Rethinking democracy in times of crises: Towards a pragmatist approach to the geographies of emerging publics

Benno Fladvad
Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies ‘Futures of Sustainability’, University of Hamburg, Germany

Abstract
How do societies respond to ‘super wicked’ problems that often occur at very large spatial and temporal scales? On the one hand, there exists a tendency to conceive of liberal democracy as inconvenient, inflexible and as incapable of dealing with complex and elusive issues such as climate change or questions of environmental injustice. On the other, these issues have given rise to manifold ‘emerging public spheres’ inside and outside existing democratic institutions. Since both of these tendencies refer to the idea of sustainability, this contribution discusses the relationships between different future trajectories of sustainability and democracy in particular with regards to their inherent spatialities. Building on this, and following the works of contemporary political theorists and human geographers, it suggests conceptualizing democracy from a pragmatist point of view as coined by the North American philosopher John Dewey. In doing so, it becomes possible to reframe democracy in the Anthropocene and to conceive of it as an ever-evolving phenomenon of problem-solving communities that convene around different issues of shared concern. This perspective allows thinking beyond theorizations of global democracy, in favor of a democratic model that shows openness for social complexity and uncertainty and which accepts that the spaces of democratic action are not given from the outset but that they are brought into being by the emerging publics themselves.

Keywords
Anthropocene, democracy, emerging publics, John Dewey, socio-ecological crises, super wicked problems, sustainability

Corresponding author:
Benno Fladvad, Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies ‘Futures of Sustainability’, University of Hamburg, Gorch-Fock-Wall 3, Hamburg, 20354, Germany.
Email: benno.fladvad@uni-hamburg.de
Résumé
Comment les sociétés répondent-elles aux « problèmes extrêmement compliqués » qui surviennent souvent à de très grandes échelles spatiales et temporelles ? D'un côté, une certaine tendance consiste à voir la démocratie libérale comme étant peu pratique et peu flexible, rendant impossible la gestion de problématiques complexes et difficilement saisissables, telles que le changement climatique ou les questions d'injustice environnementale. D'un autre côté, ces problématiques ont engendré de multiples « sphères publiques émergentes », à l'intérieur comme à l'extérieur des institutions démocratiques existantes. Puisque ces deux tendances se rapportent à l'idée de durabilité, cet article s'intéresse aux relations existant entre différentes trajectoires durables et démocratiques futures, et plus particulièrement aux spatialités qui leur sont consubstantielles. À partir de ce constat, et en s'appuyant sur des travaux contemporains en science politique et en géographie humaine, cet article avance l'idée qu'il faudrait conceptualiser la démocratie à partir d'un point de vue pragmatique, tel qu'il a pu être formulé par le philosophe nord-américain John Dewey. De cette manière, il devient possible de concevoir à nouveau la démocratie à l'ère de l'Anthropocène et de l'appréhender comme un phénomène en perpétuelle évolution fait de communautés dédiées à la résolution de problèmes et qui se rassemblent autour de diverses questions pour lesquelles elles partagent un intérêt commun. Cette perspective nous permet de réfléchir au-delà des efforts pour théoriser une démocratie globale, afin de privilégier un modèle démocratique qui ferait preuve d'ouverture face à la complexité sociale et à l'incertitude, et qui accepterait que les espaces d'action démocratique ne soient pas prévus à l'avance mais plutôt construits par les publics émergents eux-mêmes.

Mots-clés
Anthropocène, crises socio-écologiques, démocratie, durabilité, John Dewey, problèmes extrêmement compliqués, publics émergents

Introduction: On the need to rethink democracy

The current epoch of multiple socio-ecological crises, often referred to as the Anthropocene, brings into view fundamental challenges for democratic societies and their institutional procedures. One of the most obvious is a dilemma of electoral politics that has both a temporal and spatial dimension. In temporal terms, it consists in the difficulty of formulating adequate long-term responses to the critical planetary condition, while the every-day politics of representational democratic rule rather tend to focus on immediate concerns that are framed by short-term electoral cycles (Chakrabarty, 2015; Stehr, 2016). In spatial terms, it refers to the discrepancy between the fact that the countries of the Global North have contributed significantly to environmental degradation and that they are having great difficulties dealing with issues that work on much larger spatial scales (Connolly, 2019). This dilemma is also apparent in issues of environmental injustice. While an increasing number of people, in particular in the Global South, is severely affected by spatially dispersed and gradually unfolding threats, to which they did not directly contribute, such as deforestation, displacements, land loss, or sea level
rise; they have only little chance to participate in democratic procedures that might avert or mitigate these injustices. Yet, the integration of these forms of ‘slow violence’, as Rob Nixon (2011) calls them, in the established procedures of democratic rule, is very difficult, not only because they often take place in remote contexts, but also because they occur at temporal scales that are increasingly out of sync with the short attention spans and the rhythms of electoral politics. These observations thus correspond to what Kelly Levin and colleagues call ‘super wicked’ problems,1 which comprise four key characteristics: time is running out, those who seek to solve a problem are actually causing it,2 there is no central authority, and – partly as a consequence of the first three features – political decisions are often irrational and short-sighted in face of the severity of the problems in hand (Levin et al., 2012).

One reaction to this ‘wickedness’ is the rise of a new democratic skepticism that conceives of democracy as inert, inconvenient and incapable of dealing with the complexity of global warming (Niemeyer, 2014; Stehr, 2016). These calls, stemming amongst others from prominent voices of the environmental sciences, claim that climate scientists and engineers must take the lead in an expert and technocratic society, which corresponds with strongly anthropocentric narratives of the Anthropocene of a ‘planetary stewardship’, i.e. of ‘Man moving from environmental obliviousness to environmental consciousness’ (Bonneuil, 2015: 23). These eco-authoritarian and techno-managerial tendencies have to be taken seriously, since they could lead, as Nico Stehr (2016: 40) puts it, to a gradual ‘erosion of democracy’, which could involve the disempowerment of manifold alternative perspectives and emerging initiatives to respond to climate change and environmental injustice. It is precisely for this reason, Stehr argues, that there is urgent need to search for an alternative model, that ‘will be found only through revitalized democratic interaction in which alternative perspectives can be presented and tested’ (2016: 44). In other words, it means, to commit to democratic complexity and to conceive of it – contra the democratic skepticism – as a prerequisite for dealing with the ‘super wicked’ problems (Levin et al., 2012) of the Anthropocene.

