Democratic Coordination and Eco-social Crises

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Today we confront planetary crises at a time when our structures of governance are characterised by ‘dysfunctionality’, ‘hollowing out’, ‘gridlock’ and democratic governance faces ‘antagonistic self-destruction’, ‘authoritarian supersession’, or ‘death of democracy’. How should we address this predicament? This paper proposes an approach grounded in acknowledging different modes of democratic citizenship and in recognizing that addressing eco-social crises requires coordination among them. We distinguish five modes of democratic practice against the backdrop of a distinction between two general pictures of citizenship and illustrate how different modes of democratic citizenship (e.g., participatory citizens and Gaia citizens) may ‘join hands’ to address shared challenges.[[1]](#footnote-1) This approach, we propose, brings to light a slow but sure means of democratic change and transformation.

I.

The field of democracy and democratization is disclosed in a wide variety of ways in both practice and theory. Our approach is to disclose the field as a pluriverse, consisting of at least five overlapping and crisscrossing modes of democracy and democratization. Accordingly, citizens and researchers disclose the field of democracy in diverse ways, depending on the mode of democracy they foreground and the mode of engagement they practice. (Tully 2022). We preface this discussion of the five modes however by distinguishing ‘civic’ and ‘civil’ pictures of citizenship (Dunn and Owen 2014, 247-9).

Let us begin by introducing the distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘civic’ orientationsby drawing on Tully’s contrast between them which is sketched thus:

Whereas modern citizenship focuses on citizenship as a universalisable legal status underpinned by institutions and processes of rationalisation that enable and constrain the possibility of civil activity (an institutionalised/universal orientation), diverse citizenship focuses on the singular civic activities and diverse way that these are more or less institutionalised or blocked in different contexts (a civic activity/contextual orientation). Citizenship is not a status given by the institutions of the modern constitutional state and international law, but negotiated practices in which one becomes a citizen through participation. (Tully 2008)

Two dimensions of this account need spelling out for our current purposes. The first is the concept of ‘modes of citizenship’ which refers to both ‘a distinctive language of citizenship and its traditions of interpretation’ and ‘the corresponding practices and institutions to which it refers and in which it used’ (Tully 2008, 246). Modes of citizenship are thus to be conceived in terms of *praxis*, what distinguishes different modes of citizenship is the orientation or, more precisely, *practical attitude* with which they engage in the activity. The second is the contrast between the two modes of citizenship. In general terms, civil citizenship as a mode stands towards citizenship ‘as a [legal] status within an institutional framework’, whereas civic citizenship is oriented to citizenship ‘as *negotiated practices*, as praxis – as actors and activities in contexts’ (Tully 2008, 269). On the former view, civil action necessarily presupposes an institutional structure of legal rules; on the latter view, primacy is accorded to ‘the concrete games of citizenship and the ways that they are played’ (Tully 2008, 269). Notice that this general contrast already constructs a fundamental difference in the mode of self-relation of individuals to themselves as citizens. The mode of citizenship-formation characteristic of the civil stance is of the individual standing to himself as occupant of an ‘office’ specified by a range of rights and duties, whereas that of the civic stance is of the individual standing to herself as an agent whose agency is fundamentally relational, bound up in relations of acting in concert with other agents. Civil citizens stand towards themselves as persons who are *at liberty* (i.e., free from subjection to the will of another) in virtue of their enjoyment of the civil rights and duties that compose the office of citizenship under law to take up opportunities to participate as political equals in determining the law to which they are subject as subjects of a given political institution of governance. By contrast, civic citizens ‘manifest the freedom *of* participation’:

The civic citizen is not the citizen of an institution (a nation-state or an international law) but the free citizen of the ‘free city’: that is, *any* kind of civic world or democratic ‘sphere’ that comes into being and is reciprocally held aloft by the civic freedom of its citizens, from the smallest *deme* or commune to glocal federations (Tully 2008, 272).

On this view, as Isin has stressed in a range of important work citizenship is an *enacted* and *relational* mode of being (Isin 2002, Isin 2005, Isin 2008). The salience of this distinction between civil and civic pictures can be seen in the five modes of democratic practice.

Indigenous forms of community-based (and networked) democracies throughout the world of over 600 million Indigenous peoples comprise the first mode of democracy and foreground the civic picture of citizenship. These are the oldest mode of democracies on the planet and over many centuries, Indigenous peoples have attempted to develop transformative, decolonizing relationships of democratic treaty federalism with settler-colonial states. This mode is elucidated by Val Napoleon’s recent work on Gitxan democracy ‘on its own terms’ so it is not redescribed and subsumed in the terms of Western democracies (Napoleon 2022). Indigenous peoples are regenerating this mode of democracy today through the exercise of their rights of self-determination in accord with their own understanding of this concept and their Indigenous legal orders, as well as in partnership with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, but these rights are not definitive of citizenship for them but rather enabling conditions of the practice of enacting citizenship.

