

An Impossible Object? Ecological Democracy after the Anthropocene.

Manuel Arias-Maldonado

Ecological democracy: always greener on the other side?
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1. Introduction.

If an ecological democracy is a type of democracy focused on socio-natural relations, it is safe to say that no contemporary discussion of the subject can avoid the hypothesis that best summarizes the current state of such relations: the Anthropocene. Of course, the Anthropocene itself is far from being a peaceful theoretical domain: its plausibility, meanings and implications are hotly debated. Yet its impact on environmental political theory is undeniable and it looks likely that the concept is going to stay with us for a long time. It actually poses a challenge for environmental political theory, as it describes a global state of socio-natural relations that confirms the degree to which social and natural systems are coupled and thus constitute a socio-natural entanglement rather than two different entities engaged in mutual but limited relations. In this regard, it collects a number of assumptions that remained more or less disconnected -from climate change to the end of nature- and provides us with a new, more realistic framework for discussing socio-natural relations and the prospects for sustainability.

But what does the Anthropocene involve for ecological democracy? That is to say, for the prospects of an ecological democracy -since the green ideal of what an ecological democracy is has been widely theorized but never realized. How should we think of ecological democracy in the Anthropocene? Or, more to the point, can we even think of an ecological democracy *for* the Anthropocene, that takes the Anthropocene as both its *context* and its *subject*? The necessity of such reflection becomes clear if we consider how useless an ecological democracy that ignores the Anthropocene would be -an ecological democracy, then, that prefers to ignore the irreversible anthropogenic influence on Earth or confines itself to a local level or embrace a classical approach to environmental management: as if nothing had happened.

Contrariwise, the Anthropocene is a challenge that has to be confronted. Even if we conclude that the Anthropocene cannot be democratized, nor can an ecological democracy suited for this overarching reality be organized. That would not be completely surprising. After millennia of seeing political regimes as intra-human affairs, the Anthropocene forces us "to embark on a deep reconceptualisation of political agency and democracy" (Hamilton, Bonneuil & Gemenne, 2015: 9). In fact, as we shall see, the very agency *of* democracy as a transformative power should be reconceptualised. In this regard, the greatest theoretical danger lies in a vaguely utopian thinking that makes open statements about a future ecological democracy without actually being precise about the institutional arrangements or the decision-making process that the former would entail. Jeremiah Purdy, for instance, has rightly argued that

"The Anthropocene question -what kind of world to make together- should be taken as a challenge to democracy. The question is whether citizens can form the kind of democracy that can address the Anthropocene question, the question of what world to make" (Purdy 2015: 267).

In other words, the question is whether citizens -Western ones to begin with- can react to the news that scientists are communicating about the Anthropocene. As we become aware of our role as ecological agents at a global level, new responsibilities emerge that force us to act as stewards of the Earth system (see Steffen et al. 2007). For that very reason, the Anthropocene can be said to possess a moral core: if we have no choice but to live in *some* Anthropocene, our current choices will have an influence on the shape of the future, so that we can choose to some extent *which* Anthropocene is it going to be (Ellis & Trachtenberg 2013). How effective that influence can actually be, is a matter of

controversy. Yet if we talk of human choices, democracy must be taken into account: although most individual choices are not formally connected to democratic processes, all of them take place within a democratic society and are made by an individual whose subjectivity has been -at least partially- shaped by it.

What a world to make together is thus a question that can only be answered in a democracy. Purdy adds that only a democracy capable of self-restraint can truly solve this problem: only a self-restraining democracy could serve as a democracy *in* or *for* the Anthropocene. But such claim is a normative one, since he is already choosing which decisions must democracy make: a democracy oriented to self-restraint is thus a self-restraint democracy. Leaving aside the question of whether this is the only or even the most likely societal answer to the Anthropocene challenge, Purdy (2015: 268) ends up by acknowledging that "no one really knows what a democracy on the scale of Anthropocene challenges (...) would look like". Moreover, no one knows how to make that democracy a self-restraint one either. Somehow it is presumed that such political shifts will be brought about by a sudden change in collective perception, as the prospects for human survival or welfare become obviously endangered in the new geological epoch.

This must be too complacent, but certainly there is not much that can be done. Sustainability and environmental conservation are not today a greater social priority than they were a decade ago. In fact, the Great Recession has shown how quickly "materialist" worries can return in the face of economic hardships or increased national inequalities. An ecological democracy looks today less unlikely than ever. However, environmental political theory itself has no choice but to keep on thinking about it. That is what this paper tries to do, dedicated as it is to elucidate what democracy in the Anthropocene might mean and what shape, if any, should it take.