In this contribution, I take up Stehr’s considerations and aim at rethinking democracy against the background of the current crises with a special focus on its inherent spatialities (which does not mean leaving completely aside its temporal dimension). My intention is, however, not to show within which scale – locally, nationally or globally – democracy should be ideally implemented. Nor do I believe that it is necessary to develop a new democratic theory from the bottom up. It is rather to discuss how the apparent limitations of democratic proceduralism to respond to wicked, spatially extensive and temporally elusive issues, such as climate change or forms of slow violence, do not only lead to calls for more authoritarian governance, but also to the emergence of new democratic energies inside and outside the established democratic institutions. I therefore aim to elucidate under which circumstances and according to which principles these ‘emergent public spheres’ (Barnett, 2014) are brought into being and what spatialities they engender. In doing so, I suggest conceptualizing democracy from a pragmatist point of view. In particular, I draw on the work of the North American philosopher John Dewey, who elaborated his democratic theory in the interwar period of the 1920s against the background of increasing social complexities and a growing skepticism towards liberal democracy that reveals many parallels to the current situation3.
This paper is organized as follows: to begin with, I show how far current claims for dealing with the current crises relate to and challenge the idea of democracy as well as its spatial framings. Proceeding from the notion of ‘exceptional circumstances’ (Stehr, 2016), I demonstrate how the invocation and the narration of crises and disasters have on the one hand a strongly depoliticizing effect but that they may, on the other, also engender new democratic energies. Since these dynamics refer to the idea of sustainability, I subsequently draw on Frank Adloff and Sighard Neckel’s (2019) approach on the ‘futures of sustainability’ as a conceptual lens to show what kind of democratic ideas and spatial imaginaries are implied in different sustainability trajectories. In a third section, I turn to the work of John Dewey. Originating from his definition of ‘the public’, and following the works of contemporary political theorists and human geographers, I discuss how and due to which circumstances emerging publics come into being. Subsequently, I focus on Dewey’s experimental idea of democracy, which allows conceiving of democracy as an experimental process of problem-solving that emerges due to different issues of shared concern. Finally, in the conclusion, I argue – both from an analytical and normative point of view – that in the epoch of the Anthropocene it is essential to think beyond theorizations of global democracy in favor of a democratic model that shows openness for social complexity and which accepts that the spaces of democratic action are not given from the outset, but that they are brought into being by the emerging publics themselves.

**Sustainability as a challenge for democracy**

The growing awareness that environmental problems exceed national governance mechanisms, have led in the 1990s to the integration of environmental issues in institutions and procedures of global democracy. This idea to decouple environmental governance from national institutions and to scale up the idea of deliberative democracy has thus engendered new and wide-ranging forms of public negotiations and democratic procedures. Not only has the scope of the polity and the number of actors increased significantly, but also their variety as well as their degree of participation (Biermann and Pattberg, 2008). In the last years, however, and in particular after the failed climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, different scholars have criticized the ineffectiveness of these mechanisms, either due to their incorporation in modern consumer capitalism that contradicts the willingness to find sustainable solutions (Blühdorn, 2011), or due to their manifold democratic deficits and institutional weaknesses (Dryzek, 2019). Prominent voices from the environmental studies (Hansen, 2009; Jamieson, 2014; Lovelock, 2009) went one step further in questioning whether liberal democracy is capable at all to tackle the massive, urgent, and ‘wicked problems’ of environmental degradation and – above all – climate change. They conceive of it as inconvenient, slow and inflexible, and argue that mass mobilization and profound transformations towards sustainability are perhaps not possible in democratic societies due to the elusive, complex and abstract character of the current crises (see also Shearman and Smith, 2007; for critique and discussion Niemeyer, 2014; Stehr, 2016). In doing so, they (and in particular James Lovelock) invoke a warlike narrative, and express the need for strong leadership: ‘We all need modern Churchills to lead us from the clinging, flabby, consensual thinking of the late
twentieth century and to bind our nations with a single-minded effort to wage a difficult war.’ (Lovelock, 2009: 32)

In view of these tendencies, Stehr (2016: 39) argues that climate change has given rise to the invocation of ‘exceptional circumstances’ that legitimize the granting of additional powers for governments and scientific experts in order to pursue a single political purpose, namely to stop global warming, if necessary by means that are not democratically legitimized. However, the invocation of exceptional circumstances, which resembles the calls for neo-Malthusian, eco-authoritarian approaches of the 1970s (Niemeyer, 2014; Shahar, 2015), does not necessarily have to have depoliticizing effects, it also may inhere the power of releasing new democratic energies as is explained in the following.

Of crises and disasters

During the last years, talks of crises and disasters have become omnipresent in Western societies. This phenomenon is further fueled by a growing skepticism towards liberal democracies (in particular by right-wing populists), the financial crisis of 2008, and the growing awareness of ecological deterioration, in particular of climate change, and its manifold consequences. Crises and disasters have thus become part of a ‘new normal’ and float freely from one topic and situation to the other, while they are being connected to either dystopian, pessimistic scenarios or progressive, transformative and utopian political claims (Runkel and Everts, 2017). Despite an apparent effect of habituation (Grammelsberger, 2013), these ‘exceptionalist’ narratives thus inhere a strong political momentum, since they are often tied to the claiming or the reinforcement of political power and sovereignty (Hempel and Markwart, 2013). This becomes even more obvious in view of Carl Schmitt’s (1922: 1) controversial but yet influential definition of sovereignty, which states that ‘[s]overeign is the one who decides about the exception’. According to Schmitt, ‘the sovereign’ does therefore not appear in quotidian situations, although it always latently remains in force, but rather in exceptional moments of emergency, in other words, in times of crises, in which the question of ‘what should be done’ is understood as a genuine act of power (Korf and Schetter, 2012: 154).

