to respect citizens’ environmental rights, and their freedom to voice their concerns, than authoritarian regimes (Bernauer & Böhmelt, 2013, p. 201; Fiorino, 2018). Yet this correlation, or the evidence for it, has not been strong enough to prevent the circulation of an imaginary of “democratic skepticism.” This powerful imaginary suggests that democracy—particularly in the contemporary form of liberal democracy—is simply incompatible with adequate policy responses to “wicked” global ecological issues. The flip side of *climate change* skepticism, *democratic* skepticism suggests that however important and urgent the issue of climate change might be, it cannot, or will not, be effectively tackled through the involvement of the *demos*.

This imaginary of democratic skepticism is expressed perhaps most clearly in the “eco-authoritarianism” of the 1970s (see Jennings, 2013). William Ophuls, for example, compared the situation of ecological crisis to “a perilous sea voyage,” and suggested that this meant it was only rational to place power “in the hands of the few who know how to run the ship” (Ophuls, 1977, p. 159). His democratic skepticism is illustrated here in his distrust of the *demos* and the capacities of the average voter: “If we grant that the people in their majority probably will not understand and are therefore not competent to decide such issues, is it very likely that the political leaders they select will themselves be competent enough to deal with these issues” (Ophuls, 1977, p. 160). In more recent work, Ophuls repeats his doubts: “If democracy survives at all” he warns, “it will be a token democracy shadowed by the lurking menace of mob rule” (Ophuls, 2011, p. 139) and he proposes instead the rise of a “genuine elite” who are “capable of upholding a rule of life that fosters some reasonable degree of wisdom and virtue” (Ophuls, 2011, p. 101).

Today, however, this imaginary is not found so much in the *explicit* rejection of democracy as the lament that—however, regrettable this might be—democracy clips the capacity of states to tackle a complex issue such as climate change. Raising the same doubts as Ophuls about the abilities of the public and politicians to make wise decisions, Dale Jamieson and Marcello Di Paola write: “there is no reason to believe that those who are proficient at winning elections are proficient at government” (Di Paola & Jamieson, 2018, p. 395). Di Paola and Jamieson highlight an apparent paradox—if a democratic regime fails to tackle climate change or other serious environmental problems, then it fails to provide security for their citizens, but if it is to implement the necessarily robust policies, this would indubitably involve going against the wishes of the voting public. Either way the regime undermines its own legitimacy (Di Paola & Jamieson, 2018, p. 403).

This putative resistance of the *demos* to environmental policy is also considered by Ingolfur Blühdorn, who asks “how much confidence should we have that empowering the democratic citizenry will really move contemporary society closer toward sustainability?” (Blühdorn, 2011, p. 3). He argues that democracy encourages compromise, which is “ecologically ineffective”² and that, in any case, “The preferences of the majority ... are rarely sensible in terms of sustainability” (Blühdorn, 2011, p. 4). Blühdorn astutely notices that democracy has always been emancipatory and leant toward the enhancement, and not the restriction, of the lives of the majority; democracy seems to support the expansion, not the retraction, of consumption. He therefore diagnoses a lack of political will for transformation to a different society (Blühdorn, 2013, p. 19) and a widespread “democratic disillusionment” (Blühdorn, 2007, p. 261). Democracy has, he explains, rather become a tool for the governance of “the condition of sustained unsustainability” (Blühdorn, 2013, p. 18).

The imaginary of democratic skepticism hinges upon the apparent mismatch between climate science and climate politics: in a democracy, it is suggested, scientific knowledge is not always closely heeded because “expertise is subservient to the voice of the people” (Jamieson, 2020) and opinion often does not respect the facts (Parvin, 2018, p. 269). Politicians, it is understood, are unlikely to prioritize climate change, because this would go against the wishes of citizens, or at least a majority of them. As Anthony Giddens writes: “by their very nature ... democratic countries tend to be

driven by the immediate concerns of voters at any one time” (Giddens, 2009a, p. 8) and he complains that “views on how dangerous climate change is, and whether actions should be taken in the near future to contain it, have moved in the opposite direction to the main scientific findings” (Giddens, 2015, p. 157). The issue of climate change is so urgent that, according to Giddens, it should therefore be removed from normal politics, and “the usual party conflicts should be suspended” so that it can be the object of a “cross-party consensus” (Giddens, 2009b, p. 114). Giddens therefore explicitly depoliticizes climate change, thus reaffirming the “eco-political failure” of democracy (Blühdorn, 2011, p. 5).