2. Democratizing the Anthropocene (I): democracy as decision.

How do democracy and the Anthropocene relate to each other? Does it make sense to talk of a democratic Anthropocene? In principle, such proposition seems ludicrous. The Anthropocene is a state of socio-natural relations that, in turn, is produced by a great number of long-lived material and cultural processes. As such, it does not look like a democratic object -like an issue about which a *demos* can decide. But even if that is not the case, what would that *demos* exactly be? Does it include actants, citizens from all over the world, future generations? If so, what kind of democratic institutions are needed and how could their decisions be implemented? Such are the interrogations that a democratic Anthropocene suggests.

Basically, there are two dimensions to be considered, each of them representing two different approaches to the Anthropocene as an object of public decision: democratizing the Anthropocene meaning either subjecting it to a system of governance *or* fostering a politically charged public conversation about the good Anthropocene. To put it differently: democracy as decision as opposed to democracy as conversation. These dimensions can coexist -they should, in fact, complement each other. And although they actually do so already in Western democracies, complex modern economies show the limitations that affect politics when trying to achieve desirable ends that nobody would object to: from full employment to high wages. Political willingness is not the same as political efficacy and sometimes the former can even frustrate the latter. Therefore, democracy as conversation and democracy as decision can tragically diverge -and they often do so.

The Anthropocene might be a difficult object as well. Any attempt to design an ecological democracy *for* the Anthropocene must thus first reflect upon a number of theoretical problems arising from the peculiar nature of the latter. To be sure, the Anthropocene deepens some of the problems that have traditionally afflicted sustainability -or the prospect of a sustainability both democratic *and* effective- such as the divergence between social and natural temporalities, or the contrast between a predominantly national democracy and global environmental phenomena. Moreover, new issues

emerge concerning agency (a looser distribution of it among a greater number of human and non-human actors), intentionality (since all kinds of unintended actions and effects can be said to contribute to the making of the Anthropocene), and responsibility (insofar as such a wider notion can actually prevent the recognition that different actors possess different power and hence disparate responsibilities in "creating" the Anthropocene, while at the same time a non-human production of the latter can also be advocated). Finally, some classical democratic problems must be considered, such as sovereignty (how potent are the democratic decisions in the case of such complex object) and the *demos* (who belong to it if agentic capabilities are loosely distributed). A portrait of the Anthropocene as an elusive object for a decision-based democracy emerges from this discussion.

2.1. *The problem of sovereignty.*

If a democracy makes decisions, these decisions must be effective: otherwise we would be dealing with a powerless and hence a useless democracy. From an environmental point of view, this might certainly be a reason for endorsing non-democratic regimes, as eco-authoritarianism did back in the 70s. It could also be the case that a general case for the green Leviathan could be made in the face of ecological collapse -but this moment has not arrived. Besides, there are no guarantees that eco-authoritarianism would perform better than democracies: if sustainable policies lead to economic stagnation, for instance, citizens might not accept it so easily. Nevertheless, what must be asked first is whether human collectivities can make meaningful decisions about the Anthropocene. Needless to say, non-democratic politics offer some advantages, as individual rights and liberties can be violated and thus more extreme political measures can be adopted. Yet it is ecological democracy that we shall discuss, for in democratic societies we live.

Ironically, it could be argued that democratic powers *vis-à-vis* the Anthropocene have not yet been tested and therefore we do not know what they could achieve, since it has never been targeted as a democratic object. As Steven Vogel puts it:

"The environment we currently inhabit is as bad as it is -as dangerous, as toxic, as ugly- not because anyone decided to build it that way but because no *decision* was made at all: and so the shape of the environment is left as the outcome of the anarchic process that result when millions of individuals engage in private transactions without any ability to decide publically and communally what they *want* that shape to be" (Vogel 2016: 157).

To set up a democracy *for* the Anthropocene would thus mean to include the latter into the former's range, to start taking decisions that address it directly. It is only by doing this that we shall *discover* whether democracy is up to the task. As of yet we do not know whether democracy can be sovereign when deciding upon the Anthropocene, whether it can make decisions that really influence the kind of Anthropocene we will inhabit. Hence Purdy's plea to keep in view a picture

"of a world in which Anthropocene questions would be genuinely democratic. In that world, self-aware, collective engagement with the question of what kinds of landscapes, what kind of atmosphere and climate, and what kind of world-shaping habitation to pursue would all be parts of the repertoire of self-governance" (Purdy 2015: 269).

However, a problem of incongruity comes up. On the one hand, we have a particular decision system that requires the consent of everyone involved; on the other, a complex and ultimately global socio-natural phenomena whose very occurrence is a side-effect of social development and not the product of any political decision. To a great extent, in fact, the Anthropocene has been caused by unintentional actions, as a result of the adaptive process of the species. Adapting to the environment is certainly not something that can be *voted*, but *how* to adapt to it is at this point -at least to some extent- something that *could* be decided upon. Now that socio-natural relations are examined and bound to be re-arranged in the search for sustainability, it makes sense to consider how do

democracy and the Anthropocene relate to each other, i.e. how sovereign a decision about the Anthropocene can actually be.