However, whereas Schmitt had in mind the state as the ultimate entity of sovereignty, this concept today is far more contested and fragmented. In many contemporary political struggles it serves as an argumentative resource in order to prescriptively raise particular claims and forms of governance above and beyond the state (Kalmo and Skinner, 2010). Moreover, a ‘state of exception’ always underlies and could not be declared without a particular ‘geography of fear’ (Korf, 2009: 153) that emerges due to a current or impending external threat, such as a terrorist attack or natural disasters. In other words, to declare a state of exception, in essence, requires the existence and the construction of a ‘state of emergency’, that serves as the basis of legitimacy for the former (Korf, 2009: 153). Exactly because of this reason, talks of crises and disasters become so important. In pointing to the critical planetary condition and in framing environmental deterioration as an apocalyptic scenario, a fundamental, non-negotiable norm, an imperative for urgent action is created that inheres the power of justifying the changing and the suspension of the law, in other words, the exertion or the claiming of sovereignty.
In doing so, catastrophic narratives serve on the one hand as a means to maintain and to confirm a model of dominant rule, and to show that there are no alternatives to the hegemonic interpretations of social reality. The calls for eco-authoritarian governance are very good examples, since they do not, despite their calls for urgent action, claim a change of the current socio-economic order, but rather plead for technical approaches that do not question the underlying systemic causes of climate change and ecological deterioration (Swyngedouw and Ernstson, 2019). On the other hand, talks of crises and catastrophes often engender and motivate new democratic energies and transformative claims. It therefore reflects the fragility and radical openness of every political order (Mouffe, 2005), and is often accompanied by attempts to delegitimize and transform otherwise undisputed social norms (Dünckmann, 2020). Recent environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion or Fridays for Future serve as good examples. In their actions they warn against an impending collapse with wide-ranging consequences and appeal to governments to acknowledge the catastrophic reality of mass extinction and climate change, as well as to undertake urgently needed and wide-ranging political actions. At the heart of the claims of these social movements thus lies the accusation that political decisions and institutions are too shortsighted and too slow to adequately respond to the catastrophic long-term consequences of global warming and its exponential exacerbation. Put differently, in the view of many activists, the climate system does not wait for public deliberation and half-baked compromises. ‘Time is running out’ (Levin et al., 2012: 127) and there is only little time left for societies to avoid, or at least, to attenuate the coming climate catastrophe (Klein, 2019).

Notwithstanding, calls for more serious and profound consideration of environmental concerns have also led to institutional changes and new democratic dynamics within established forms of governmental rule that cannot be assigned to the dichotomy of either ‘top down’ authoritarianism and democratic skepticism or ‘bottom up’ radicalization and calls for transformative politics. In fact, existing political institutions and procedures are often subject to renewal and change without being fundamentally transformed; and, likewise, they may become more authoritative without completely rejecting democratic values. Moreover, the desire to respond to environmental degradation and climate change, in particular at the local level, has led to new democratic dynamics in-between political scales and institutions that are often seen as separate and inflexible. This is demonstrated for example by the idea of ‘sustainable cities’, which have contributed to new multilevel environmental governance mechanisms between communal and state institutions, as well as to new transnational alliances between different municipalities and non-state actors (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005).

In addition, scholars have recently theorized more in-depth the temporal dimensions of politics in the Anthropocene, in particular the inconsistency between geological ‘deep-time’ scales and the short-term intervals of democratic procedures and institutions (Galaz, 2019). Some have even provided practical suggestions for new institutional designs, such as embedding a ‘deep-time perspective’ within societal and political organizations and establishing (analogously to multilevel governance) a multi-temporal governance architecture (Hanusch and Biermann, 2019). Another, yet more established approach, is to enhance the reflexivity and responsiveness of democratic institutions in
order to prepare them for the uncertainties and exponential dynamics of future developments (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019: 155f.).

**Democracy and the ‘futures of sustainability’**

Apparently, the dynamics explained above assemble around the principle of sustainability. It would however be misleading to dismiss sustainability as a fuzzy signifier that points to all and nothing at the same time and that has been structurally undermined by neoliberal capitalism (Swyngedouw, 2010; Blühdorn, 2011). In fact, sustainability has certain meanings that exceed its vague understanding as a principle according to which current actions should not endanger the needs of future generations. It involves at least three diverging and potentially conflicting trajectories – an ecological modernization, transformative approaches and politics of control (Adloff and Neckel, 2019) –, which each underlies different spatial imaginaries and relationships towards democracy.

Obviously, a politics of control reflects what Stehr (2016) means by ‘exceptional circumstances’. It involves a partial or temporary suspending of democracy by sovereign authorities, in order to exercise specific ‘top-down’ policies, such as comprehensive surveillance or regulations and policies that aim at enhancing the resilience of certain groups (Adloff and Neckel, 2019). Accordingly, sustainability is framed as a technocratic and eco-managerial issue (Luke, 2006), in which initiatives from the civil society and forms of direct or participatory democracy are generally ignored. In this regard, the control-path involves two different geographical imaginaries: on the one hand, it engenders a separated world of enclosures and clear demarcations in order to protect privileged groups from the effects of global warming and climate change-induced migration. On the other, it rests on a geographical imaginary that can be described as ‘the planetary’, since it transfers, without further ado, the large-scale thinking of earth system science onto the social world, thus envisioning a global elite that ought to ‘guide’ humanity towards sustainability, using technologies with global impact and other wide-ranging managerial approaches (Bonneuil, 2015: 23; Neckel, 2021).

Ecological modernization, instead, centers on economic liberalism and market-based solutions, as well as on the securing of the regenerative potentials of resources and on guaranteeing the potentiality of future development opportunities (Neckel, 2018: 16). In doing so, approaches of modernization are often organized around the merging of democratic participation, sustainable behavior and economic rationalities. This is demonstrated for instance by the strategy to shift the political responsibility of creating more sustainability towards individual consumers and their choices, which coalesces with a liberal and cosmopolitan imaginary of a community of environmental citizens as the central agents of social change (Bell, 2005). Moreover, the idea of ecological modernization is embedded in diverse global environmental governance mechanism, in particular multi-stakeholder dialogues, which have contributed significantly to a democratic interaction of private, governmental and non-state actors that deliberatively aim at finding consensus between economic, ecological and social concerns (Biermann and Pattberg, 2008).

Yet, the relationship between ecological modernization and democracy is not unproblematic. In the case of the ‘citizen-consumers’, it privileges individual, private self-interests over citizenship goals and profound systemic changes (Johnston, 2008). This idea
thus drives the idea of sustainability – which in itself represents a matter of public concern – from the public (and democratically negotiable and controllable) realm into the private sphere (Grunwald, 2010). Likewise, multi-stakeholder processes primarily create non-legally binding instruments such as voluntary guidelines, certifications and corporate standards that rather follow economic rationales and often lack transparency (Lipschutz, 2005). In view of the apparent power imbalances between the actors involved, and due to the fact that stakeholders, who do not adhere to the idea of ecological modernization, are often not represented, the democratic quality of these processes is indeed questionable. Critical scholars thus classify the modernization path as leading to an entirely ‘post-democratic’ society (Blühdorn, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2011).