In short, in the imaginary of democratic skepticism the future of democracy is bleak, for the ecological challenges facing it will only increase (Di Paola & Jamieson, 2018, p. 373). Rising concern over the climate crisis and the failure of democratic governments to convincingly address it, fuels the circulation of this imaginary and shores up its claims. Democratic institutions are seen as problematic hindrances that should, as much as possible, be bypassed, for they cannot overcome the epistemic and ethical failures of the *demos*. And yet while the *demos* is deplored here, it is also simultaneously reified, as a cretinous public who are immovably entrenched in their own deficiencies. There is no possibility of overcoming voter ignorance or political greed through the revision of democratic mechanisms or the rise of new types of political representatives. There is no possibility of the transformation of contemporary liberal democratic politics; it is not only climate change but also democracy that is depoliticized in this imaginary. This means that skepticism extends not only to the ability of democracy to tackle climate change, but also to the ability of democracy to reform *itself*. This construction of democracy as fixed in its unsustainable state, is challenged in the imaginary we turn to next in which democracy can be rendered ecologically rational, so that democratic means are aligned with green(er) ends.

4 | THE RATIONAL DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARY

As we have seen, the skeptical democratic imaginary presupposes that the *demos* is either ignorant, or selfish, or both, which exacerbates the structural problems of democratic states. But this imaginary does not resonate with those who argue that, on the contrary, these problems are not the result of too much democracy, but of *too little* democracy and the failure of governments to attend to the environmental concerns of its citizens (Deese, 2019, p. 134). For Val Plumwood, for example, the problem is not democracy itself, but the liberal democratic systems in which decision making is dominated by privileged elites who are insulated from environmental degradation (Plumwood, 1995, p. 138; Machin, 2013, p. 73; Müller & Walk, 2014). A policymaking process that included the voices of the less privileged would be more equal, more democratic and capable of change: “a polity that is open to reshaping institutions in response to the views and needs of a wide range of social groupings, especially those at greatest risk of ecological damage, is likely to be able to respond reflectively and usefully to a crisis in its ecological, as in its social, world” (Plumwood, 1995, p. 137). Others agree that liberal democracies are stymied by the assumption that citizens are atomistic individuals, motivated by economic self-interest; Marit Hammond complains that our political imagination is drenched in the neoliberal rationality that obstructs the possibilities for transformation: “neoliberal principles are reflected in how liberal democracy sees vote choice as a matter of the competing material interests of individual citizens” (Hammond, 2020b, p. 221). Attention is therefore being paid to alternative forms of democracy that might replace or at least supplement liberal democracy, which apparently underpins capitalism rather than destabilizing it (Goodman & Morton, 2014, p. 247).

Thus, if the skeptical democratic imaginary highlights what Graham Smith calls “democratic myopia” (Smith, 2021, p. 8), in the rational democratic imaginary such short-sightedness can be at least partly vanquished through an improvement of democratic representation and participation, as Smith himself suggests. In what constitutes a complete reversal of the depiction of democracy as fostering and responding to selfish consumption and ignorance, democracy is regarded here as uniquely placed to extend political perspectives on climate change and other long-term, complex, and contested issues. In other words, in the context of environmental crisis, democracy is seen as more important than ever.

This imaginary is expressed in the proposals for the *expansion*, *rescaling*, and *deepening* of democracy (Machin, 2018). First, democracy is supposed to be made more ecologically rational through the *expansion* of democratic representation of distant and non-human others and future generations, using mechanisms such as proxies, trustees, spokespersons, and ombudsmen (Beckman & Page, 2008, p. 529; Ball, 2006; Dobson, 1996; Eckersley, 2004, 2017). These mechanisms face not only practical problems (how would such mechanisms fit alongside existing institutions?) but also epistemic problems (how is it possible to know the interests of these constituencies?). These challenges notwithstanding, there have been various practical attempts to introduce institutions for the representation of future generations in which the expansion of the *demos* is envisaged (Gonzalez-Ricoy & Rey, 2019; Karnein, 2016).

