Ecology and Democracy in a World on Fire

Our first responsibility, always, is to preserve the world, and our second is to improve it

Jedediah Purdy

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Blackwork Design for Goldsmithwork with Monkey, Birds, and Insects (ca. 1582–1616)

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The following text was first presented on April 22, 2025, as a distinguished lecture presented by the Henry H. Arnhold Forum on Global Challenges and the New School for Social Research.

I want to trace the outline of an era that has closed. It ran from roughly the end of the Cold War until now, although it's been in crisis for nearly a decade.

Its basic logic took shape in the 1990s, but it reached its apex in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It was an era of uniquely dominant American power—military, economic, cultural. The US decided when and where to go to war—including, portentously, in Iraq in 2002. Wherever you went in those years, from Egypt to India to Indonesia, young people would tell you that they expected the future to be a certain kind of American world. Even in China, which very much had a sense of its own place

on the global stage, I remember walking into a Shanghai bookshop in 2001 to encounter an exhibition of an audio program for learning English, which was repeating this useful phrase: "We are looking forward to the closer trading relationship."

The working assumption of that era was that history had a direction, glimpsed in the audio book I just quoted: The direction was toward liberal democracy, and the road to it was the global extension of market life. Whether or not we knew it, we were all, in fact, looking forward to the closer trading relationship.

Global media would remind people of what they wanted—personal liberty and nice things. After all, the story went, the Soviet empire had fallen because its people wanted blue jeans and rock and roll. Markets would bring these things, and participation in markets would shape people into liberal and democratic citizens. Why? Because as entrepreneurs, small property-holders, people with jobs and a stake in the system, they would demand security, stability, and personal rights from their governments. Regimes around the world would become more responsive, and more responsible. Ultimately, we would all be democratic.

But—and here was a paradox—we might hardly notice the difference democracy made. Democracy is a system of collective choice, a way of choosing a future. But in the climate of thought that I am recalling, there was only one desirable future. All democracies would get to more or less the same place, with different details, which were not much more important than national costumes, local cuisines, or preferred holidays. Democracy would put a final stamp of approval on the world that markets and human nature were already building.

This description suggests a complacency and sense of inevitability, which is partly false. There was also a deliberate political effort to build the world order in which this theory of democratic development would thrive. This was global economic integration on broadly market terms: first lowering barriers at the border, especially tariffs and capital controls, then pressing toward standardization of domestic regulation and the building of a transnational dispute resolution system that would give investors their own private legal sphere where mere national sovereignty wouldn't intrude. This is what we now call globalization. We should identify it more precisely as a specific program of globalizing market relations as a path to viable world order.

There was plenty of money to make in all of this, but it was also a geopolitical gamble: Its vision of world order was that countries integrated in this fashion would not go to war abroad and would not undercut their own democratic and liberal orders at home. They would be too interdependent, and too sensible, for such self-inflicted disasters.

So we live in an era that was built on a theory of modern political economy. The theory comes in two parts. First, *doux commerce*, translated roughly as "sweet commerce"—that market economies take the edge off human psychology and social life, make everyone more rational, more prudent, more inclined to seek stability. Second, commercial peace theory: basically that *doux commerce* scales up to the national and international levels, partly because national politics is driven by citizens who are prudent and sensi-

ble, partly because political and economic elites understand that open conflict would wreck an architecture of interdependence that everyone needs. Think of global supply chains or the stability of international investments.

The political science of this era argued that once countries reached a certain level of economic growth and held a certain number of successful elections, they would not go back: They were what political scientists called "consolidated democracies," and they would not deconsolidate themselves.

I don't think you need me to remind you of all the ways that this theory has been shaken. We are not living in the future that it proposed.

The current relationship between democracy and ecology took shape in the shadow of this theory. In addition to what I've said, it was widely accepted that there was one existential challenge to consolidated democracies, which they would have to rally to meet. That was climate change.