What can be democratically decided when deciding about the Anthropocene? Timothy Morton (2013) has talked of "hyperobjects" to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. Examples include the biosphere or a black hole, but also some human manufactures such as the sum of all plastics. They are not local, in the sense that their local manifestations are not *them*, and involve different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to deal with. The Anthropocene is an hyperobject itself, or at least it stands for a related network of hyperobjects such as climate change or socionatural hybridization. A problem with hyperobjects is that they are so vast both spatially and temporally that their representations "cannot evoke the feelings of urgency in individuals or political collectivities that might translate into action" (Frost 2016: 186). At the same time, the notion that a democratic assembly could stand in front of any of these hyperobjects and make meaningful decisions about them seems moot.

A first caution regarding ecological democracy in the Anthropocene, and a key one, thus concerns the scope and ability of such a political regime. Facing the Anthropocene *in toto* and its different manifestations, a democracy cannot make fully sovereign and effective decisions -on the contrary, it is constrained in its decision-making capacities. This is not the same as arguing that ecological democracy in the Anthropocene is unfeasible or irrelevant, but to acknowledge that its powers are limited and hence so should our expectations about its transformative force.

Therefore, political decisions in this realm cannot be but decisions oriented to influence the course of the Anthropocene, that is, they can be decisions about the way in which society relates to the environment in particular aspects -but not direct decisions on material processes and phenomena that cannot be so easily politicized. Besides, these kind of 'decisions' reveal the relative impotence of politics. No matter how much sovereignty it claims to have, democracy cannot always achieve what it would like to achieve: climate change cannot be easily stopped, biophysical systems cannot be replaced. Much can be done, however, not least because science is providing human beings with new powers of intervention and manipulation. Yet whether that what can be done is *democratically* doable is another matter. Coordinating so many actors, epistemic processes, technological innovations and social interactions with the environment at so many different levels, as well as fostering the necessary shift in social values and practices -that is arguably an impossible task. An incremental, piecemeal approach seems thus more advisable. That is why environmental *governance* seems more appropriate than an all-encompassing anthropocenic *democracy*. Or at least more appropriate than a formal, institutionalized system of democratic decision-making directly focused on the Anthropocene.

2.2. *The problem of scale.*

Any attempt to deal with the Anthropocene -either democratically or through a system of institutional governance- faces an inescapable obstacle: its global nature. Although it can be decomposed in a number of local and national socio-ecological regimes, the Anthropocene is ultimately a global phenomena that demands planetary solutions or at least the coordinated aggregation of national and regional ones. Hence the much-discussed idea of setting up planetary boundaries for creating a "safe space" for humanity (see Röckstrom 2008). In this regard, few problems have been more recurrent in the history of democracy than scale. On the one hand, it constraints the effectiveness of deliberation and reduces the chances for direct (formal) individual participation; on the other, as far as global issues are concerned, it demands coordination between states or even the creation of transnational bodies of decision that, in turn, are affected by problems of legitimacy, given the absence of a global *demos* and the lack -so far- of a strong global public opinion.

Arguably, the Anthropocene itself may contribute to the gradual constitution of a global subject that is likely in the making, thanks to the combination of globalization (social processes that create

mutual interdependences) and digitization (new tools of communication that change both social perceptions and individual relations). By gathering apparently disparate socio-natural phenomena and showing that they all are affecting *the* global environment upon which every human being on Earth depends (despite the fact that socioeconomic inequalities matter, for instance providing different resources for adapting to the rise of global temperatures), the Anthropocene makes clear that a global management of this shared environment is inescapable. For Schellnhuber (1999), the global subject will be 'produced' by the very technologies that have also facilitated the scientific models and representations that are ushering a second Copernican revolution grounded on Earth-system science: global telecommunication will ultimately establish a cooperative system generating values, preferences and decisions as crucial commonalities of humanity online. However, this is more akin to environmental governance than to ecological democracy. And global environmental governance is problematic from the viewpoint of democracy and justice (Dryzek 2016). Then again, if governance can do things that ecological democracy cannot maybe this is a lesser evil.

Admittedly, the social response to the Anthropocene does not have to operate exclusively under the logic of globalism. On the contrary, the aggregated view of Earth-system science can be detrimental to the application of particular, situated solutions that take local knowledge and experience into account. It can certainly be detached from the different geographies of personal or collective culture and history (Hulme 2010: 5). An Earth-system perspective can easily lead to a totalizing vision that results in managerial schemes that erase different viewpoints or alternative experiences of nature (Lifton 1997: 38). Therefore, ineffective as they may be in a wider context, local democratic practices can make sense in order to solve local problems. But in turn, the lack of global coordination may result in a diminished sovereignty.