Representative democracies within modern states comprise a second mode of democracy and one which operates under the civil picture of citizenship. These representative governments in all their varieties comprise the dominant mode of democracy on the planet. State-centred democracies and the crises they are undergoing, are of course the major focus of research on democracies today. But a key premise for us is that representative democracies, which in adopting the civil picture prioritize the institutions of collective self-rule and take the civil and territorial boundaries of the collective as a settled question, provide only one “picture” of democratic citizenship among others. Another set of pictures drawing on the civic outlook emphasizes the social processes through which people work out the terms of living together that are not defined by territorial borders or the boundaries of legal citizenship and rely on the virtues of everyday participatory democratic relationships (Owen 2022). While the first treats democracy as “closed”, the second remains “open” to challenge, criticism and ongoing change (Laden 2022).

The third mode of democracies consists of the multiple forms of community-based, self-organising and self-governing (“co-operative”), direct or participatory democracies and their global networks around the world. As in two classic cases of “assembly democracies,”—Potlatch democracy and Athenian democracy—the members are both citizens and governors. The people themselves (*demos*) exercise political power (*kratos*). These community-based democracies today also tend to provide the basis of democratic practices of nonviolent resistance to and transformation of unjust relationships and social systems: participatory democratic democratization, or democracy from below. The Gandhian tradition of democratic self-government (*swaraj*) and democratic contestation and transformation (*Satyagraha)* and the African American ‘beloved community’ tradition associated with Martin Luther King Jr. are well-known examples of this diverse global mode of democracies. [[2]](#footnote-3) A recent exemplar is the 15M Movement illuminated in Pablo Ouziel’s study (Ouziel 2022). This mode is exemplary of the democratic enactment of the civic picture.

Democracy “beyond the state” is a fourth mode of democracy. This encompasses the diverse ways in which citizens engage in democratic practices of contestation and interaction with global institutions of various kinds illuminated by Antje Weiner’s recent work on norm contestation in the international/global order (Wiener 2018). It also confronts the issue of the democratization or failure of democratization (both the “deficit” and “disconnect” problems) and their consequences for institutions of the European Union, global governance, global law, international relations, democratizing the United Nations, and so on. Here we often find both civil and civic pictures in play, with the former focusing on, for example, the status of EU citizens or human rights as denoting the status of membership in global political society, while the latter encompasses the practices of contestation that aim to reshape governor/governed relations in transnational space.

These four general modes of democracy are located within, conditioned by, and reciprocally condition other powerful non-democratic social, economic and military systems. This assemblage of complex global systems – of democratic *and* non-democratic social, economic and military-industrial systems – generates radical inequalities in the individual and collective well-being of humans and their communities. These inequalities obstruct and undermine the conditions of democratic relationships within and across these modes of democracy. Moreover, the assemblage of global systems exploits, degrades and destroys the ecosystems and earth systems on which all life on earth depends. We have known since the 1970s that this gives rise to complex, interdependent, and cascading crises of democratic, social, ecological, and earth systems. We call these the “Gaia crises” for shorthand (see Lynas 2020). The democratic crisis across all four democratic modes is the incapacity (or gridlock) of democracies to cooperate in responding effectively to the Gaia crises (Held 2022).

The Gaia crises bring to human awareness a fifth mode of democracy: Gaia or earth democracy which can be seen as an expansion of the civic picture to encompass life in general. Homo sapiens and their systems are interdependent members of symbiotic ecological and earth systems that have sustained and complexified life for over 3.8 billion years. These life systems are symbiotic and cyclical in the virtuous or co-operative sense that they reciprocally sustain themselves in ways that co-sustain the interdependent life systems on which they co-depend. They exercise the power or animacy of life-sustaining-life (*anima mundi*) themselves without a ruler (the Gaia hypothesis). These complex cooperative systems are often far from equilibrium and often tip over into unsustainable vicious systems. Yet, they also have the capacities to transform vicious systems into sustainable systems by means of cooperative ecological succession, either before or after collapse, as has happened many times in the past. This living Gaia democracy is primary in the sense that it is the ground of being and well-being of all other forms of democracy and their members. Homo sapiens are thus “plain members and citizens” of Gaia democracy with responsibilities to care for and sustain the biodiverse life systems that sustain them, as Aldo Leopold famously argued in 1949(Leopold 1949, 239-40). How do the participants in the other four modes of democracy respond to the Gaia crises and integrate in and with Gaia democracy? (see Bilgrami 2020, Tully 2018).