Climate change had a double face, because it was an existential challenge that also seemed to fit perfectly within the intellectual framework of the time. It was the great exception to economic logic, but an exception that could be understood entirely in the dominant economic terms, so it seemed to confirm the larger logic rather than call it into question. The standard analysis of climate change, as you no doubt know, ran like this: Economic citizens, who were otherwise the prudent models of *doux commerce*, nonetheless burned fossil fuels like there was no tomorrow because their emissions were "externalities," harms for which they didn't have to pay. And this problem scaled up globally: Every country "rationally" produced externalities for the rest of the world. In the intellectual life of the time, in policy schools and think thanks and law schools, there was a certain aesthetic pleasure in the logic of climate crisis: It was a terrible problem, but it all made so much sense.

And there was a solution embedded in the same way of thinking: If the problem was externalities, a bug in the pricing system of markets, then the cure was to patch the code. So for roughly two decades the overriding concern of respectable thinking about climate change was how to "put a price" on carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions. The big question was whether the price should take the form of a carbon tax or of tradeable emission permits. Once the price was there, the theory went, the whole economy would pivot to a green transition: there would be enhanced returns to investment in clean energy, consumer decisions would reflect the "true" cost of emissions, and *doux commerce* would also be *green commerce*.

This idea had a mostly unexamined institutional context. First was its audience: It was never a popular political program, but a technical program directed to a responsible, public-spirited lawmaker. So it needed that lawmaker to exist: In that sense, it involved a big, implicit gamble on democracy itself, a version of democracy that was at once bold and strong enough for a fundamental reworking of the economy and humble and technocratic enough to take dictation from economics-minded policy specialists. But of course that was how trade liberalization had gone, or seemed to be going, so it was a natural extension.

Second was the idea that this policymaker would be able to shape not just the national economy but the world order. A patch to the national economy that raised the cost of doing business would be a self-imposed economic wound unless other countries were on board. But in a period in which a rules-based international economic order was expanding and pressing its logic behind borders, this ambition seemed plausible. A later version of the same goal would focus on shaping the investment policies of the biggest financial actors in the US and Europe, on the theory that they were effectively institutions of governance that could reset priorities in the direction of a green transition.

Again, I don't think I need to remind you of all the ways that these assumptions now seem fanciful.

In this new world, missed opportunities become clear in hindsight. During more than a decade of vanishingly low interest rates, in a time of relative peace, the US did not invest aggressively in an energy transition but waited for reengineered market signals to do the job. Not even the reengineering emerged. We have remembered, belatedly, that large public investment in key infrastructure and technology is the way to set a direction in national development. The Biden administration tried to make up lost ground under the unfavorable conditions of higher interest rates and a tiny and fleeting Congressional majority, but time ran out.

I said earlier that we got here under a specific theory of political economy, which did not turn out to be a good compass. The world in which a vision of climate policy rose and fell was threaded through with a theory of what democracy and capitalism mean in relation to each other. In this vision, capitalist markets would promote and secure democracy, but also put it in its place, keep its ambitions within reasonable limits. In our time, when that compass seems to have failed, one direction is to learn from other theories of political economy, other ways of thinking about the relationship between democracy and capitalism.

Like some members of the New School faculty whom I admire, I have learned from the economic historian Karl Polanyi, who argued that the laissez-faire market tends to undercut the conditions of its own success by treating as commodities things *it needs* which will break down or collapse if they are produced and exploited based on return on private investment. Polanyi's key examples of what he called "false commodities" were land, labor, and money. To update the thought, for money, consider the prospects of financial crisis that we face in a world where money is one the hand the essential infrastructure of economic world order and on the other hand a wild west of crypto ventures. We've already lived once through the kind of systemic lockup that can happen when reckless private investment engineering interacts with key financial flows: That was the 2008–9 financial crisis, a watershed of today's world disorder; but it could be so much worse. For labor, think of the essential work on social reproduction that Nancy Fraser has done here at The New School: How do we keep the human world going when nearly everything we need has a price—food, shelter, medicine, often education—but having and raising children is treated as a free input to the system? We can update

land to ecology, and see much of our environmental crisis as what happens when the nonhuman world is an object of profit-making, but without care for the conditions in which its systems can continue to thrive—whether we are talking about the soil of Iowa, the water of the American West, or the global atmosphere's processing of carbon and other greenhouse gases.