The question is thus how to combine democracy, globality, and efficacy. In other words, how to make meaningful democratic decisions that match the scope of the Anthropocene and are effective enough to make a difference -and to make sense at all. This is not easy; maybe it is unfeasible. If the Anthropocene requires that government is thought in terms of geopolitics, i.e. of Gaia-politics (Hamilton, Bonneuil & Gemenne 2015: 10), so that the Earth itself becomes a political subject, the lack of a democratic *Weltstaat* forces us to defer to governance, which in the case of democratic states possesses at least an indirect democratic legitimacy. Likewise, scale has always determined democratic possibilities: the greater the size of a community, the more delegative its politics must be. There are several reasons for this, ranging from the conditions for meaningful deliberation to the complexity of decisions themselves. In any event, the monstrous scale of the Anthropocene seems to obstruct the way towards ecological democracy and points instead to the more modest virtues of environmental governance.

2.3. The problem of agency.

Who makes the Anthropocene? To answer this question is a necessity for ecological democracy, since only by doing so can causal factors be tracked down and the corresponding responsibilities be attributed. In the case of the Anthropocene, though, mapping agency does not provide clear-cut solutions but new intricacies that further complicates ecological democracy's prospects. This happens because realising the complexity of agency in the Anthropocene does not only affect the identification of causes and the attribution of responsibilities -it also concerns the ability to act in order to stop, reshape or mitigate it. And all the more if we take a democratic viewpoint, given that the action or influence of some agents are not easily democratized nor subjected to an effective political control.

The very origins of the Anthropocene, seen in historical rather than evolutionary terms, show how misleading abstract concepts can be. It has been argued that the Anthropocene misattributes the causes of environmental degradation to all of "mankind", blaming so-called universal "human nature" for problems wrought by the actions of particular subsets of the world's people (Malm and Hornborg 2014). As Peter Sloterdijk puts it, the "humanity" we often talk consists actually of that limited number of actors who, in the Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, developed a

number of techniques that combined a new socio-natural arrangement with a universal discourse that rested upon the idea of progress. So that:

"When Crutzen speaks about the 'Anthropocene', he does so with Dutch courtesy -or an aversion to conflict. It would be more appropriate to talk of an 'Eurocene' or of a 'Technocene' originated in Europe" (Sloterdijk 2016: 10).

In doing so, the Anthropocene concept allegedly overlooks the "inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity's strategic relations of power and production" and thus blocks possibilities for radical politics (Moore, 2014: 2). The true geologic actor in this new epoch, these social scientists assert, is imperial capitalism, not some abstract "humanity". Thus, in lieu of the term "Anthropocene", several scholars have proposed the "Capitalocene" as a more apt name for this epoch (Moore, 2014). Others, such as Donna Haraway, refuse to be trapped in the alternative presented by Anthropocene and Capitalocene, arguing instead that we should talk of a "Chthulucene" -a denomination that goes beyond human exceptionalism and bounded individualism and tries to show that "Western-indebted people can no longer figure themselves as individuals and societies of individuals in human-only societies" (Haraway 2016: 30-31). Two different agency-related problems thus arise in connection to the Anthropocene: humanity as a flawed causal category and the unrecognized participation of non-human forces.

This is a complex matter. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that processes belonging to the deeper history of Earth and life are co-actors in the current crisis. In a controversy with Slavoj Žižek, who defends the Capitalocene thesis and thus blames capitalism as a destructive force, Chakrabarty has retorted that

"to say that the history and logic of particular human institutions have become caught up in the much larger processes of the Earth system and evolutionary history (...) is not to say that human history is the driver of these large-scale process" (Chakrabarty 2015: 54).

From a deep time perspective, then, capitalism is anecdotal. It could even be argued that targetting capitalism is a way of reducing events that go beyond human experience to epistemologically manageable terms -we see ourselves as protagonists and hence the "Anthropocene" label. What Chakrabarty suggests is that the latter can partly be explained by factors that cannot be controlled nor held accountable by democratic institutions. However, he sees human beings as actors as well and defends that "the story of our necessarily divided human lives has to be supplemented by the story of our collective life as a species" (Chakrabarty 2015: 49) -a split between two histories that the category of *population* conjoins.

This last point is a relevant one. Because even if attributing agency to "mankind" is a way of hiding the special protagonism that some social groups in certain contexts have possessed, the lens of the historian must be supplemented by those of the evolutionary theorist who think of the human species -or human populations- as causal units. After all, we are talking about the human species, whose exceptional way of being features an aggressive adaptation to the environment that is both colonizing and transformative (yet not always intentional). Such adaptive efforts may be *leaded* by certain groups or countries or individuals, but technological and institutional novelties are *spread* among populations. Virginie Maris summarizes the problem:

"Cultural and biological agents are individuals or, at least, social groups. The idea that humans could be geological agents refers to human as species. Individual or small group behaviours cannot interfere with the great geological processes" (Maris 2015: 129).