One central theme is the ways in which the five modes of democracy and their distinctive activities relate to one another, for better or worse. These relationships are not well understood because our disciplinary and everyday ways of perceiving the field tend to treat the various forms of democracy in isolation from one another. When they are studied together, they are often pictured as in oppositional and/or hegemon-subaltern relationships. If the entangled, crisscrossing, and overlapping relationships enacted among them and the larger social systems are disclosed and discussed, we would be able to examine the challenges and possibilities of finding ways for these modes of democracy to *coordinate and cooperate* together as equals (‘democratic integration’) in addressing and transforming the local and global systemic causes of the Gaia crises and other crises. It may be that this kind of transformative democratic integration among democratic modes (‘joining hands’) could overcome what is called in the literature the “dysfunctionality,” “hollowing out,” “gridlock,” “antagonistic self-destruction,” “authoritarian supersession,” or “death of democracy.” However, we cannot begin to think about genuinely democratic coordination of different modes of democracy until we have learned to listen to and understand how democracy and coordination are articulated, understood, and enacted by different peoples and those affected by them. This basic democratic norm of *audi alteram partem* (always listen to the other side) enables us to avoid and challenge the tendency to take one mode of democracy as the dominant mode of action-coordination under which all others are disclosed and subalternized. These comparative and critical democratic dialogues of all affected are the groundwork of and for the transformative kind of democratic coordination and cooperation we call “joining hands.”[[3]](#footnote-4) They enact democratization by democratic means.[[4]](#footnote-5) In joining hands democratically, they connect with the animating democratic spirit or power of cooperating and contesting with and for one another that sustains democratic communities. Aristotle called this democratic spirit “*philia*” (friendship). In response to the ecological crisis in 1976, Eric Fromm renamed and extended it to “*biophilia”* (the animacy of Gaia democracy). (Fromm 1973. See also Tully 2020, Rogers n.d.).

II.

Our starting point is based on the Aristotelian, Arendtian, and Gandhian premise that healthy and sustainable pragmatic representative democracies are grounded in and grow out of healthy and sustainable everyday participatory democratic relationships in which citizens acquire democratic ethical skills of interaction through trial-and-error practice and guidance by exemplary citizens. In brief, civil democracy must be grounded in the civic democracy. This ethical self-formation (*ethos*) consists in the cultivation of democratic relationships with oneself (inner freedom), other humans, and the living earth. This way of being democratic contrasts with the recourse to force, the imposition of ruler/ruled relationships (*arche*) of other forms of government, the creation of us/them relationships, the escalating campaigns and competitions of and for power-over, and thus the undermining of democratic relationships of power with, by, and for one another.

These civic virtues of being democratic bring to light by contrast the following three crises of contemporary representative democracies. The first is the marginalization of everyday participatory democratic relationships in modern societies and the dominance of unequal and undemocratic ruler/ruled relationships across the public and private spheres. The second is the resulting disconnection or alienation of representative governments from ongoing, participatory democratic relationships of consultation and accountability with all affected—engaged democratic citizens — and thus the rise of increasingly non-democratic relationships over, rather than with, the governed. Third, even within representative political parties, campaigns, and institutions, gaining a majority or plurality and imposing a solution is much more common than trying to “work across the aisle” to reach agreements among free and equal partners. As we know from contemporary history, this kind of political power over others becomes concentrated in the hands of elites, authoritarian movements capture democratic institutions, the iron law of competing oligarchies becomes the norm, and politics resembles war by other means (see Keane 2020, Kochi 2020). Our claim here is that the crises of representative democracy and its inability to respond effectively to them are, in varied ways and by various roots, connected to its being held captive by the civil picture of citizenship.

The democratic civic virtues also initiate the internal and circular relationship between means and ends in politics. Non-democratic means bring about non-democratic ends, whereas participatory democratic means bring about democratic ends. They are autotelic.[[5]](#footnote-6) If this is correct, then the response to these democratic crises is to democratize representative democracy by democratizing our everyday relationships across public and private spheres, and, in so doing, generate transformative cycles of democratic succession and transformation. This is what we call “democratic democratization.” This structure of argument explains why the cultivation of culturally diverse democratic ethics is primary. It appears to be a key *condition* of overcoming the three crises of representative democracies and building networks of democratic coordination, cooperation, contestation, and conflict resolution in response to the gridlocked problems we confront.