Second, in this imaginary, democracy becomes separated from the nation-state and undergoes a *rescaling*. Democracy is reimagined at a scale that is more appropriate for formulating and implementing policy on climate change that currently is mainly governed by states, but unfolds at a global level and has devastating effects at the local level and therefore seems to call for greater political engagement and legitimate decision making at both of those levels. Many voices call for a “transnational” or “supranational” democracy in which formal international institutions are democratized (Deese, 2019; Holden, 2002) and the more informal “spaces” are empowered as part of a decentralized global system (Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014). Alongside this “scaling up” is a scaling down to a local “grassroots” level, a level at which sustainable lifestyles are most commonly adopted and at which democracy is seen as functioning at its best (Fischer, 2017, p. 14). Local projects around the world provide opportunities for valuable forms of learning and practical experimentation (Fischer, 2017, p. 15). However, understanding of the way in which democratic processes at these different levels connect is currently rather underdeveloped (Pickering et al., 2020, p. 9).

Third, the imaginary is expressed arguably most prominently in the proposals for *deepening* democratic participation through increasing the opportunity for public deliberation on climate change and other environmental concerns (Baber & Barlett, 2005; Barry, 1999; Blue, 2016; Dryzek, 2000, 2015; Eckersley, 2004; Hammond, 2020a; Niemeyer, 2013; Pimbert & Barry, 2021; Smith, 2003, 2021; Willis et al., 2022). Democratic deliberation, which (ideally) involves a fair, equal and inclusive exchange of reasons between citizens and stakeholders in a public forum, is expected to improve understanding and to encourage a sense of community and consideration of both human others and their environment. It is expected to “place reasoned discussion at the heart of democracy” (Willis et al., 2022, p. 3). For Robyn Eckersley democratic deliberation is also valuable for environmental policymaking because it exposes the policies and interests of social, political, and economic elites to public scrutiny and “privileges generalizable interests over private, sectional, or vested interests, thereby making public interest environmental advocacy a virtue rather than a heroic aberration in a world of self-regarding rational actors” (Eckersley, 2004, p. 117). Eckersley promotes the building of an “enhanced reflexivity” through science education, the public participation in science and “collective learning,” in order to cultivate new imaginaries that can help societies better navigate problems such as climate change (Eckersley, 2017, p. 996). For these reasons John Dryzek claims that deliberation will make policy making more “ecologically rational” so that it “overcomes anthropocentric arrogance” and “can cope more effectively with the ecological challenge” (Dryzek, 2000, p. 160) and, more recently in a co-authored article: “deliberation leads judgments to become more considered and more consistent with values that individuals find that they hold after reflection” (Dryzek et al., 2019, p. 1145).

Many (but not all) of those arguing that democratic deliberation can make the politics of climate change more “ecologically rational,” advocate the institution of forums or “mini-publics” in which citizens alongside scientists and other types of experts, have a chance to deliberate on this complex and contested topic. Deliberative forums include citizen juries, citizen councils, town meetings, consensus conferences, although perhaps the most well-known type of deliberative forum is the citizens’ assembly” (Hammond & Smith, 2017, p. 14; Dryzek et al., 2019). Participants of these forums are not only expected to become more informed about the issue but also to become more engaged with its causes and consequences. In this way citizens will come to formulate socially and environmentally responsible opinions and produce a set of strong policy recommendations so that climate change can be tackled both more effectively and legitimately. Rebecca Willis for example promotes citizens’ assemblies that she claims will “make democracy work better for the climate” (Willis, 2021). She asks: “What if we were to begin with the assumption that people can and do make sensible decisions if they have the evidence and the influence that they need?” and she argues that by designing “a meaningful dialogue between citizens, experts, and governments” the result would be “better outcomes” (Willis, 2021). Empirical research has certainly indicated that deliberation (in both formal and informal settings) can transform public responses to climate change and increase support for environmental policies (Niemeyer, 2013; Nordbrandt, 2021).

In this imaginary, through the introduction of mechanisms for wider representation, greater opportunities for deliberation, and by scaling up and scaling down, democracy will become more “ecologically rational.” This imaginary emerges in the face of the challenges posed by climate change to defend, if not even improve, democracy by making it more aligned to ecological ends and by doing so it builds faith in the flexibility of democracy and the capacity of its citizens to cope in the face of ecological upheaval.