For her, this is a problem for democracy insofar as such an abstract global story can hardly motivate local political action, especially since individuals are dispossessed of their ability to feel morally responsible and become actors in the solutions. The conundrum is that the human *species* has brought about -or contributed to produce- geological changes about which *individual* members of

that species are supposed to decide in a democratic way. A further complication concerns the flawed sovereignty of ecological democracy in the Anthropocene, as the brute force of population behaviour over time cannot be fully replicated by political decisions in complex, divided societies. Ironically, some geoscientists welcome the opportunity that the Anthropocene provides for politicizing geology -by bringing power, colonial histories or human inequalities into the pages of scientific journals and thus complicating conventional stories about "mankind" (see Swanson 2016). But a constructive critique does not translate easily into effective decisions.

On the other hand, there is the problem that relates to the fact that "things have politics", as Marres (2013) puts it. If we understand politics as something that goes beyond the human realm to encompass all those actions that make a difference in the world, certainly human individuals are not the only ones that take part on it. New materialists thinkers have been making this claim for some time now, mostly on the basis provided by Bruno Latour's (1993) Actor-Network Theory, which makes a distinction between human *actors* and non-human *actants*. As both are said to possess agentic capacities, all kinds of non-human beings and entities become, if not actors, actants: they produce effects and affects, influence human actors by encouraging or blocking them, alter a given course of events, etc. Jane Bennett (2010) has proposed an "enchanted materialism" where matter is vital and active rather than passive and submissive to human ends. Germs would be actants, as well as particular technologies: the car, for instance. Likewise, climate change -by forcing human beings to adapt- could also count as such. Thus Bennet's talk of an "interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity" that produces the social world and shape socio-natural relations. In short, human beings do not hold a monopoly on agency.

Yet how to translate this into democratic language? To begin with, there is nothing "democratic" in such agentic distribution. Likewise, it is hard to conceive of ways in which actants can be incorporated into the democratic process, despite some proposals that center around their proxy representation by humans (Goodin 1996, Eckersley 2000). But how can climate change be politically represented? What about virus or technologies? The challenge for ecological democracy is plain. As is the disjuncture between the relevant actors/actants and the *demos* of such a democracy. If things other than humans make a difference, while are also affected in turn by human actions, who belong to the *demos* of an ecological democracy in the Anthropocene?

Incorporating non-human actants to the *demos* is easier said than done. Although their relevance has to be acknowledged and in some cases (animals or certain ecosystems) their interests must be weighed and can even be humanly represented, they cannot become meaningful participants in the democratic process. They may have agentic capabilities, but lack agentic awareness and even intentionality in the politically relevant sense. New materialists somehow recognize this limitation, as they abandon for a moment their rejection of the human/non-human divide in order to admit, albeit implicitly, that humans are exceptional: whereas Diana Coole (2013) suggests that responsibility is in itself an agentic capacity that makes human beings particularly responsible for endangering the planet, William Connolly (2013) points out that humans think more profoundly about their situation than other species and thus have a greater responsibility. It might then be the case that only a reflective, self-conscious agency is democratically meaningful, whereas "raw" agency, while politically relevant, can hardly be democratized. Still, it can be taken into account and thus "covered" by a self-conscious ecological democracy.

The problem of the *demos* is hardened by the Anthropocene scale. The absence of a global democracy -or, for that matter, the absence of democracy in countries as relevant as China- makes the assembling of such *demos* even more unlikely. Reflecting upon the possibility of such democracy, Purdy acknowledges the obstacle:

"To write of a 'we', a polity that could inhabit and constitute such a democracy, in the absence of the institutions and shared identities that would make it real, is to write fiction, imaginative literature. (...) The thing is to hope that it is a productive fiction" (Purdy 2015: 268).

Productive, that is, in that it will gradually make ecological democracy closer by showing its necessity, by producing a shared identity among human beings, by designing institutions that might be built p one day. This will certainly not solve the problems that have been just discussed, but may contribute to the democratization of the Anthropocene in a weaker way, namely, the one provided by democracy understood as a public conversation.

3. Democratizing the Anthropocene (II): democracy as conversation.

An alternative path for ecological democracy in the Anthropocene is to rely on democracy as public conversation: as an ongoing debate about the good Anthropocene that is not directly connected to an institutionalized decision-making process. The public sphere should thus sustains a debate about how to manage this inherited condition, in the hope that this will help to politicize the subject.