Proponents of the transformation path – such as peasant and indigenous movements from the Global South or members of the de-growth movement – seek instead to move beyond market logics and claim to create counter-hegemonies that rest on principles of solidarity and justice and on the democratic self-organization of commonly shared resources (Tauss, 2016). In so doing, these movements often build on a geographical imaginary that includes on the one hand a radically different understanding of the nature-culture-relationship, i.e. as holistic and spiritual (Acosta and Martínez, 2009), and on the other, the idea that the transformation towards sustainability has to be achieved locally, from the bottom up, in the form of multifaceted practices of a solidary way of life (Brand and Wissen, 2021). These transformative movements are however not merely regionalist or place-based, nor do they solely rest on changes of lifestyles and behaviors towards sufficiency and individual self-restraint, as some advocates of the de-growth movement argue (Paech, 2012). Instead, most of them are embedded in broader emancipatory and counter-hegemonic networks that call for a fundamental shift and a radical democratization of the socio-political and economic order (Eversberg and Muraca, 2019). Therefore, their political actions seem to relate to a disruptive and agonistic idea of democratic politics (Mouffe, 2013): in radically contesting existing social and symbolic orders, these movements aim at expressing pluralism and dissent and thus bring into being multifaceted ‘interstitial spaces’, in the sense of diverse, post-capitalist initiatives and practices in the ‘cracks’ of the dominant system (Wright, 2010).

In sum, the three distinct trajectories of modernization, transformation and control show that sustainability has a complex and multifaceted relationship towards democracy. Whereas the control path rather tends to constrain public deliberation and participation by diminishing or partially suspending democratic rule, the modernization path builds on the idea of an increased participation of non-state actors, and of establishing new democratic governance mechanisms above and beyond the state. However, due to the trend of privatizing sustainability issues, the modernization path has a rather tensed relationship towards democracy, understood as a model that essentially builds on freely accessible space of public deliberation (Habermas, 2004). The transformation path, instead, rests on radicalizing democracy and contesting existing structures and procedures. This brings it in proximity to an agonistic understanding of democracy, which, albeit its diverse and conflicting interpretations (Wenman, 2013), likewise emphasizes the disruptive nature of democratic action as well as ‘the human capacity for creation [. . .] to bring new ways of being into the world’ (Wenman, 2013: 7). Yet, this does not mean that the transformation path automatically leads to a deepening or an enhancement of liberal democratic values.
In fact, within this path, there exist tendencies that show similarities to the control path and to the democratic skepticism discussed earlier, not least because their advocates often present their claims as being without alternative and the only solution to avoid the coming disaster (Adloff and Neckel, 2019: 1022).

Of course, the three future trajectories of sustainability and their particular relationships towards democracy are primarily analytical categories, since in reality they may intermingle, contradict or reinforce each other. Nevertheless, they allow a more nuanced perspective on sustainability’s complex and tensed relationship towards democracy. Moreover, they reflect, at least to a certain extent, a common and stylized contrast between different understandings of the core values of democracy: one that is rather consent oriented (e.g. in the form of attempts to balance interests between economic, ecological and social concerns, or to scale up the idea of deliberation in multi-stakeholder dialogues) and one that rather emphasizes the transformation of democratic institutions and the disruption of established patterns of social life, as exemplified by movements of the transformation path. This contrast of ‘deliberation vs. agonism’, most prominently discussed by Chantal Mouffe (2005, 2013), who strongly advocates for the latter, serves as a suitable point of orientation for the argument in the next section. Therein I turn to the pragmatism of John Dewey to discuss an understanding of democracy that is neither reducible to contestation nor to deliberation and which provides important insights for rethinking and reframing public action in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

Adopting a pragmatist perspective

As noted above, the current epoch is marked by ‘super wicked’ problems (Levin et al., 2012), most notably climate change, environmental degradation and concomitant forms of environmental injustice. These are characterized by high complexity, urgency, elusiveness, lack of central authority, irrational and shortsighted political decisions, as well as by the circumstance that those who try to solve the problem have essentially contributed to its creation. Given these challenges, it may indeed seem tempting to respond to them in a ‘top down’, expertocratic fashion, and to temporarily suspend democratic procedures – according to the logic that high complexity and severity require determined action and professional expertise. Such view, however, glosses over the empirical evidence that authoritarian and technocratic regimes have a very poor record on environmental (justice) challenges (Shahar, 2015). Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that the exceptionality of the circumstances (that would legitimize suspending democracy) is in fact not limited in time, but – given the irreversibility and depth of changes of the earth system – rather a distinctive and permanent feature of the Anthropocene (Mert, 2019: 139). The idea of a temporal suspension of democracy to return to a pre-crises condition is thus at best naïve, and at worst a dangerous fallacy. Moreover, as Stehr (2016: 43) puts it, “[t]he problem is not one of democracy, but of the complexity of social change”. This means that democracy, understood as the only type of governance that commits to social complexity and its dilemmas, is not only necessary, but also indispensable to deal with the current crises.

However, a simple call for ‘more’ or deeper democracy is not sufficient. Instead, a profound rethinking and re-imagining of democracy is necessary, which means to go to
the core values and meanings of democracy and to ask, what kind of democracy and democratic imaginaries are possible and necessary in the epoch of the Anthropocene (Mert, 2019: 129). Such an approach thus requires to move beyond the contrast between either deliberative or agonistic approaches (as described above) and to search for a model that not only prioritizes pluralism, dissent and contestation, but which also highlights the importance of creating and engaging in new institutional designs both inside and outside existing structures and procedures of democratic rule.

The democratic theory of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, to which I will turn in the following, offers valuable insights for such an approach. Although Dewey is generally regarded as liberal thinker, he was highly critical of classic liberalism and proponent of a ‘social liberalism’, in which individuals are not atomic entities but always embedded in social interactions and relations (Antic, 2017: 154ff.). His theory therefore centers on the thought that individuals are, in a self-reflexive way, capable of distancing themselves from their self-interests, in order to balance their own interest with the interests of those with whom they share the political space (Rogers, 2016: 5). In this regard, Dewey conceived of the formation of a democratic will as ‘a process of thoughtful interaction in which the preferences of citizens are both informed and transformed by public deliberation [. . .] to decide which policies will best satisfy and address the commitments and the needs of the community’ (Rogers, 2016: 6).