I would add two other false commodifications. One is law. Consider a part of what held together the optimism about market-based climate policy: a certain image of how market actors relate to the framework of law in which they operate. In this image, market actors fight tooth and nail for advantage *within the terms of authorized competition*, but this rule-bound war of all against all stops at the boundaries of the authorized marketplace. So if policymakers change the rules, Exxon, for instance, will turn its efforts to hydrogen fuel research and negotiations with Saudi Arabia over placement of solar arrays. But today it is easy to say what was once scandalous: market actors don't want competition. They want regulatory rents, platform monopoly, employment market oligopsony, and all the other advantages that Peter Thiel had in mind when he announced that "competition is for losers." The logic of competitive markets is not to respect the legal boundaries that set the terms and limits of competition, but precisely to treat the rules themselves as objects of investment, meaning law is less likely to serve as the means for democratic and technocratic judgments that temper market order, more likely to be the place where market actors try to hack out new paths to dominance. In other words, law gets produced as an object of private investment and, when this is true, its ability to provide an independent stabilizing and organizing framework is undercut.

The other false commodification that I would add here is the commodification of culture, or of social imagination. Democracy in a vast and complex society depends on imagination, the atlas of the world that we carry in our heads. You can have largely the same day-to-day experience, the same concrete interactions, and at the same time broadly believe either that others are your fellow Americans—and fellow humans—to whom you are bound in loyalty and affection, or that you live under siege by people who want to tear down all that you hold dear. We can understand our elections as collective decisions only because we carry overlapping pictures in our heads of what is at stake when we check one name or the other on a ballot.

So we have to ask how our imagination is produced and reproduced—as we might ask about law or ecological health. A key part of the answer is in how we communicate. If imagination seems ephemeral, communication is very material. For decades, the sense of the world outside one's own immediate experience came, to a very great degree, from broadcast television and print that tended to create a broadly consensual view of the world, for reasons that were both technological and regulatory. It was during the same period that political scientists concluded that so-called "consolidated democracies" were basically immune from backsliding into undemocratic politics. The eclipse of that optimism about democratic stability has come along with the eclipse of those forms of consensus-fostering communication. Now democracy seems unstable and fragmenting

even as the technologies that mediate our communication, and shape our imagination, have become fragmenting, ways of multiplying worldviews and setting them against one another. Anyone who has been active on social or partisan media, as I used to be, knows that although we express our own opinions and absorb those of others, we don't choose the conditions in which we do so, and that algorithms and group dynamics change the conversation and change us. And we know that these dynamics all take place within a larger economy in which the commodification of attention proceeds by activating feelings of fear and resentment, which make it feel reckless to look away, and so keep us exactly where our efforts at civic dialogue—or just at personal survival—contribute most to the return on investment of platform owners.

I don't mean to say that we are in the Matrix, or to deny that people know things and reason about what we know, but I do mean that how we imagine our world matters essentially to our politics, and it changes as the means of communication change.

I suspect that the commodification of culture is one cause of the collapse of trust in public institutions and in other people. That collapse makes deep, constructive political change much harder, and may even put it out of reach. And it highlights how much democracy relies on the intangible cohesion of trust—a force that, like gravity, holds us together but which we can hardly sense before it begins to fail. When the great modern environmental laws were passed by overwhelming congressional majorities between 1970 and 1973, about 60 percent of Americans said they trusted the government to do what was right all or most of the time. That was already down from more than 75 percent in the mid 1960's, but it was still remarkable in hindsight: Coming out of a decade of war, domestic terror, and riots, large majorities of Americans solidly believed in their core political institutions. Today the comparable figure is about 22 percent, and it has languished around that level for nearly two decades. During the same period, Americans' trust in other individuals has also collapsed: Although it was never as high as trust in institutions, more than 50 percent of Americans thought when the big environmental laws were passed that other people were basically trustworthy. Today, that number is around 30 percent, and is lowest among young people, who are extremely likely to say that others will take advantage of you if they get the chance.