However, the conversation on the good Anthropocene should be differentiated from the unsustainability question. The reason is that there is not an automatic connection between a state of sustainability and a particular moral type of socionatural relation. Because it may very well be the case that the *desirable* Anthropocene is not the *feasible* Anthropocene, given how prone public opinions are to ignore trade-offs and to avoid hard choices. That is why debating the good Anthropocene should be separated from guaranteeing sustainability in a technocratic manner. Climate change makes for a nice example: we might dream of a carbon-free society where poor countries become advanced economies, but may not have any idea about how to fulfill this vision. In the meantime, though, it is imperative to create some international regime of climate mitigation that avoids -or tries to avoid- a catastrophic increase in global temperatures. Using Röckstrom metaphor, sustainable policies may create the "safe space" for deliberating about the good Anthropocene.

Besides, this caution seems politically indispensable: democratic deliberation does not guarantee that sustainable policies will be endorsed if they clash with other interests or values. Although the ideal of deliberation was taken in the past as an enabler of sustainable outcomes, this view is being undermined as we realize the rational limitations of human democratic beings -re-described now as affective, biased, post-sovereign subjects (see Krause 2015). In the age of alternative facts and post-truth, how to expect that climate evidence will be enough to convince the public about tthe need to act decisively against global warming?

In view of this, the "regulatory ideal" of ecological democracy as proposed by John Dryzek (1995) - that of "effectiveness in communication that transcends the boundary of the human world"- looks more fragile than ever. To grant communicative rationality to non-human actants when new doubts about the communicative rationality of human actors are emerging seems bitterly ironic. This is not to say that this aim should be dismissed: signals emanating from the natural world should certainly receive a respectful attention on the human side. But as I have argued elsewhere, such signals are either univocal and banal, pointing to a non-interference policy that would allow beings or ecosystems to flourish, or equivocal and thus subject to human -distorted, contested- interpretation (see Arias-Maldonado 2007). The public conversation can make room for such signals through those participants that pay attention to them, but formal decision-making processes cannot do it so easily.

None of this sounds very "democratic" and will hence be rejected by those who denounces the reduction of eco-politics to mere managerialism. Whereas Swyngedow (2013) has warned against "post-politics", Blühdorn (2007) refers to a "simulative politics": the latter denounces that liberal environmental policies are just a means to pretend that something is done about unsustainability, while the former attacks the managerial framing of the environmental question as constituting in practice an abolition of politics. In a similar vein, Lövbrand et al. (2014) argue that there is a paradox in the contrast between the scientific narrative of potential collapse that the Anthropocene consists of and the political narrative of managerialism that supports the continuity of the current

socioeconomic model -one that they identify with "the political economy of neoliberal capitalism" (Lövbrand et al. 2013: 9). For them, the solution lies in the re-politization of the Anthropocene:

"To re-politicize the Anthropocene, we argue, means fostering a vibrant public space where the manifold, divergent and often unpredictable socio-ecological relations and futures can be exposed and debated. (...) the Anthropocene is not the end of politics but a social-natural arrangement -a hybrid nature/culture- subject to political contestation and normative choice" (Lövbrand 2014: 14).

Who could disagree? A pluralistic public sphere is a necessary precondition of a democratic society and hence also of an ecological democracy. The problem lies in the institutionalization of such communicative practices. Schellnhuber (1999) has talked of a cooperative system and also of a 'polylogue' (a dialogue of many) that takes place via the Internet: roughly, the binary system of governance and informal deliberation that constitutes the most realistic prospect for democratizing the Anthropocene. Radical democrats will not be satisfied with such a loose system of decision-making, but a more institutionalized procedure of democratic decision-making at that level is hardly viable. The fact that digital communications make debating *easier* does not mean that they make debate *better*, nor that the outcome of that conversation is to be formally connected to democratic institutions. That would be the wrong conclusion: if the public sphere has become more pluralistic and lively, it is also more chaotic and less civil (see Margetts et al. 2016). Moreover, there is a strong technical side to the Anthropocene that cannot be ignored. Thus a difficult balance is to be reached between popular preferences and technical possibilities -a balance that only a representative system, complemented with local participation, seems able to achieve.

Ultimately, the idea that different Anthropocenes should be debated, lest an homogenous discourse becomes prevalent, does not differ from what was said earlier about the sustainable society (see Wissenburg 1998: 61). That makes sense, since what is at stake does not change much, i.e. which kind of socio-natural relation is going to be promoted. This is not to dismiss the importance of the Anthropocene, but just to point out how the idea that different conceptions of the latter should be debated updates the sustainability debate. Moreover, the goal of achieving a sustainable society remains in place, no matter how much abused the category has been (see Blühdorn 2016). Sustainability becomes now sustainability *in and for* the Anthropocene. But there is no theoretical need to create a new category to designate that what sustainability designates: a stable socio-natural relation that can be maintained indefinitely in the future. Surely the Anthropocene provides an important shift in perspective by categorizing human beings as major agents of geological and ecological change. But then again, as we saw above, it also brings about both a "deep time" perspective and a recognition of the role played by non-human actants and evolutionary processes that limit our ability to just "re-write" socio-natural relations at will. At the same time, the Anthropocene is like sustainability in that both confront us with widespread indeterminacy and are best described as processes than as final states.