Dewey’s understanding of democracy is however not reducible to the deliberation of interests within certain governmental institutional arrangements. He rather conceived of it as a ‘political ethos’, a ‘moral ideal’ that affects and pervades ‘all modes of human association’. In other words, as Dewey put it, democracy ‘is the idea of community life itself’ (Dewey, 2016: 171, 175). This idea of democracy is thus an entirely radical one, since it is not merely understood as a set of rules, but as an always-incomplete process of experimental and collective problem-solving6 that derives out of situated contexts and experiences of everyday life. In so doing, Dewey’s democratic vision is highly normative, because he regards democracy as a valuable and defendable asset, whose core ideas are deeply entrenched in and correspond with the cooperative character of the human nature (Adloff, 2016: 53ff.). At the same time, due to its emphasis on communication, problem-solving and participation, Dewey’s democratic theory reveals a profound analytical depth and is regarded as an important cornerstone for deliberative democratic theories of the Habermasian tradition. The following subsections will explore these aspects in more detail.

The geographies of emerging publics

The apparent failure of established democratic institutions and procedures to deal with the ‘wickedness’ of issues such as climate change and environmental injustice raises several questions. In particular, when these issues become so pressing, wicked and severe that they can no longer be ignored – as it is the case with the manifold effects of climate change and forms of environmental injustice – and when the affected people reflect on and take action against them, the question of how to integrate these emerging public spheres in the existing democratic procedures arises. Connected with this are yet further questions, such as the questions of who belongs to the emerging publics, how they may
lead to the creation of new democratic institutions and according to which principles their members recognize themselves as belonging to communities of shared concerns.

In particular, Dewey’s understanding of ‘the public’, which forms the centerpiece of his democratic theory, is most helpful in this regard. ‘The public’, for Dewey, is not reducible to any institutionalized and predetermined form, rather, it ‘consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for’ (Dewey, 2016: 69). In other words, it means that the public sphere comes into being as soon as certain transactions and their non-intended consequences (e.g. carbon emissions, sea-level rise, agro-industrial activities, land-loss, destruction of habitats), affect a group of individuals to such magnitude that political action is required. Yet, in denoting that ‘the public’ forms up as a reaction of ‘indirect consequences’, Dewey does not imply that the impact itself is weak or elusive – in fact, it can be severe, harmful and profound as Nixon’s descriptions of ‘slow violence’ show – but that ‘the public’ is formed by individuals that are not immediately involved in the transaction itself (Dewey, 2016: 66). Therefore, according to Dewey, a matter of public concern is not determined by its content, but by the fact that it considerably affects people who have not directly contributed to its causation.

In contemporary political theory, in particular in theories that stem from the Habermasian tradition, such as Nancy Fraser’s, Dewey’s understanding of ‘the public’ corresponds with the so-called ‘all-affected principle’. This principle holds ‘that all those affected by a given social structure or institution have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it’ (Fraser, 2005: 13). In so doing, this principle does not only inhere a strongly normative force, but brings in a decidedly geographical dimension into theorizations of democracy, since it addresses the question of the spatial framing of public action (Barnett and Bridge, 2013; Barnett, 2017). Whereas this question was formerly answered by equating the ‘all-affected-principle’ with the territorial state, in the sense that the state served as the only and taken-for-granted frame for guaranteeing justice, the manifold extra- and non-territorial forces, demonstrate that the state today is not sufficiently able to fulfill this function and that injustices of various kinds transcend its boundaries. What then arises are forms of ‘meta-political-injustices’ (Fraser, 2008: 62) that occur when the polity through which decisions are negotiated does not match with the scope and extent of the injustices that certain people experience. In these cases, the ‘subjects of justice’ are completely barred from participating in political decision with regard to the injustices they experience – in Fraser’s words, they become ‘misframed’ (Fraser, 2008: 62).

But how do those that are ‘misframed’, such as people that are affected by ‘slow violence’, recognize themselves as a community of subjects of justice? Again, the ‘all-affected principle’ provides orientation, since it reflects the Deweyian argument that publics are not defined a priori in the form of political membership (to a state), nor in virtue of the sheer fact of being human (as proponents of a cosmopolitan global justice approach suggest). Rather they are being defined in virtue of a joint ‘co-imbrication in a common structural or institutional framework, which sets the ground rules that govern their social interaction’ (Fraser, 2005: 13). This definition, however, still lacks of explanatory power and requires analytical differentiation. In fact, as soon as the ‘all-affected principle’ is understood merely as a causal and objective criterion, as it is the case in
Habermas’ theory (Marres, 2007), i.e., when the ‘fact’ of affectedness is used as a neutral rationale for determining who is a legitimate member of a democratic community and who is not, it falls victim to over-complexity and arbitrariness, since it is ‘rather difficult to disentangle simple relations of cause and effect’ in complex social systems (Barnett and Bridge, 2013: 1026). Moreover, it neglects the questions of power and subjection to certain structures, and thus fails to identify morally relevant claims, because it implicitly presumes that different people are to the same extent affected by indirect consequences, which is the reason why Fraser (2008: 65) prefers to speak of the ‘all-subjected principle’, instead of merely being causally affected.

When applying the principle of all-affectedness, it is thus necessary, as the human geographer Clive Barnett (2017: 187ff.) argues, to differentiate between an objective and causal criterion on the one hand, in the sense of ‘having an interest’ in an issue, and a normative and affective criterion on the other, in the sense of actively ‘taking an interest’ in one. This two-fold interpretation of the ‘all-affected principle’, between being causally affected, and self-reflectively identifying oneself as affected, also allows, following Barnett (2017: 187ff.), a more nuanced understanding of Dewey’s understanding of ‘the public’: whereas it might seem at first sight indeed a merely causal principle (people mechanistically react because they are affected by indirect consequences), Dewey put more emphasis on the reciprocal perception and recognition of individuals around an issue of shared concern. Therefore, Dewey understood the formation of a public to a lesser extent as a chain of cause and effect, and rather as emerging from both the cognitive reflection and the embodied feeling of being affected by spatially and temporally wide-ranging consequences of human transactions and of coordinating action against them. As Dewey (2016: 78, my emphasis) puts it: ‘When these consequences are in turn realized in thought and sentiment, recognition of them reacts to remake the conditions out of which they arose. Consequences have to be taken care of, looked out for. [. . .] For the essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them.’