Schematically, this participatory response to democratic crises appears to consist in two major phases articulated in different ways in the five modes of democracies and in different subject positions within them. The first phase of “constructive programs” involves the cultivation of democratic ethics and relationships here and now, and thus a corresponding non-cooperation with non-democratic relationships; a stance illustrated, for example, in the ‘democratize work’ and 15M movements. On this participatory democratic groundwork, the second phase engages with and seeks to transform non-democratic and anti-democratic governance relationships and their members into democratic relationships by democratic means. This democratic mode of democratization from below is qualitatively different from the dominant top-down and coercive civil modes of global democratization and conflict resolution that are a major cause of the gridlock crisis we face today (see, for example, Morefield 2022, Held 2022, Sripati 2020). Yet, it is alive and well in the local and global traditions of participatory democracy.

III.

An illustration of such democratizing democracy is provided by the UCSD Community Stations, a network of civic spaces located in four neighborhoods on both sides of the border wall at Tijuana-San Diego that Forman and partner Teddy Cruz designed in partnership with grassroots agencies to engage local ecosocial crises. (Forman 2022, Cruz and Forman 2022).In these spaces, university researchers, residents, activists and government agencies -- representing all five modes of democracy and citizenship discussed in this paper -- assemble as partners to share diverse knowledges, to build habits of dialogue and collective action, and to co-produce new narratives, enduring alliances and concrete projects that could not be achieved without joining hands in this way.

Racist political narratives portray the US-Mexico border region as a site of criminality and dangerous undercurrents that only a wall can stop. But borders zones are unrelentingly porous: air, water, waste, health, money, culture, hope, love and justice don’t stop at walls. These flows shape transgressive, hybrid identities and everyday practices in this part of the world. Forman, Cruz and their partners are committed to generating counter-narratives about life in the border region from the bottom-up, and to reclaim an idea of citizenship where belonging is oriented not by the state, but by the lived experiences and aspirations of diverse people who inhabit a violently disrupted civic space. Border regions are a natural laboratory for reimagining citizenship along these lines.

The UCSD Community Stations curate convergences, cultural performances and “unwalling experiments” to increase public recognition of eco-social interdependencies between San Diego and Tijuana, and to cultivate a cross-border *res publica* with a corresponding “citizenship culture” (Forman 2018).

These activities often produce encounters with entities that formally govern the borderlands, from federal agencies, to municipalities to local planning councils. Sometimes these engagements reinforce a sense of intractable conflict and injustice in a fragmented zone of racialized violence. But sometimes the wisdom of joining hands prevails, and a coalition emerges to tackle a concrete eco-social challenge. Over the years the UCSD Community Stations have facilitated dozens of cross-border projects that advance social and environmental justice in the border region, including green infrastructure and environmental remediation projects that support vulnerable communities adapting to the impacts of climate change; social and emergency housing, most recently a refugee sanctuary that houses 400 migrants (Gordon 2021); and public space projects that transform neglected urban remainders into vibrant civic spaces. An especially durable and transformative example is the *Cross-Border Commons* initiative

*The Cross-Border Commons*

The movement of water through shared canyon systems has been a powerful device to stimulate cross-border civic thinking in the Tijuana-San Diego border region. The Tijuana River Watershed is physically bisected by the international border, and this fractured bioregion produces eco-social trauma on both sides, disrupting the natural hydrologies, biodiverse flows and social ecologies essential to the health and sustainability of the region.

Two of the four UCSD Community Stations are located in the Laureles Canyon on the Western periphery of Tijuana, home to an informal settlement of 100,000 people. This canyon is an important finger of the binational watershed because it drains northward across the wall into a federally-protected US estuary before discharging into the Pacific Ocean. Because the informal settlement sits at a higher elevation than the estuary, and has little water and waste management infrastructure, tons of trash, sediment, and industrial *maquiladora* waste flow northward each year and inundate the estuary. These currents are intensified by erratic and heavy rainfall patterns caused by climate change, producing dangerous flooding and mudslides across the Laureles Canyon. The US has further accelerated these calamitous flows in recent years by carving concrete dams and syphon-like drains into new borderwall infrastructure.

Forman, Cruz and their partners wanted to expose the eco-social wounds of border-building, and so they curated a cross-border civic action through one of these sewerage drains. Presenting themselves as “artists,” they negotiated a permit with U.S. Homeland Security to transform the drain into an official port of entry southward for twenty-four hours. Their convoy was comprised of 300 local residents and activists, representatives from the municipalities of San Diego and Tijuana, and artists and border activists from around the world. As they moved together southward under the wall, they witnessed wastewater and plastics rushing northward toward the Estuary beneath their feet, illuminating the most profound interdependencies of the region.