A theory of ecological democracy for the Anthropocene cannot ignore these challenges and must accordingly advance towards a distinction between technical and normative concerns, i.e. between the *feasible* and the *good* Anthropocene. Therefore, an emphasis in public conversation and micropolitics seems advisable, while institutional efforts should be directed towards the opening up of conversational settings that foster the public conversation on the subject and promote participatory politics at the local level.

4. Habitation versus habitability: a new framework for debating the Anthropocene.

If an ecological democracy *for* the Anthropocene is mostly a public conversation *about* the Anthropocene, that is, about the kind of Anthropocene we want to live in, I would like to suggest that the distinction between habitation and habitability provides a fruitful alternative to the language of sustainability and can serve as a basis for such debate. Needless to say, the quest for an ecological democracy is not limited to this conversation, as there are other aspects of the former that can be

pursued: from environmental regulation to indigenous empowerment and environmental justice. But this paper is focused on the challenge that the Anthropocene itself poses for democracy and hence for ecological democracy. Hence my suggestion about the language of habitation as one that befits this complex and contested reality.

Habitation *versus* habitability: whereas habitation refers to the way a community makes use of its environment in order to support its way of life, habitability designates the match or mis-match between them (see Lantrip 1997). Humans do *not* possess a 'natural' way of life, though: they have developed a number of alternatives that are expressed in different patterns of habitability -in turn shaped by *ideals* of habitation. It could even be said that humanity's way of being as a species *contradicts* the very idea that there is a natural 'match' between a society and its environment. Likewise, not every 'match' is feasible: a society can try to realize a given ideal of habitation, only to find that it undermines habitability: ecological collapse can follow (see Diamond 2006). Interestingly, local habitation can be seemingly viable, while the aggregate effect of several local or national communities can lead to patterns of global un-habitability. This is the case with climate change, the quintessential Anthropocenic phenomenon. Such potential divergence is of the utmost importance when thinking about ecological democracy in our times.

Talking about modes of habitation thus involves the recognition that human beings relate to their natural environments in different ways. This is not surprising: socionatural interactions are socially bounded and culturally constrained -otherwise they would be the same everywhere. Instead of possessing unique features irrespective of the time and space in which it takes place, this relation varies *relatively* from one social context to another, so that different understandings of nature co-exists, producing different patterns of interaction between human beings and the natural world. These patterns depend on a complex set of factors, including culture and history. Admittedly, a global socionatural relation is emerging, as the Anthropocene itself demonstrates. But two levels of occurrence and analysis can be distinguished. On the one hand, the universal fact of human adaptation to nature, which, despite symbiotic and cooperative practices, mostly adopts the form of a culturally turbocharged niche-construction that is tantamount to the social re-construction of nature (see Arias-Maldonado 2015). On the other, the particular circumstances of a context-bound adaptive process that (still) reflects local singularities and thus produces a relative variability in socionatural patterns of interaction. At this latter level, different ideals of habitation can make a difference -by influencing current modes of habitation.

Now, politicizing habitation means making habitation *salient* enough, so that citizens can become aware of the fact that societies *do* have modes of habitation that involve a particular treatment of the non-human world and a particular way of exploiting natural resources. A mode of habitation can undermine the habitability of a society if it ceases to be sustainable in relation to the conditions that a given environment impose. This is one reason for politicizing this question -together with moral issues concerning the treatment of non-human beings. Yet what if that habitability is not, after all, threatened? What if a society produces the necessary technological innovations to conjure up this danger or adapts to the changes that befall it without substantially changing its prevailing mode of habitation? In such a case, there are reasons to expect that making habitation salient would still be useful. For one thing, this operation seeks to create an awareness of the *fact* of habitation, that is, the very fact that societies *are* inhabited in a certain way, apparently reflecting particular ideals of habitation. Ideally, once this is understood, citizens can choose between different modes of habitation -including the existing one!

Interestingly, much as there exists a permanent gap between expressed values and actual behaviors in the environmental realm, a societal gap is also observable in the contrast between prevalent *modes* of habitation in the developed world and its pervasive *ideals* of habitation. Most people still hold a Romantic view of nature either as a wilderness to be in touch with or as a garden where is worthwhile living -or both. Yet we live in a hypertechnological society where natural resources are methodically exploited and biodiversity is plummeting. This contradiction should also be made

salient, in what clearly constitutes a political task that only an ecological democracy -a conversation on our ecological conditions- seems able to perform.