Although Dewey did not make it explicit in these lines, it becomes clear that the public is not only a contingent and situative phenomenon, but that it is also a pluralist one. Distinct consequences (or problems) do not only engender different publics around which people constellate and form distinct political identities (Rogers, 2016: 37), they also implicate different actors antagonistically in an issue of public concern (Marres, 2007: 773). Moreover, according to Dewey, the formation of publics represents a highly communicative process, since it is ultimately brought into being by the capacity of humans to reflect and to communicate, as well as to experience emotions that enables them to recognize and to imagine themselves as being part of broader complex systems with spatially dispersed and temporally elusive consequences. Given these insights, it is no wonder that Dewey’s theory represents an important intellectual basis for Bruno Latour’s democratic experimentalism (Latour, 2004a) with which he seeks to re-materialize democracy and establish a democratic model that assigns a special role to objects and ‘things’. Yet, a ‘thing’, for Latour, is not reducible to artifacts or material entities. He rather intends to give political shape to commonly shared and problematic ‘matters of concern’ – understood as issues which are subject to disputes, to diverging assessments and valuations – and which are, from his point of view, being falsely treated as non-negotiable ‘matters of
fact’, i.e. as allegedly neutral things, devoid of social values and emotions (see also Latour, 2004b; Marres, 2007).

In sum, Dewey’s understanding of the public, or rather publics, offers a helpful theoretical approach to reflect on the democratic challenges sketched in the introduction. It shows that the inability of democratic institutions to deal with ‘wicked’ issues on much larger scales (or ‘matters of concern’) is closely connected to the fact that those who are involved in these institutions often lack of the ability to cognitively reflect and emotionally feel that they are being affected by certain indirect consequences. In Latour’s (2004c: 205) words, they lack of the capability of ‘learning to be affected’, that is, of being bodily put into motion by humans and non-human entities. Moreover, it points to the fact that emerging ‘publics are [. . .] not merely found’ (Barnett, 2014: 10) on the basis of preexisting democratic frames, nor on the sheer fact of being human, but on the basis of being causally affected (or subjected to use Frasers term) and the ability to reflect and to take action, i.e. of affectively ‘taking an interest’. In doing so, it allows to perceive of ‘the public’ as an ‘imaginative entity’ (Barnett, 2017: 188f.) that is neither reducible to short-term politics nor to predetermined democratic frames. Instead, it emerges on the basis of individuals who are cognitively and emotionally affected by the consequences of certain transactions (i.e. of toxic waste, use of GMOs, deforestation or sea-level rise), and who coordinate and organize themselves via practices of joint communication in order to take care of these shared ‘matters of concern’ (Latour, 2004b).

**Democratic experimentalism and the ‘politics of swarming’**

Conceptualizing the public as an ‘imaginative entity’, however, does not mean that publics are purely ideological, in the Cartesian sense of a distinct sphere that is detached from bodies and the material world. This would be a contradiction to Dewey’s (2013) philosophical key assumptions, according to which the evolution of humans and their environment is being embedded in a reciprocal and dynamic continuum out of which new subject positions and relationships emerge. Mind and matter are, according to Dewey, no distinct categories but co-constituted, as ‘body-minds’, and constantly in flux, which, again, shows the close proximity to Latour’s theory. Central to this philosophy, is Dewey’s anti-Cartesian understanding of ‘experience’, which refers to the notion that the production of knowledge derives out of a ‘continuum of response’ (Bridge, 2013: 305) between non-human organisms, objects and the environment. Humans and non-human entities are thus in constant ‘transaction’, meaning that they are never fully developed and closed, but embedded in a permanent process of reciprocal co-evolution and reorganization (Dewey and Bentley, 2008).

However, as soon as problematic situations arise, in which habituated procedures are interrupted and the indeterminacy of the future becomes apparent (e.g. extreme weather events or land-loss due to climate change, agro-industrial activities, or toxification), human experience shifts to what Dewey (2013) called, ‘secondary experience’. This kind of second-order knowledge production differs from ‘primary experience’ insofar as humans start to engage in a differentiated and future-oriented process of reflection and problem-orientated activity in order to overcome and to adapt to the new situation. Such process is neither individual nor merely cognitive in the sense that it can be reduced to
rational choices of individual actors. Instead, it represents an entirely social activity that is creatively and collaboratively enacted with others as well as with the non-human world (see for an early elaboration of this thought: Joas, 1997).

At present, there exists a whole range of grassroots initiatives and newly emerging public spheres both inside and outside existing institutions that are paradigmatic for Dewey’s arguments: in the last years, affected people and communities in different parts of the world have been developing very diverse answers to climate change and forms on environmental injustice. These include for instance self-governed renewable energy projects of indigenous people in Canada (Stefanelli et al., 2018), resettlement strategies of environmental migrants in the Pacific region (Klepp and Herbeck, 2016), or the struggle for food sovereignty of peasant communities in the Global South (Fladvad et al., 2020). These movements and initiatives do not only claim more protection against the structures that harm them, as well as self-determination and participation in respective decision-making processes, they also collaboratively create new institutional designs and seek to realize their own legal strategies of dealing with climate change and/or environmental injustice. For example, in the case of food sovereignty, new transnational alliances between peasants and indigenous peoples have recently resulted in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, which was adopted by the United Nations in 2018. This declaration demonstrates how the manifold local experiences and initiatives of peasants worldwide have been transformed into a new framework, which opens up new legal spaces and possibilities for grass-roots democratic policies in the rural sector (Claeys and Edelman, 2020).

Although this notion of an experimental, or rather ‘creative democracy’, as Dewey (2011) called it, might appear as straightforwardly consensual, as if conflicts, power relations and differences have to be deferred for the sake of the common good, this is far from Dewey’s intention, since he conceived of democracy as being highly contingent on pluralism, agonistic relationships and competing interests. As he put it ‘genuinely democratic faith in peace is faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other’ (Dewey, 2011: 153). The peasant organizations of the food sovereignty movement illustrate this idea very clearly, for example in debating at their events possible contradictions between claims for gender equality in the rural sector and agriculture in traditional, patriarchal societies or between local production and international trade. In consequence, the democratic ideal Dewey envisioned (and for which the food sovereignty movement provides a good example), does not follow superordinate objectives of social living together. Rather it aims at providing the possibility of open debate, conflict, critique and reflection in order to learn from each other, to engage in collective problem-solving and to adapt institutionally to the unanticipated changing of certain circumstances (Antic, 2017).

