

# BETWEEN POLIS AND PHYSIS: Democracy as a problem and a solution for the climate crisis

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**Abstract:** The debate on climate change has begun to influence public policies through technical documents which include predictions and impacts concerning the environment, society, the economy, and culture. Within this context, research and intellectual contributions on the theme have been focussing on the development of mechanisms designed to avoid or mitigate the approaching global crisis. In this review, setting itself a little apart from these perspectives, the work of Frank Fischer is presented which, in accepting the inevitability of the crisis, adopts a line of political debate on “the place of democracy” in a context of an established global disaster. His main arguments will be highlighted, such as the authoritarian tendencies which emerge as a means of facing the crisis along with the structures and development of mechanisms for defending democracy, bringing into the discussion perspectives of eco-localism and its associated elements., Furthermore, analysis will be made of the potential and also some of the weaknesses of Fischer’s arguments. Fischer is an author who has become established as a fundamental reference for those who are involved in the subject.

**Keywords:** Climate change, democracy, authoritarianism, eco-localism

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*Review*

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**Book:** Fischer, F. 2017. *Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect: Participatory Governance in Sustainable Communities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press .

Over the last few years there has been a growing interest in discussions regarding the relationship between democracy and the environment, especially in relation to the impact of a diverse number of governmental policies, many of them sustained in legislative deliberations, which have an influence on central aspects concerning the ecological preservation of the planet (LENZI, 2009; ALLEGRETTI; BARCA; CENTEMERI, 2013; GUGLIANO; LUIZ, 2019; POVITKINA, 2018).

Frank Fischer's "Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect" falls into this line of debate, which considers the problems of democratic regimes in the face of the climate crisis and also the possibility of strategies which can strengthen the involvement of members of the public in the search for solutions to the question.

The book discusses four aspects: the failure in the capacity of democracies to deal with the climate crisis; the problems of the alternatives which up until now have been presented to manage this crisis; the limits and possibilities of the development of participative environmental governance based upon local experience; and, finally, the book analyses experiences which the author considers more effective in terms of combatting the environmental crisis, proposals based on sustainable agriculture, the production of renewable energy and incentive for an eco-community life on a local level.

The proposed focus is fruitful because nowadays evidences that the principal western democracies have the capacity of dealing with the climate crisis and its effects are rare. Successive failures of climate and environmental world conference agreements, giving rise to the emergence of a populist neo-conservative leadership in prominent western democracies, sometimes incredulous, as with, for example, President Donald Trump or President Jair Bolsonaro, in relation to global warming, have had far reaching effects on the many hard won environmental advances over the last few years, threatening not just the sustainability of the planet but also the quality of democracy itself. (LEVITSKY; ZIBLAT, 2018; RUNCIMAN, 2018; BROWN, 2006).

The book criticises politicians but also reproaches ecologists. It raises the alert concerning the diffusion of authoritarian rhetoric in the international environmental movement, a phenomenon which has stimulated the militarization and securitization of environmental questions. A universe in which the scientific and military elite have the tendency of assuming the reins in the political game, indicating authoritarianism as the only form of managing the ecological crisis.

The growth of sectors within the environmental movement which flirt with antidemocratic theses is one of the leading themes of Fischer's book. With the worsening of climatic problems comes the resurgence of eco-authoritarianism, a perspective based on the idea that only an authoritarian government would be capable of reverting the growth of the environmental crisis (OPHULS, 1977). This point of view is fed by the work of a group of authors who denounce the collapse of the earth's natural resources,

especially in relation to the unbridled population growth in the poorest countries, and which embodies the well known concept of overcoming the “earth’s carrying capacity”. (DAYLI; EHRLICH, 1996; DRUMOND, 2006).

Within this context, survivalism is one of the main expressions of the precept of eco-centred development. Supported by authors such as Garret Hardin (1968) and James Lovelock (2006), the proposal has the tendency of prioritising the survival of the human race and the conservation of nature, even if in detriment of human rights. It assumes that the intensification of social environmental conflict demands strong governments firmly affixed to politically robust leaderships, specialised scientists and, whenever necessary, military support.