Laclau's (1990) conception of the political can be helpful in this context. He dwells on Husserl to make a distinction between the *social* and the *political*: the former consists in forgetting the acts or decisions of "originary institution" of the social order, whereas the latter requires the reactivation of the contingent moment of foundation, thus disclosing the potential for different constructions of that order. This happens because social structures and collective norms are sedimented and thus taken as 'natural'; the political reveals them as *contingent*. For Laclau, the frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable. It requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents that seeks to 'naturalize' their preferred social order. The ensuing conflict can take many forms -from collective mobilization to framing battles in the public sphere, from electoral competition to social upheavals. He is thus giving an explicit political meaning to genealogies, in the Nietzschean sense: researching the true origins of social norms and practices (Nietzsche 1988). In his own words:

"To reveal the original meaning of an act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency – in other words, to reinsert it in the system of real historic options that were discarded (...) by showing the terrain of original violence, of the power relation through which that instituting act took place" (Laclau 1990: 34).

It is thus an unveiling operation that can shed light on current social configurations. Yet a genealogy of habitation in the Anthropocene should go beyond the classical green framing -according to which human beings have alienated themselves from nature by dominating it- in order to explain in a realistic fashion why and how the current modes of habitation are firmly in place and why are they so different from the Romantic ideals of habitation that pervade Western cultures. Developing a genealogy of habitation thus involves the recognition that human adaptation is not a choice but rather a necessity, as well as identifying those aspects of human adaptation to the environment that could not have been much different (dominating other species, exploiting natural resources, migrating to other territories, and so on). In sum, there is an unintentional side to habitation that must be emphasized, so that alternative ideals -as it is the case with the Romantic or Arcadian one- can be weighed more realistically. If, as Sloterdijk (2010: 60) claims, a genealogical investigation allows us to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' origins, a genealogy of habitation in the Anthropocene must be careful in identifying pure contingencies from bare necessities within sionatural history.

Therefore, the first task of an ecological democracy might just be the ecologization of democracy, namely, the rising of the public awareness about the Anthropocene itself and the need to debate about both the desirable and the feasible versions of it. To such end, sustainability, with its emphasis on survival and resources, may not provide the best grammar -as it does not emphasize enough the normative aspects of the good Anthropocene. Hence the potential usefulness of habitation, which additionally should help us to distinguish between the intentional and unintentional, as well as the necessary and contingent aspects of the human transformation of the environment.

5. Conclusion.

How does the coming of the Anthropocene affect the concept and prospects of ecological democracy? This paper has tried to answer this question, arguing that the Anthropocene is a difficult, if not downright impossible, democratic object. Ecological democracy has been understood as a democracy *for* the Anthropocene, namely, a collective process of decision-making that targets the latter -as opposed to an ecological democracy that pursues other environmental goals *in* the Anthropocene, be them ecosystem restoration or extended citizen participation.

A distinction has been made between two conceptions, or aspects, of democracy: democracy as a decision-making device and democracy as a conversation about the public good. Both are informally connected in representative democracies, since the process by which public opinion is formed

sustains the process by which political decisions are taken. As far as the Anthropocene is concerned, democracy as decision present a number of problems regarding sovereignty (since the democratic ability to make meaningful and effective decisions on the Anthropocene itself is limited due to the latter's nature), scale (as a global phenomenon it requires a global democracy that is not even in the making) and agency (given that the Anthropocene, that involves large-scale natural processes and a deep-time perspective, can only be explained by enlarging our understanding of agency, incorporating actors and forces that in turn cannot belong to the *demos*). However, this does not mean that making democratic decisions about the Anthropocene is impossible or useless. It simply attests how difficult it is to answer to it in a collective and concerted way, suggesting that our expectations about ecological democracy in the Anthropocene should be limited.

Democracy as conversation is more promising. From this viewpoint, the public debate would be the place to start, as an ecological democracy cannot even be started without enough public concern about its object. For radical democrats, this is far from satisfying. Yet the lack of a *demos* and in fact the absence of global democratic institutions make this other path a more realistic way of politicizing and democratizing the Anthropocene. This public conversation runs parallel to a system of environmental governance and ideally nurtures him. Yet the Great Recession and the rise of populism show how secondary environmental concerns may be in the face of "materialist" worries. At the same time, sustainability and desirability should be separated: the good Anthropocene is one thing, the sustainable Anthropocene another. The reason is that we can be sustainable in the Anthropocene in different, albeit not endless, ways. In this vein, I have suggested that the language of habitation may be a useful alternative to develop an ecological democracy in the Anthropocene, as it highlights the very fact that human beings inhabit their environments in different ways and in ways that can be changed, at least to some extent.

All in all, the Anthropocene is such a difficult object for democracy that expectations about its democratization must be kept low. Although it will always exhibit a great potential, an ecological democracy for the Anthropocene looks inescapably post-sovereign, as humans themselves after the affective turn in social sciences do. Only time will tell whether the public environmental concerns grows enough to turn our shaky liberal democracies into ecological democracies able to meet the formidable societal challenge posed by the Anthropocene.

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