Democracy relies on trust to a special degree. In it, we put ourselves in one another's hands. Who would do that for institutions they thought corrupt and untrustworthy, and people they thought likely to take advantage of them? It is no surprise that American lawmaking has mainly proceeded through debt-financed spending—the one thing that, for now, a government without popular confidence can do. Just now the shrinking and even dismantling of parts of the federal government seems to confirm this condition: In a time of widespread disaffection, it is possible to unmake institutions and to break customs and norms—maybe even constitutional rules—that once seemed permanent. There remains plenty of power in government, and it can be turned against enemies and in favor of friends. But this is different from the broadly consensual making of a common world. I am not sure *that* is in our reach today.

I won't try to say what comes next. Uncertainty is the basic fact about our political moment—uncertainty and danger. But what I will do is to set out some of the qualities that have often defined ecological politics, and which were largely missing from the two decades of climate-focused politics that I have been describing. The point of this exercise is that I suspect we might want to recover some of those qualities—*we* being those of us who care about our ecological future.

First, ecological politics has often been about world-making. In the United States, the creation of the Sierra Club and other long-lasting organizations, and the broader history of mobilization around the human relationship to the natural world, both began in a politics of landscape. Between the Sierra Club's founding in the 1890's and the passage of the federal Wilderness Act in 1964, arguably *the* defining goal of environmental politics was to preserve and, by deliberate management, to produce certain kinds of terrain: Think of the Cathedral-like spires of Yosemite Valley framing its almost pastoral lowland meadows, or the big slopes and endless forest of the Adirondacks. Part of the purpose of these landscapes was civic: They formed a commons. They physically represented the common ground of civic membership. They provided a place where anyone had a right to be. In this role, they resembled urban parks and promenades, public libraries and universities. They were sometimes called "republican parks," meaning places of recreation and rest for a free, self-governing country, in contrast to the royal and aristocratic parks of the old world.

Public spaces like Yosemite were also places to cultivate a certain mode of experience. People went there to connect their own lives with a bigger order of being. It was a Romantic idea that in wild places you could become more yourself, because nature was a kind of spiritual home. Here a literary idea became a political program. It became an agenda of state and federal land law to make places in which this kind of experience could flourish. Today we have 83 million acres of national parks and 112 million acres of designated federal wilderness, each park and wilderness tract established by an act of Congress. That is about eight percent of the land area of the country.

There has been a lot of writing about the limitation and problems of this history: its elite and sometimes elitist profile, the involvement of some of its major figures in eugenics and theories of racial hierarchy. I have done some of that writing, so obviously I think it's important. But I also think that in making these appropriate qualifications and criticisms, we risk losing track of the distinctive power of this kind of politics: its power to shape a world and help call into being ways of seeing, of feeling, of being together. It seems to me that we need these, we know that we need them, and we are at something of a loss as to how to create them.

The misleadingly named Inflation Reduction Act, the Biden administration's major energy and environmental legislation, aimed at a green transition based in an environmental politics that can build—build solar arrays, a better energy grid, charging stations for electric vehicles. This move to building infrastructure was, to my mind, the most promising direction in environmental politics in decades, and I am gravely disappointed both by the ways it was hobbled on its own terms—almost no charging

stations were built—and by the ways it is now being pressed back by political opposition. But the odd thing about infrastructure, especially energy infrastructure, is how it aspires to invisibility, to be the background of experience. We tend to notice it only when it fails, when a natural disaster imposes a terrifying thought experiment: How long can we go without power, without water, how far can we drive before we run out of fuel? Until that moment, who even sees the power lines? Infrastructure politics usually lacks almost entirely what I have been calling a politics of experience, a spirit of world-making. And I have been arguing that this spirit has not been an eccentric or elite part of ecological politics: It has often been its beating heart.