Among the more radical environmentalists, Fischer identifies this “loss of patience with democracy” (op. cit., p. 54). For these groups, the democracies are incapable of putting into operation the necessary measures for combatting the environmental crisis, considering their potential for generating discontent in the constituencies. Because of this, in the place of preserving democratic liberties, it becomes better to form new governments with scientific clarity and strategy of the same magnitude of the problems to be faced.

In airing the restriction of political liberty, eco-authoritarianism strengthens the transfer of sovereignty of the public community to the elite, especially the economic elite, thereby increasing the effects of the climate crisis on the majority of the population. When environmental policies are restricted to a technical and market dimension, based on cost/benefit/risk dimensions, it results in the creation of an illusion within a false harmony between environmental protection and the hegemony of an unbridled model of economic development, fed by the infinite invention of new consumer needs.

The absence of recognition of antagonism between an ungoverned capitalism and the preservation of the environment is the Achilles heel of not only eco-authoritarians but the entire group of environmental sectors which produce green production models, as in the report coordinated by Tim Altenburg and Claudia Assmann (2017), without the perception that these very models end up being absorbed into the mother-system of economy, which is more and more directed towards the concentration of wealth (PIKETTY, 2014)

Contrary to this, within this framework, a number of authors defend the necessity of increasing rather than reducing democracy in the environmental debate. On an equal footing, they advocate for changes in the economic production system. In this direction they point to a proposal for the inclusion of deliberative mechanisms capable of empowering the public in discussions concerning this question (BÄCKSTRAND et. al., 2010), similarly, regarding the consensus meetings and public juries established for widening the political participation of the communities on a national level. This is one solution which does not reduce at all the institutionalised disbelief described in Frank Fischer’s work, in relation to the fact that the author considers that, even with the incorporation of decision making bodies, western governments continue to be incapable of forming adequate policies for dealing with large scale environmental problems, as will be the case with the consequences of excessive carbon emissions being released into the atmosphere

by great industries

Questioning the viability of making the state “green”, as an alternative, the author presents the creation of local sustainable development units which could have the capacity of transforming the way of life of the communities with the substitution of environmental projects of the top-down variety, captained by the state, by bottom-up experiences, engendered in the actual social groups, running conversely to the instrumental interests and the asymmetrical power relations which permeate the market structures and the state organizations.

The examples of this new praxis are abundant. Fischer highlights the movements of forest communities in Nepal and the ecovillages spread over various countries as experiences which are reinforcing an ecological transition, thereby strengthening democratic practices. Such environmental protection action and sustainable management of the forests is part of the day-to-day practices of the majority of the indigenous communities of the amazon region. In Brazil from 2009 until recently, territorial and environmental management plans were being implemented in indigenous lands with direct participation of the communities. Until very recently in Bolivia and Ecuador, various endogenous environmental development projects were carried out based on the “buen vivir” (“good living”) principle.

Notwithstanding, although recognising the merits of these experiences, a key question remains regarding at which point these local models can serve as a parameter to guide democratic practice in relation to the climate and environmental crisis. Weighing up the book, Frank Fischer’s efforts are unquestionable regarding his vision of widening the debate in relation to the social-environmental theme and its relationship with democracy. The author, therefore, does not refrain from careful revision and critical analysis of the various positions which characterise the international debate, thereby making this book a reference for more in-depth exploration of this theme.

Fischer presents in great detail the proposal of democratic solutions, aiming to anticipate a predictable authoritarianism which could occur and which may bring about a worsening of the climate crisis. However, despite revindicating a pragmatic position based on an accumulation of local experiences, it is possible to identify some weaknesses in his argument.

Initial criticism concerns the difficulty of correcting global problems through a sum of local solutions because there is evidence that the ecological problems go beyond the space and time in which they are formed. Therefore, in the absence of institutional arrangements on a regional scale, both national and international, which are able to efficiently regulate the agents, it will be difficult to slow down the aggravation of the problems. Even working on a local level and thinking globally does not appear to be sufficient for solving the problems.