This perspective also provides, as Clive Barnett and Gary Bridge argue (2013; see also Bridge, 2005, 2013), an alternative understanding of the spaces of democratic action, namely, one that does not decide in advance how democracy should be ideally structured (e.g. as containers or networks) and at which scale democratic institutions are best established (local, national, or global). Instead, it allows conceiving of democratic spaces as
emerging from the formation of problem-solving communities that constellate around issues of shared concern and who bring into being their own spatialities that may differ in reach, structure, and formalization. They can emerge locally and regionally, they may territorialize or form relational networks between different actors and institutions as, for example, the case of ‘sustainable cities’ shows (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005). Moreover, they also may support existing democratic institutions and frames, such as the state, as long as these institutions are flexible and open for modification. If this is not the case, i.e., if institutions impede the experimental reorganization of their very own foundations, the formation of emerging publics stands in a rather agonistic relationship to established institutions and democratic frames. In these cases, as Dewey (2016: 81) put it, ‘the public has to break existing political forms’, even if this entails the risk of failure. This is an important aspect to keep in mind since, according to Dewey, there are no pre-given rules or categories that distinguish a failed state from a ‘good state’. Instead, ‘[t]he formation of states must be an experimental process [. . .] with diverse degrees of blindness and accident’ (2016: 82).

Given the violent history of the 20th century and the apparent failure of diverse ‘state experiments’, this idea of experimentally searching for ‘good’ democratic institutions must of course be considered very carefully. Nevertheless, it provides important insights for the democratic challenges of today. In fact, it is exactly this quality, i.e. the simultaneous accentuation of the formation of democratic publics as disruptive, counterhegemonic ‘spaces of agonistic encounter’, as well as their feature of ‘experimenting with institutional designs’, that distinguishes a pragmatist understanding from democratic theories, which either overemphasize the value of agonism and disruption, or the norm of consensus finding and deliberation (Barnett and Bridge, 2013: 1025). In short, Dewey’s pragmatism allows moving beyond this contrast and conceives of democratic action as an ongoing experimental process of collective learning, of try and error, that is neither reducible to conflict and contestation, nor to intrinsic value of participation, but which involves a commitment to both of these democratic qualities.

Notwithstanding, in the face of the spatially dispersed character of many contemporary issues (such as climate change or injustices in the rural sector), the question remains of how citizens from disparate sites and regions recognize themselves as joint communities of ‘the affected’ (e.g. as part of a food or climate justice movement), how they learn from each other, and how they organize themselves as part of a broader, yet pluralist public. It is precisely here where the political theorist William Connolly (2019: 123ff.) takes Dewey’s pragmatism further. Inspired by the idea of a ‘honeybee democracy’ he develops the concept of a ‘politics of swarming’ that consists of the interaction of manifold experimental approaches within multiple sites and scales of political action, such as ‘churches, worksites, consumption localities, investment, universities research, teaching [. . .] each carrying some potential to augment and intensify the others with which it becomes associated’ (Connolly, 2019: 125). In doing so, Connolly assigns a special role to ‘specific intellectuals’, i.e. to specific individual citizens such as people working in bureaucracies, scientists, writers-activists, mechanics, manufacturers, teachers, religious leaders or journalists that use their specific knowledge in order to modify (in their niche) certain habits or institutional and structural arrangements and to make things public. The
tasks of these ‘scouts’, as Connolly calls them, is therefore to engage in manifold ‘micropractices of creative experimentations’ and to use the complexity of contemporary life, in order to bring into being a cross-regional ‘assemblage of multiple actions’, in other words, a public that consists of multiple publics and constituencies.

In short, Connolly maps out an idea of deterritorialized democratic politics that is very close to Dewey’s theory: when and where it is deemed necessary, i.e. where specific problems arise and become urgent, people may organize and convene around matters of shared concern and engage in creative ‘role experiments’ to activate shifts and adjustments within, and often in opposition to, the existing institutional settings. The ‘swarming’ metaphor, in this regard, is very appropriate, since it underlines the argument, put forward by Barnett and Bridge (2013), that there is no external authority or centrally coordinated structure that determines how the spaces of collective problem-solving should look like, but that they follow their very own unpredictable ‘swarming’-dynamics.

**Conclusion: Moving beyond global democracy**

This contribution has aimed at rethinking democracy against the background of the current crises and corresponding debates around sustainability with a special focus on its inherent spatialities. Of central concern has been how the ‘wickedness’ of issues such as climate change, as well as the apparent democratic deficits to deal with environmental (justice) challenges, contribute to a growing democratic skepticism, which manifests itself through evocations of catastrophic, warlike scenarios and calls for expert and technocratic forms of governance. According to this view, democracy is seen as an impediment to sustainability and ‘ordinary citizens’ as inert, ignorant and impossible to mobilize for action. This tendency corresponds to what Adloff and Neckel (2019) call the ‘control path’ of the ‘futures of sustainability’: to invoke a ‘state of exception’ and to strive for sustainability by diminishing or even suspending democratic rule, which may lead to a world of enclosures for the benefit of a few and the detriment of many.

Yet, the current crises and the growing awareness for environmental concerns and sustainability have also given rise to diverse transformative social movements (e.g. the movement for food sovereignty or the manifold climate justice movements) and to a revitalization of democratic life within established institutions and procedures, at the municipal level for instance, in the form of ‘sustainable cities’ or through similar initiatives. These transnational dynamics – which relate quite differently to democracy, depending on whether they rest on the idea of an ecological modernization, on a politics of control, or on transformative claims – attest that the complexity of contemporary social life, as well as the urgency of the problems it has brought about, do not necessarily lead to depoliticizing or anti-democratic tendencies. Rather, they demonstrate that the ‘super wicked’ problems of the Anthropocene manifest and are negotiated in diverse manifold public spheres that bring into being their own spatialities and democratic procedures.

Analytically, these ‘emerging publics’ are best conceptualized by taking the core insights of Dewey’s pragmatism seriously. That means to acknowledge – and herein lies one of the central benefits of Dewey’s theory – that democracy is not reducible to specific standards and rules, geographical scales or institutional procedures, but that its
fundamental core consists of an always-incomplete and cooperative process of experimental problem-solving that derives out of the indirect consequences of human transactions and the manifold practical experiences of people in different situations and places. Recognizing these problems and searching collectively and in an experimental way for institutional solutions, thus, means – normatively speaking – to decentralize and to pluralize democracy in favor of multiple epistemologies, ontologies and worldviews (Mouffe, 2013). Or, to put it in the words of John Urry (2016: 64), ‘in the case of wicked problems such as climate change [. . .] there is no permanent way of getting the right policies in the right place in the right time’.