Another major theme in the history of ecological politics has been the meaning of the nonhuman world. In saying "meaning," I am being deliberately broad: This theme cuts across ethics, aesthetics, and the relationship between knowledge of others and knowledge of oneself. It is Henry Thoreau asking the pond, "Walden, is it you?" and getting no answer except everything he recounted in the book that he named for the pond. It is also Thoreau watching the spring melt bare earth in a railroad cut between his shack and the village of Concord, and falling into a vision in which he sees his own body in the rivulets of dirty water, the newly loosened soil, and the structure of a first green leaf, whose stems become in his mind both the joinery of his own hands and the branching tributaries of great rivers. This is one source of the idea, which informed the Wilderness Act, that our self-knowledge, as individuals and as a culture, depends on relationships with what is beyond us and strange to us. It also helped to power the Endangered Species Act, which, 52 years ago, established something like a legal right to exist for species, including a prohibition on killing individual members of threatened or endangered species, and a requirement that federal actions respect the critical habitat of these species. Biodiversity is often shoehorned into arguments about economic benefit—who knows what medicines we might synthesize from some obscure plant?—and that is fine, but there is another, powerful register of political motivation, which starts not by asking what we can get from the nonhuman, but what it is, and what we are in relation to it. We are here among other beings, some wildly different from us. What changes when we grasp this, when we genuinely appreciate it? How far *can* we genuinely appreciate it? When it comes to understanding human politics, the essential starting point is that other people *really are* other. Someone who sees other people as aspects of oneself may be cunning and effective but in the end will be confused and dangerous. Can we extend this thought beyond the human ambit?

I sense a hunger to reopen with this question. When the philosopher Thomas Nagel asked in 1974, "What is it like to be a bat?" his point was that the question could not be answered from our standpoint, because we are always caught in what it is like to be a human, and the gulf is unbridgeable. The late writer Barry Lopez labored in 1986 to imagine the sensorium of a narwhal, a creature that, like a bat, inhabits a landscape of sound, three dimensions of vibration (perhaps like one of those old cosmological globes, in which circles of perception work outward from the middle, the outer limits of perception like the sphere of heaven where creation reached its boundary)—Lopez

was then engaged in a novel literary experiment, trying to carry human consciousness across Nagel's great divide by drawing on our own power to remake our experience through imagination. Today, that literary experiment is commonplace—and the results are sometimes dazzling. Many books invite us to contemplate the inner life of the hawk, the octopus, the elephant, songbirds, dogs and cats, fungal colonies, and forests, to name a few. There is conjecture that artificial intelligence might be able to reconstruct the languages of whales and other species from the patterns of massive recordings, which no human mind could organize. In law, there is a push to take seriously the idea of nature's rights, sometimes taken as far as to say that, for instance, in deciding whether to build a dam, we must ask whether the river consents.

I think this development can play into environmental politics in two opposite ways. On the good side, one of the best things about human beings is our generous curiosity. We can pose questions whose answers will change us. What it is like to *be* other life is one of those questions. It should be staggering that the world is full of many kinds of experience, many standpoints. We live in a profusion of worlds: the world of the forest, the world of bats, the world of possums. Taking this on is a real effort to grapple with how we are not alone.

On the other hand, there is real danger of projection and escapism. Some Victorians liked to imagine that, in a gray industrial world full of human suffering and utilitarian rationalizations of it, there were also fairies in the gardens of the middle classes and aristocrats. I have almost boundless emotional sympathy for this impulse, but I think there is a responsibility to be intellectually skeptical of it, especially if the question is whether it can improve our law and politics. I don't think we know how to say whether a river has consented to a dam, or that we know whether one evocation of a forest's experience gets it more right than another. Forests and mushroom colonies have been advanced as evidence of the ethical superiority of socialism, libertarianism, and even a kind of pull-up-your-pants paternalism, and the trees are not going to tell us which one is *really* right for them, or what it means for us. That we are asking these questions about our place in the world, I find really hopeful. The answers we can finally give will have to be worked out among other human beings, people with whom we will continue to disagree. At best we will merely disagree.

So what about our politics? I said at the beginning that we are at a moment when past experience is no guide to the present. A worse thought would be that the recent experience of relatively fortunate people is not a guide to the future, but that the broader shape of human experience might be. That experience has been of vulnerability and domination in political life, scarcity and domination in economic life, and scarcity and uncertainty in relation to the natural world. In each of these domains, you ultimately had to make your best effort and pray for good rulers (and to escape the attention of rulers in any case), good weather for harvests, and no predators or plagues.