The diffusion of sceptical ideas in relation to economic growth is a further point for debate in the book. As a discourse it functions well, but effectively, zero or negative growth rates have given rise to disastrous crises for the democratic institutions; see, for example, the situations in Greece, Venezuela and Brazil over the last decade. On the

other hand, studies suggest that growth of income is a fundamental variable for obtaining better environmental policies as well as realizing energy transitions (SCRUGGS 1999; CADORET; PADOVANO 2016; SEQUEIRA; SANTOS, 2018). Preservation of the environment demands availability of the appropriate resources. Similarly, the development of new productive sectors attuned to sustainability also culminate in the creation of a new type of economic dimension (ALTENBURG; ASSMANN, 2017; RODRIK, 2014).

Fischer gives the same limited attention to the problems of access to information on the climate crisis, a subject which is little explored in the book. For the most part, the book focusses on the discussion of climate change and the tendency for this subject to be centralised and to assume an authoritarian form, notably in the context of the neo-conservative political agenda. In the present day, the debate on the environmental crisis, as it is presented, could begin to be of less interest for various sectors of the population because it is not directly connected to everyday life for a very large sector of society. In other words, the question related to climatic changes does not make sense for a great many people who are concerned with basic questions related to employment and income, housing, food, health and education. While, from the perspective of this sector of the population, these considerations remain absent from the centre of debate on climate change, the subject will not be given its due importance.

To conclude, it is necessary to say that, in the face of the proportions of the climate crisis, Fischer's book is of indispensable reading. The author alerts us to the possible growth of an authoritarian bias in environmental policy and at the same time highlights the importance of alternative formulas to create democratic solutions for the question. An urgent discussion on an emerging theme.

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# ENTRE POLIS E PHISYS: A democracia como problema e como solução da crise climática

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*Resenha*

**Resumo:** O debate sobre mudanças climáticas atinge a política por meio de documentos técnicos que abrangem previsões e impactos sobre o ambiente, sociedade, economia e cultura. Nesse contexto, pesquisas e produções intelectuais sobre o tema tem se concentrado na elaboração de mecanismos voltados a evitar ou mitigar a crise global que se aproxima. Nesta resenha, distanciando-se um pouco dessas perspectivas, apresentamos a obra de Frank Fischer que, ao assumir a inevitabilidade da crise, parte para o debate político sobre o “lugar da democracia” em um contexto de desastre global estabelecido. Serão apontadas suas principais bases, abordagens e reflexões críticas a tendências autoritárias que emergem como caminhos para fazer frente à crise. A partir disso, o autor aborda estruturas e mecanismos de resistência democrática, trazendo à discussão perspectivas eco-localistas e seus modelos. Ademais, analisamos as potencialidades e algumas fragilidades dos argumentos de Fischer, que passa a se constituir como uma referência fundamental ao tema.

**Palavras-chave:** Mudanças climáticas, democracia, autoritarismo, eco-localismo

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# ENTRE POLIS Y PHISYS: La democracia como problema y como solución a la crisis climática.

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*Resenha*

**Resumen:** El debate sobre el cambio climático impacta en la política a través de documentos técnicos que incluyen pronósticos e impactos sobre el medio ambiente, la sociedad, la economía y la cultura. En este contexto, la investigación y la producción intelectual sobre el tema se han centrado en la elaboración de mecanismos destinados a evitar o atenuar la crisis mundial que se aproxima. En esta recensión, alejándonos un poco de estas perspectivas, presentamos el trabajo de Frank Fischer, quien, asumiendo la inevitabilidad de la crisis, trata de debatir el papel de la democracia en el contexto de inminente desastre global. Se señalarán los principales argumentos del autor sobre las tendencias autoritarias que surgen como alternativas para enfrentar la crisis, así como las estructuras y mecanismos de resistencia democrática, introduciendo la discusión desde las perspectivas del eco-localismo y sus modelos. Además, aquí tratamos de analizar las potencialidades así como algunas debilidades de los argumentos de Fischer, un autor que hoy es una referencia fundamental para aquellos que estudian la temática.

**Palabras-clave:** Manglares; Fitosociología; Industria del petróleo; Vulnerabilidad socioambiental; Interdisciplinariedad.

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