And yet it is important to note the way that democratic means are being instrumentalized for green ends here. For while democracy is championed in this imaginary, it is simultaneously at risk of being undermined, because the preoccupation with achieving robust, sustainable, and rational policy on climate change threatens to destroy the valuable *open-endedness* of democracy. Democratic participation is not valued *in itself* but because it is imagined that, designed correctly, it will produce a set of coherent “sensible” and “better” recommendations. As Eckersley indeed

acknowledges, there are problems with an instrumental “problem-solving” approach to democracy: “there can be no guarantee that democratic procedures (whether voting or reaching agreement via deliberation) will produce collective decisions which protect the local environment, let alone non-citizens, non-humans, or Earth systems processes” (Eckersley, 2017, p. 994. See also Eckersley, 2002). To pre-empt the outcomes of the democratic process is to prematurely suppress the democratic impulse. The third democratic imaginary of climate change, described in the next section, resists this suturing of democracy and instead turns the argument around: democratic participation is not supposed to generate better climate policy, instead climate change is expected to encourage political engagement and to thereby democratize politics.

5 | THE RADICAL DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARY

The third imaginary certainly does not circulate as widely as the other two, yet it arguably offers an important alternative for approaching the connection between climate change and democracy. This imaginary does not see wicked ecological problems as exposing the limits of democracy as much as driving its renewal. In this imaginary, by revealing the structural problems of liberal capitalist societies, the “climate crisis” constitutes a moment of rupture which opens the possibility for broader social and political transformation (Methmann, 2010, p. 355). It is radical not only because it heralds dramatic change in energy culture and economic arrangements, but also because it envisages the openness of politics to a plurality of conflicting demands that contest the prevailing political regime “all the way down” (Tønder & Thomassen, 2005, p. 4; Tambakaki, 2019). Democracy is imagined as an ongoing project that celebrates pluralism, encourages participation and facilitates and legitimizes the expression of differences. Climate change, on the other hand, is portrayed here not as a technical problem in need of a single and straightforward solution, but rather as a *political* issue that drives democratic participation and around which alternative, dynamic, and conflicting socio-economic projects circulate (Kenis, 2018; Machin, 2013). This imaginary refuses to reduce democracy to its capacity to address climate change and instead calls for climate change to revive democracy.

While the radical imaginary has in common with the rational imaginary a concern to protect and deepen democracy, it does not try to do this by aligning democratic procedures with a specific set of environmental outcomes, but by refusing to suppress the contestation between differences on which democracy is understood to be ultimately based (Mouffe, 1997, p. 26). And while it shares with the rational imaginary an appreciation of the critical capacity of citizens, it does not anticipate that this critical capacity has to be fomented through the redesign of democratic institutions and the creation of new ones (from the inside/above) but rather suggests that it *already exists*, and calls for the entry of new subjects and conflicting demands into the political realm (from outside/below) to make themselves visible and proffer real alternatives.

In this imaginary, such critical capacity bubbles in the gaps, contradictions and occlusions of the prevailing structures that prop up carbon-intensive lifestyles and economies. As indigenous and climate justice scholars emphasize, beyond the traditions and practices of the prevailing capitalist system persist hitherto excluded demands, knowledges, agendas and visions of the future provoked by environmental disruption that continues to threaten the health, livelihoods and cultures of indigenous peoples and marginalised groups (Whyte, 2017; Routledge et al., 2018; Lau, 2021). The “core message” of climate justice, Brian Tokar explains, is that: “While diplomats continue to search for an impossible compromise that would not upset the global status quo, devastating patterns of floods, droughts, wildfires, and other catastrophic weather events ... disproportionately impact the people who are most vulnerable, and who also contribute the least to the excessive emissions of greenhouse gases that lie at the heart of the problem” (Tokar, 2015, p. 66). He remarks upon the “new communities of resistance” that have emerged in response to this injustice around the world, not least in the “global south” (Tokar, 2015, p. 69, see also Dwivedi, 2001 and Satheesh, 2021). These grassroots initiatives and movements are precisely what underpins Ashish Kothari’s “radical ecological democracy” (Kothari, 2014). As this indicates then, there are distinct notions and practices of radical democracy outside the global north rooted in subaltern struggles against enclosure, extraction, and exploitation (Conway & Singh, 2011, p. 699).