The event helped to solidify broad public commitment, and culminated in the *Cross-Border Commons*, a binational land conservancy initiative to protect unsquatted parcels in the settlement, to invest in adaptive hydro-pedagogic infrastructure, and to define a conservation zone that crosses the international line, the only *territorial transgression* of its kind in the region (Cruz and Forman 2018). The *Cross-Border Commons* is stewarded today by a binational coalition of university researchers, state and municipal agencies, local environmental non-profits and community organizations, including members of the Kumeyaay Nation whose ancestral territory is ruptured by the line. Each partner brings a unique set of knowledges and capacities to the alliance, joining hands to reimagine sovereignty and citizenship through a shared commitment to the health of the bioregion.

While they prioritize local work, Forman, Cruz and their partners have also cultivated civic solidarities along the entire US-Mexico border, and beyond. Through cartographic experiments and cultural imaginaries, they “nest” local conflicts within expanded spheres of circulation and interdependence, enabling people to recognize themselves within broader ecologies that contain the injustices they face. For example, *MEXUS* is a visualization project that dissolves the 3,145km borderwall wall into a bioregion shaped by the eight binational watershed systems that comprise it.[[6]](#footnote-7) The Tijuana River Watershed is nested at the westernmost corner of *MEXUS,* where the wall descends absurdly into the Pacific Ocean. The Rio Grande Valley and the border cities of Matamoros, Mexico and Brownsville, Texas anchor the eastern end. *MEXUS* demonstrates what dumb sovereignty looks like when it hits the ground in a complex bioregion, exposing diverse social ecologies that the wall cannot contain: 11 tribal nations; 110,000 square kilometers of protected lands; 16,000 square kilometers of croplands; 28 urban crossings, many more informal ones, 15 million people and more. *MEXUS* counters America’s wall-building fantasies with expansive imaginaries of belonging beyond the nations state; and has instigated trans-border civic coalitions to share best practices and cooperate on environmental policy transformation.[[7]](#footnote-8)

The aim of disclosing the multiplicity of modes of democracy is to both recognize and open new thinking about how diverse democratic citizens can and do work together in context-specific, integrative relationships of democratic cooperation and contestation. These relationships of democratic “joining hands” or integration, are not only possible, but actual, here and now, in the local and global field of democratic diversity. Our wager is that the further growth of these action-coordination relationships has the potential to generate and integrate robust democracies with the capacity to respond to our ecosocial crises and co-create a sustainable, democratic future.

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1. Joining hands is a metaphor that covers a wide range of culturally diverse ways in which humans ‘help one another’ (mutual aid). It can be lending a hand, giving a hand, sharing with, mutual service, listening carefully to one another, negotiating together, acting together in various ways, and, nonviolently offering an open hand rather than a closed fist as the offer of radical trust, and so on: that is, all forms of egalitarian democratic relationships or of trying to initiate them through Satyagraha. It contrasts with the much tighter relationship of “linking arms together” that seems to always generate an “other” against whom one group links arms together – as in the dominant uses of the word “solidarity”. The phrase “joining hands” derives from the very long Mohawk word translated as “joining hands” that the Haudenosaunee Confederacy always uses to describe the relationship that they wish to establish with the Settlers from the early 1600s to contemporary anti-pipeline protests. The word is **Tehatiatnetsha.**They use it to describe all the co-sustainable kinship relations they have with humans and the living earth.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Restakis 2010 estimates that about 800 million people are involved to some extent in these direct democratic communities of practice. See, for example, Engler and Engler 2016, Ferreras, et.al. 2020, Parker 2017, Santos, et. al 2005 and Tully 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For an insightful historical Marxist study of how the global “precariat” could join hands democratically, see Davis2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Compare Said 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. tested the truth of the thesis that means configure ends in practice and in their writings. Joan Bondurant, Hannah Arendt, and Richard Gregg presented the classic theoretical defenses of it and the challenge it presents to Western political theory and practice, based as it is on the thesis that violent and non-democratic means are necessary to establish order (the rabble hypothesis that humans are incapable of self-organization and governance without an armed master) and these violent means somehow lead to peace and democracy in some distant future to come. (Arendt 1970, Gregg 2018 and Bondurant 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *MEXUS: Geographies of Interdependence* was first commissioned by the United States pavilion for exhibition in the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Most recently, a new alliance among civic coalitions in San Diego-Tijuana, El Paso-Ciudad Juárez and Brownsville-Matamoros to engage water challenges, called “Shared destinies: Hydro-Social Infrastructures for Community Involvement and Sustainability in Fragmented Border Regions” funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF-SRS 2115124). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)