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CLIMATE CHANGE, DEMOCRACY AND IMPATIENT SCHOLARS

Some ninety years ago, travelers of all stripes returned from visiting Mussolini's Italy, Stalin's Russia, and Hitler's Germany, impressed by the common purpose in these nations and their shared economic and technological achievements. Compared to the state of the countries they visited, their own democracies seemed divided, weak, inefficient, chaotic and backward. Intellectuals such as George Bernard Shaw left no doubt about their admiration for Joseph Stalin. Today, as a number of prominent scholars in the wake of the challenge of climate change flirt with the idea that more authoritarian governance would help us address global warming are equally mistaken. In parallel, the view that the pandemic confronts democracies with unsolvable 'wicked' problems gains assent. What's really needed is more democracy.

There are many threats to democracy in the modern era. Not least is the risk posed by the widespread feeling among different segments of the public in contemporary democracies that no one from the political class is listening. Such discontent reaches from the Trump wing of the Republican Party, the current government in Brazil, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party and the National Front in France. Surprisingly perhaps, similar sentiments can be found in reputable segments of the scientific community.

The robustness of the consensus in the science community about human-caused climate change has in recent years not only increased in strength, but a number of current studies point to far more dramatic and long-lasting consequences of global warming than previously thought. Under such circumstances, how is it possible, many scientists ask, that such evidence does not motivate political action and behavior change in all societies around the world? Why are we waiting? In light of the extraordinary dangers to human civilization posed by climate change, especially extreme weather events, democracy quickly becomes an inconvenient form of governing.

The well-known climate researcher James Hansen, who has been publicly sounding the alarm on global warming since his influential 1988 testimony before the U.S. Congress, summarized the general frustration when he asserted in 2007 that "the democratic process does not work." Hansen is equally unimpressed about the 2015 Paris Agreement. In his 2009 book, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, James Lovelock, another long-time scientific voice of warning, compares climate change to war, emphasizing that we need to abandon democracy to meet the challenges of climate

change head on. To pull the world out of its state of lethargy, “nothing but blood, toil, tears, and sweat” is urgently needed.

Dale Jamieson, professor of environmental studies, philosophy, and law at New York University and author of *Reason in a Dark Time* (2014), also exemplifies such a skeptical view about the obstacles faced by our present political order in coping with the consequences of global warming. He warns that climate change presents us “with the largest collective action problem that humanity has ever faced, [but] evolution did not design us to deal with such problems, and we have not designed political institutions that are conducive to solving them.” He adds: “Sadly, it is not entirely clear that democracy is up to the challenge of climate change.” And Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman says: “the bottom line is that I’m extremely skeptical that we can cope with climate change. To mobilize people, this has to become an emotional issue. It has to have immediacy and salience. A distant, abstract, and disputed threat just doesn’t have the necessary characteristics for seriously mobilizing public opinion.”

The 2006 famous documentary an “inconvenient truth” about Al Gore’s campaign to educate people about global warming begins now to strongly imply the complements of an “inconvenient democracy” due to an “inconvenient mind,” that is, the cognitive inability of ordinary citizens to incorporate longer-term transformation demanded by climate change into their thinking and everyday decision making, and “inconvenient social institutions” that systematically ignore the future.

THE EROSION OF DEMOCRACY

The argument about exceptional circumstances due to climate change and the concomitant implication of an inconvenient democracy derives its intellectual sustenance from a range of considerations: a deep-seated pessimism about the psychological make-up of human beings; the specific temporality—that is, short-term perspective—of human thought; the failure to mobilize populations to support the cause of effective climate policies; the inability of government, given constitutional constraints, to attend to long-term goals; the fragility of political order, which depends for survival on mobilizing consensus around incremental change; the influence of vested interests on the political agendas of the day; the widespread social addiction to fossil fuel; and last but not least, the climate science community’s sense that its message of evidence and rationality is not stimulating robust action.

ENLIGHTENED LEADERSHIP?

But the idea that science and scientific leadership offer some sort of alternative to democracy has, to put it mildly, major weaknesses. To begin with, scientific knowledge does not and cannot dictate what to do. One of the fundamental flaws in the portrait of an inconvenient democracy is the failure to recognize that knowledge of nature must always enter society through politics (whether democratic or authoritarian)—through decisions about, as Harold Laswell famously put it, “who gets what, when, how.” Knowledge about how such decisions are best made is not particularly available to scientists. Indeed, such knowledge is inherently and necessarily contestable.

The pessimistic assessment of the ability of democratic governance to cope with and control exceptional circumstances seems to bring with it an optimistic assessment of the potential of large-scale social planning. Yet all evidence suggests that the capacity not only of governments, but societies, to plan their future is rather limited. The problem is not one of democracy, but of the complexity of social change. Indeed, this is why democracy, inconvenient as it may be, is not only necessary but, for a challenge of the magnitude and complexity of climate change, essential. To a far greater extent than authoritarian governance, democratic governance is flexible and capable of learning from policy mistakes, which are inevitable when trying to deal with something as complex as climate change or the pandemic. Limiting individual freedoms in coping is not totalitarian. But it is crucial that citizens are in agreement with the limits.

Climate policy must be compatible with democracy; otherwise, the threat to civilization will be much more than just changes to our physical environment. The alternative to the abolition of democratic governance is more democracy—making not only democracy and solutions more complex, but also enhancing the worldwide empowerment and knowledgeability of individuals, groups, and movements who work on environmental issues. Democracies will produce new, multiple forms of social solidarity and obligations, strengthening local and regional capacities to respond to climate change, and enhancing the awareness of social interdependence. Examples include the widespread community and regional support of renewable energy in Germany—and the success of wind energy in Texas.

Efforts to simplify the global approach to climate change through a single international governance regime have failed. Now is the time to commit to democratic complexification that fosters creativity and experimentation in the pursuit of multiple desired goals. For those who think that there can be only one

global pathway to addressing climate change, the erosion of democracy might seem to be “convenient.” History, of both recent decades and centuries, tells us that suppression of social complexity undermines the capacity of societies to solve problems. Friedrich Hayek points out a paradoxical development: As science advances, it tends to strengthen the observation shared by many scientists that we should “aim at more deliberate and comprehensive control of all human activities.” Hayek pessimistically adds, “It is for this reason that those intoxicated by the advance of knowledge so often become the enemies of freedom.”