It is possible, then, that by encouraging the renewal of debates over inclusion, inequality, and justice, climate change, along with its unevenly distributed causes and impacts, is a catalyst for political participation. The question that haunts the radical democratic imaginary is whether democracy can ever be adequately disconnected from the particular regimes in which it has been “weaponized” as an excuse for domination and exploitation, of both human and non-human nature (Bond, 2019; Conway & Singh, 2011; Hunt, 2021; Tambakaki, 2019). But if democracy is too valuable to give up, then there might be hope in the movements that struggle against environmental injustice and

exploitation and that at the same time might entail the radical re-imagining of democracy and its delinking from colonial systems of knowledge and violence. Walter Mignolo urges for the contestation of “global linear thinking” through what he calls “epistemic disobedience” in order to decolonize democracy (Mignolo, 2011, p. 92. see also von Redecker & Herzig, 2020). Ecological crisis arguably both requires and provokes such epistemic disobedience. Climate change can almost be understood as a traumatic opportunity for democracy here.

To some extent, this radical democratic climate politics is imagined in the form of a lively, unrestricted, deliberation, that will be ultimately be *disruptive*, rather than *supportive*, of the system (Hammond, 2020b). This is precisely what has led to wariness amongst certain advocates of deliberative democracy about the implementation of deliberative mini-publics, causing a split in the field: “deliberative democrats” who call for democracy in general to be made more deliberative are concerned by the pursuit of “democratic deliberation” in designed settings that can ensure “standards of critical dialogue” that the “mass public” by implication is understood as unable to attain (Chambers, 2009, p. 322). Such mini publics are criticized for the tendency to ultimately shore up the status quo and existing power hierarchies. As Gwendolyn Blue writes: “formalized deliberative practices can tacitly and prematurely close down policy options by limiting the framing of issues to mainstream assumptions and values” (Blue, 2016). Eckersley ponders whether “keeping the dialogue alive in order to ask more and deeper questions is ultimately more valuable and important than resolving immediate, narrowly defined practical problems” (Eckersley, 2002, p. 60). For her “democracy is about arguing as well as making decisions” (Eckersley, 2002, p. 66).

Indeed, the radical democratic imaginary is more prominently found in the work of the various writers who explicitly recognize the value of disagreement in the politics of climate change (Kenis & Lievens, 2015; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Machin, 2013, 2020; Pepermans & Maesele, 2014, 2016; Swyngedouw, 2010, 2018). This body of work, which can be loosely categorized as “agonistic,” is united in its concern regarding the tendency for climate change to be regarded a unitary problem with a single solution. This agonistic approach asserts that ecological issues are likely to be issues over which various perspectives clash, but that this is not a result of irrationality, ignorance, or immorality but because such issues have no “correct” solution that is satisfactory to everyone. This approach therefore resists the foreclosure of the persistent political disagreement around this issue and challenges the “post-political” framing that attempts to place climate change beyond political dispute and delegitimizes the expression of dissent. The “post-political” framing only tolerates dissent as “democratic” when it does not challenge the status quo (Bond et al., 2020). The aim of democratic institutions, according to the radical democratic approach, is not to suppress conflict, but rather to facilitate its respectful expression, and in this way can defuse the potential that it is expressed violently (Mouffe, 1997, p. 27).

Political disagreement is imagined here not as the straightforward conflict between those who believe in anthropogenic climate change and those who deny it, but also as the contestation over its meaning and implications, and the struggle over *who gets to decide*. We could borrow from Jacques Rancière here to point out that *political* disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and one who says black but rather “the conflict between one who says white and another who says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness” (Rancière, 1999, p. x); it involves “a dispute over the object of discussion and over the capacity of those who are making an object of it” (Rancière, 1999, p. xii). Radical democrats such as Rancière have long celebrated disagreement and dissent as a key feature of democracy (Tønder & Thomassen, 2005, p. 3). While for liberals, disagreement is the clash of predetermined interests of fully formed parties, radical democrats are interested in disagreement as the on-going political struggle over the formation of collective demands and identities and the very boundaries of the community (Mouffe, 1992, p. 10; Tønder & Thomassen, 2005, p. 4). For some, this involves the rupturing of the Western (liberal) framework of democracy that they see as obstructing substantive change (Conway & Singh, 2011).

Radical democratic struggle includes activism and protest and extends beyond the formal political realm into every aspect of society “from the street to the factory to the university” (Rancière, 1999, p. viii). We might add “the school” to this list too, for the “climate strikes” of school children over recent years have become a visible aspect of climate politics (Hayward, 2020). The *School Strike 4 Climate/Fridays for Future* movement has mobilized unprecedented numbers of young people to demand climate action and galvanized a new generation of activists (Fisher & Nasrin, 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019). What is arguably most striking about this movement is the very *appearance* in the political realm of young citizens who are not yet able to vote. By simply speaking they are disrupting the established order, and the demarcation who is counted and who is not. The school strikes are radical, not so much because of *what* they say, but because of *who* is saying it.