Modern life has been a search for a generalized way out of this situation into a domain of greater freedom. Much of the great modern political debate between left and

right, between "more democracy" and "more market" has been over where the domain of freedom is: for libertarians of the right, as Nobel economist Milton Friedman put in in his *Capitalism and Freedom*, in voluntary market relations with the overreaching, irrational, grasping state kept at a safe distance; for the democratic left, in shared decisions among political equals about how to live together: about the value of work, the value of learning and rest, the value of the larger living world. In this second vision, people can be the authors of a world that is good for them to inhabit. Notice that in both versions, right and left, there is a conjunction of kinds of freedom: greater agency, greater capacity to set our own projects and direction, a kind of affirmative freedom, will also make us more secure, freer from abuse, domination, everyday insecurity—some would call it negative freedom, I would say a securing or shielding aspect of freedom. Each side of this debate has accused the other of confusing freedom and domination. For the right, the left has romanticized democracy—and sometimes "community"—failing to recognize that it is in collectives, especially political collectives, that we are most dangerous to one another. For the left, the right has romanticized the market, failing to recognize that this supposed realm of freedom is structured through and through by "private government," unequal bargaining power, and the motive of exploitation, which is not personal but systemic in the pressure to increase return on investment.

The bleak thought is: What if each is right about the other? What if there is no privileged domain of freedom that we can generalize as a way of looking out for one another? And what if, for just that reason, we are likely to keep reconstituting the natural world as an increasingly dangerous place, reviving the once ordinary dangers of starving seasons and plagues? In a way, we see the eclipsed market ideal in the carbon-trading scheme—bringing the natural world into a logic of price-mediated mutual benefit—and the democratic ideal in the Green New Deal, now also politically eclipsed, which aimed to decommodify parts of care, work, and learning alongside an explicit political judgment about how to honor the value of life in the twenty-first century. If both ways forward are closed for now, then economy, ecology, and politics all become—again—ways that we are buffeted by fate, and places where we hope for mercy.

And here is one more turn to the thought, an even worse one. What if we are making ourselves into people who like to see things burn? There is a standard story of American environmental law in which green legislation comes along after the Cuyahoga River catches fire in 1969 where it runs through Cleveland. What's missing in the standard story is that Americans had to learn to see a burning river as a crisis: the Cuyahoga had burned before, quite a few times, and it had not been taken as a crisis. Now suppose it were taken as a kind of festival. As a species, we produce gardeners, devoted caretakers, and also arsonists. We can experience a sense of agency, engagement, in slow, deliberate, self-limiting kinds of work, or in setting off a spectacle of destruction and watching our work. If there is money to make in the kind of entertainment, even the kind of politics, that trains us to be arsonists, the training will happen.

It seems to me that we can't afford to ignore these possibilities, and also can't afford to surrender to them. There's nothing new about the challenge of holding contradictory thoughts together, but it always feels new, because there is no formula.

I find myself thinking now that there should never be a profligate rejection of anything that makes the world more viable and humane. Examples that come to mind now include due process, the rule of law, free speech, constitutional order, our federal lands as they now exist, independent institutions such as universities and the professions. Our first responsibility, always, is to preserve the world, and our second is to improve it. We don't know how to hold these imperatives in balance, we have no complete or even very adequate theory of our collective lives, and so the place we start is a kind of gift and a kind of mystery. This is true even as all our necessary criticism and qualification of our starting place is also true. And even our criticism begins from our experience of what's good, and asking why there cannot be more of it: more good work, more fellowship, more safety, more care. We take the first measure of criticism from what we have learned to appreciate. This is a conservative impulse, and I think it is one that helps to show even the most radical ambition in its best light.

By the same token, I am grateful now for every park, every community garden and little farm, every piece of education that prompts children, or adults, to think in terms of cardinal directions and watersheds, of land history and its many relationships to human history. This is the ground that ecological politics has to come back to, again and again. Maybe into the politics of food, human health, and land health. Maybe into new dimensions of climate justice.

These kinds of ecological work and imagination are how democracy learns to make a safe and lasting home in this world. And democracy is how ecological imagination begins to become real. They need each other, and both are fragile now.

Jedediah Purdy
Raphael Lemkin Professor of Law at Duke University School of Law

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