As a consequence, dominant theorizations of a global or cosmopolitan democracy (e.g. Beck, 2006; Held, 1995), according to which – broadly speaking – the scale of the polity is adjusted to the scale of the problem, should be viewed very skeptically. These imply, as Fraser (2008: 64) puts it, a ‘one-size-fits-only’ approach, which is ‘oblivious to actual or historical social relations’ and ‘forecloses the possibility that different issues require different frames or scales of justice’. In a similar vein, Mouffe (2005: 90ff.) argues that the cosmopolitan approaches, if put into action, for instance in the form of shifting more decision-making power to international institutions, would not only undermine and delegitimize local and national sovereignties, but also disregard the enormous power imbalances and antagonisms between peoples and regions of the world.

A pragmatist approach offers a promising alternative, both from a normative and an analytical point of view. It not only strengthens and concretizes Stehr’s (2016: 44) argument that the best political answer to the complexity of climate change and to the erosion of democracy is a revitalization of democratic interaction; it moreover allows to analytically focus both on the disruptive energy of emerging publics, and on their capacity to experiment with and to establish new and decentralized institutional designs (Barnett and Bridge, 2013). In doing so, Dewey’s pragmatism provides a philosophical basis for, for instance, a polycentric approach to the governance of common pool resources (Ostrom, 2010), as well as for approaches that highlight the importance of institutional and ecological reflexivity for providing an effective response to the Anthropocene (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019). In addition, it enables researchers to understand that the issues, around which these emerging publics convene, are not positively given, and that the moral incentive to take action against them doesn’t derive out of an objectively assessable affectedness. Instead, it highlights that issues of shared concern arise as soon as the established democratic institutions fail to deal with them, and when people who are affected by them are capable of recognizing them, of taking an interest, and of coordinating action against them. Therefore, issues of shared concern have to be publicly identified, examined, articulated and transformed into political action in order to qualify as such (Dewey, 2016: 224f.). Such a ‘critical democratic’ approach to determine ‘how’ problems are being determined and ‘who’ stands as a subject of justice in relation to them (Fraser, 2008: 41ff.), thus underlines that the proper frames of democratic action should not be determined by scaling up the polity, nor by prioritizing national or local sovereignties. Rather, it suggests that the spaces of democratic action should derive out of a dialogical and yet agonistic process of experimental problem-solving, i.e. from the emerging publics and their democratic procedures themselves. These ‘emergent public spheres’ (Barnett, 2014) therefore unfold unforeseeably, and follow, to use Connolly’s (2019) metaphor again, a spatial logic that can be best described as a ‘swarming’.
In sum, Dewey’s pragmatism serves two purposes. On the one hand, it serves as a means for reframing and rethinking normative political theories in the light of the complexities and democratic challenges of the Anthropocene, in particular with regards to the core values of democracy and related aspects, such as the relationship between experts and lay citizens as well as the need for reflexivity and experimentation. On the other, it serves as an analytical framework for investigating the geographies of these emerging public spheres. It thus helps to analyze how and according to which principles emerging democratic collectives convene, how they connect to each other, how they institutionalize, and how they relate to established forms of democratic governance. In doing so, a pragmatist perspective provides both more nuanced insights into the practice and the liveliness of democracy, as well as an inspiration for an urgently needed discussion about the future of democracy in the Anthropocene.

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ORCID iD
Benno Fladvad https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6016-6315

Notes
1. The concept of ‘wicked problems’ was first described by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973), who argued that, in contrast to ‘tame problems’, ‘wicked problems’ have features such as: not being definitively solvable, dependent on their framing, a possible symptom of other problems, subject to different worldviews and changing circumstances. In political science and planning theory, there is an ongoing debate on this term (see for an overview Ritchey, 2011; for current empirical examples and political discussions: http://www.wicked7.org/). In this contribution, I will, however, not discuss the respective literature as a whole, but limit myself to the definition coined by Levin et al. (2012), since it is very suitable for current ecological and environmental issues.

2. This second feature has to be considered carefully. It is certainly true that policies against climate change, in particular mitigation strategies, are often developed in the same countries that have contributed significantly to global warming. This however does not reflect that there exist several strategies of dealing with climate change in different parts of the world, e.g. in small and vulnerable Pacific islands states, that have not, or only to a small degree contributed to it, in particular in relation to their affectedness (Klepp and Herbeck, 2016). Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that this feature does not imply a direct chain of cause and effect, but rather an indirect responsibility in the sense of non-intended consequences of collective activities (Levin et al. 2012: 127).
3. I am referring here to the so-called Lippmann-Dewey debate, which centered on the question of the extent to which ‘ordinary citizens’ should participate in questions and decision-making procedures of high complexity. Whereas Walter Lippmann (2017) – one of the most renowned North American journalists and authors of the 1920s – endorsed an elitist vision of democracy in which scientific experts take the leading role in dealing with complex issues, John Dewey (2016) advocated for transferring more decision-making power and responsibility to citizens. Yet, Dewey did not envision citizens as omnicompetent and was highly aware of the importance of experts, but was rather concerned about the relationship between citizens and experts, in particular regarding the question of power relations (Rogers, 2016: 26).

4. It should be noted here that democratic action and thought are not per se understood as being inconsistent with the deep-time perspective of the Anthropocene, but the majority of the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy (see for further elaboration Galaz, 2019).

5. A good example here is the RTRS, the Round Table on Responsible Soy (https://responsiblesoy.org/). Although several organizations from the civil society are represented in this mechanism, important stakeholders, who are not in line with the RTRS-objectives, i.e. who fight for a redistribution of land and for the recognition of peasants’ rights, do not participate (Mier y Terán, 2011).

6. A problem-solving activity, according to Dewey, does not mean that existing problems lead automatically to solutions that are satisfactory for all participants. In particular in the case of ‘wicked problems’ this would be impossible. Rather, it means that humans engage in a creative activity of dealing with problems, of identifying them and of creating problem awareness, but not necessarily of finding solutions (see Rogers, 2016).

7. These two aspects were debated at the Congress “Global Peasants Rights” in Schwäbisch Hall, Germany from 7 to 10 March 2017, which the author of this article attended (for more details on the inherent tensions of the food sovereignty movement see Edelman, 2014).

8. Institutional reflexivity is based on the idea that institutions are flexible enough to learn from past decisions and to respond to public deliberations, while they are at the same time stable enough to provide a framework for collective action and long-term policies. Ecological reflexivity means that institutions are attentive and responsive to the earth system and unprecedented ecological dynamics (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019: 151ff.).

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Author biography

Benno Fladvad is a human geographer and research associate at the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies ‘Futures of Sustainability’ at Hamburg University, Germany. In his past research, he focused on the struggles for food sovereignty in Bolivia from a political geography perspective. His current research is centered on conflicting imaginations of sustainability, climate justice and geographies of democracy in the Anthropocene.