So, if the skeptical imaginary dismisses the demos as ignorant consumers, and the rational imaginary promises that they can be ecologically enlightened, the radical imaginary regards the demos as radically incomplete and enlivened by

ongoing struggles. Democratic means should not be bypassed or adjusted to meet “green ends”—in the radical democratic imaginary, environmental politics is seen as ideally consisting of a “healthy multiplicity” of distinct opinions and demands (Sandilands, 2002, p. 127). The point is not just that a multiplicity exists, but as Anneleen Kenis observes, that there is a recognition of the place of dissensus between these opinions and demands and the openness for social conventions to be questioned (Kenis, 2018, p. 5). So although environmentalist movements create, and depend upon, a strong collective identification, an “us” against a “them,” this “us” can only ever be contingently constructed. This means that the boundaries of environmentalist groups, just like the boundaries they protest against, are continually challenged and renegotiated. The very meaning of “environmentalism” or “greenness” itself is open for contestation (Smith, 1998, p. 34).

In this imaginary, then, as in the rational imaginary, democracy is not seen as incompatible with adequate climate change policy, quite the opposite. But rather than democracy being “rationalized” in order to fit the environmentalist agenda, in this imaginary the agenda itself is decided through democratic contestation between competing alternatives that are continually being reinvented. Climate change is imagined as here as a starting point for radical democracy and the empowerment of previously excluded constituencies who bring distinct ideas and knowledge for policymaking. As Chantal Mouffe indicates, radical democratic projects will find it hard to avoid environmental concerns: “it is not possible any more to envisage a process of radicalization of democracy that does not include the end of a model of growth that endangers the existence of society and whose destructive effects are particularly felt by the more vulnerable groups” (Mouffe, 2020). But if climate change is the starting point, there is no end place. Any consensus on climate change is only “illusionary” (Machin, 2013, p. 5) just as a “perfect” democracy is impossible (Mouffe, 1992, p. 14). It is the lack of an end place and the perpetuity of contest over the borders and content of the political realm, however, that keeps alive both democratic politics and the possibility of finding alternative ways to live, act, and interact.

6 | CONCLUSION

Climate has always been imagined in different ways. Mike Hulme recommends that the idea of climate change is seen as a “resource of the imagination” that can inspire different artistic and scientific projects and alternative ways of life (Hulme, 2009, p. 363). The changing climate will also impact the way we envisage the capacities and limitations of our democratic politics. As Mark Brown writes “climate change is not just a policy problem, nor just a geophysical phenomenon, but a site of cultural and conceptual change ... whether or not climate policy needs democracy, it is likely to transform it” (Brown, 2014, p. 130).

In this review I have distinguished between three different imaginaries that offer conflicting visions of the way that democracy fares in a climate changing world. These imaginaries appear within academic literature, as well as the broader public sphere, and influence political practices and expectations for climate policy and politics. The skeptical democratic imaginary warns that democracy is doomed, the rational democratic imaginary counsels that it can be extended, rescaled and deepened, and the radical democratic imaginary hopes that democracy is brought to life through the formation and contestation of alternatives. The refusal of the radical imaginary to close down political disagreements may frustrate those who champion green ends, but I have suggested that the inevitable plurality and contestation around climate change that is celebrated in this imaginary ultimately underpins both a healthy democracy and a more profound socioecological transformation. To take it seriously is to notice that to “rationalize democracy” is to emaciate it, and to respect democracy is to open up the possibility for an outcome that might not yet have been foreseen. In other words, this third imaginary leaves space for the unimaginable.

My main point, however, is not that any one of these imaginaries is more accurate than the others, but that they each sculpt the political horizon in different ways to tell us what is desirable, possible, and even thinkable. If climate change is already having profound impact on societies around the globe, then these imaginaries proffer some different possibilities for navigating that impact and reconfiguring political life for a transforming world. By provoking the undulation of political imagination, climate change itself opens the opportunity to rethink the meaning, scope and value of democracy today and into the future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

ENDNOTES

¹ See also: <https://www.euronews.com/green/2021/06/29/why-democracy-is-the-key-ingredient-to-battling-climate-change>

² See also Ruser and Machin (2017) on the relationship between compromise and sustainability.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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