

# Towards a Democracy of All Beings

by Nathan Kleban



**D**emocracy is what everyone wants, we all say. Democracy is all the nice things. We profess our desire for more democratic institutions at home. We want to share democracy so much that we'll use violence, occupation, and drone strikes to deliver it.

What is democracy, at least for “individual humans” together? Fuzzy definitions of democracy confuse conversations around it. I speak of democracy in a general sense: a governance or organizational structure operating in the interests of those who participate in it. Democracy shows the flow of power, who has a say (and who doesn't), and so who matters (and who

doesn't). At its best, it's the idea that people should have power over their own lives and a say in decision-making to the extent that it impacts them. At its root, it's the belief in people's value as individuals and collectives. The decisions of governments or any organization should reflect their constituents' interests. Democracy is the rule of the people, people power—or is it?

Time's unfolding is not determined by the actions of a few kings, generals, philosophers, presidents, and billionaires, but by the collective interacting mass of beings, human and other-than-human.

The outer-space-bound billionaire cannot act alone. They co-arise alongside other people, ecosystems, infrastructures, belief systems, and more-than-humans. Bacteria—other-than-human cells—composes more of the billionaire's body than human cells do. Most of the necessary parts of being human aren't human. Water, elements, composites flow across the billionaire's skin—and are their skin. To speak of the billionaire as an individual doesn't tell the whole story of human mutual entanglement. Democracy as a decision-making process between "autonomous" human beings becomes less certain.

Consider the garden. We approach our gardens with authoritarian control. *Keep the lines straight! Rip up plants!* ("Weeds.") *Kill the insects!* ("Pests.") *We must keep the harvest safe!* In the end, if we're lucky, we harvest our desired fruit.

But even when we try to assert control, life expresses itself with a wisdom that we have yet to come to grips with, a deeper and wider wisdom that serves a greater variety of lives than we know.

Even if we leave the land alone, we are still not separate from the land or its expression. Our actions and inactions are both enfolded within the land as moments in its continuous unfolding. The land has power, a say in how it is impacted. How power operates on this terrain seems further from authoritarianism and like something closer to democracy, with or without us.

Power, decision-making, and democracies often center humans: human desires, human directions, human power over other beings. Others are objects or workers we use to achieve our ends. We center human agency above the agency of other beings: humans plant the rows of crops, and what goes on at the edges of the field? Weeds, pests, *invaders* are agents of harm. What if these beings were treated as having lives and agencies and agendas of their own?

# Who Has a Say?



Democracy, however we may define it, is [far from the place that we inhabit](#). Community decisions aren't usually shaped by the humans in those communities. Humans with the most capital—*money*—are the main decision-makers. Farmers' livelihoods, for example, are at the mercy of volatile global markets driven by trade wars and government subsidies, both informed by "public" policy in service to capital—and capitalists. This same volatility impacts the livelihood of land and the other-than-human communities the farmers inhabit, but democracy isn't often meant to apply to the more-than-human.

More-than-humans have their own ways of communicating their desires, but their voices are rarely factored into decisions that affect them. Discerning how much of a say those affected should have and how decision-making processes play out is not simple or clear.

Those with the most power tend to have the most say. Which place someone occupies in a hierarchy, family, or group affiliation; access to wealth and institutional power; expertise and

training; and how someone speaks—all this serves as other determinants of power. A distribution of power or say in a process is harmful or even exploitative when it is disproportionate to their involvement and how they are impacted. The values of those in power are embedded in decision-making processes. Capital is a foundational value—and not by random circumstance.

Let's use building a housing complex as an example of who is involved and who has a say. At first glance, those most affected include the construction workers, future residents, and those otherwise affected by this change, like neighbors. But those who live where the timber and building materials come from or are involved in the extraction, processing, and transportation of these materials are also affected by the housing complex. We use semi-regulated capital markets to negotiate these events, distributing decision-making power and rewards in ways without ideal outcomes.

Efficiency—utilizing time, energy, and “resources” with as little waste as possible—is also an important value, at least on the surface. But efficiency requires re-imagination in a world where production often serves unnecessary consumption and wastes are often dumped into rivers and landfills and not taken into account. On a simple and focused level, people driving around in privately owned cars as individuals has an efficient appeal, but on a systemic level that includes ecological realities this is a wasteful process (as well as ramifications like the “hegemony of the car” has on private and public spaces, community formation and disintegration, and on landscapes).

If the government is most represented by moneyed interests, then it is owned by moneyed interests. Valuing the say of those with money is the organizing principle (hence capitalism). Accountability towards the devastated landscapes and other-than-human communities affected doesn't occur in meaningful ways. Sometimes, stories about justice and equality often obscure underlying material forces and decisions that appear more democratic than they actually are.

The nationalization of organizations, or shifting private assets to “public” ownership, is one example of this. In the United States, prominent examples include nationalizing railroad systems leading to the formation of Amtrak, the airport security industry after 9/11, and General Motors in 2009. While they are then “publicly” owned, the word “public” leads to a distorted sense of what is going on. While circumstances vary, in [General Motor's case](#) those

who benefited the most materially from this shift of private to public were those with private ownership interests (specific private interests, since even the common stockholders lost out), not the workers who lost jobs and wages, nor the general public who ultimately [sold GM shares back at a loss](#).

If we want organizations to benefit the wider public, rather than nationalizing organizations into the centralized power structures of the nation-state (the “few over the many”) we should democratize them by putting decision-making into the hands of those affected, not only the workers but also the consumers, everyone up and downstream—including the streams themselves.



# Who Has a Voice? Who Has Agency?

We as human societies are coming more and more (back) into the recognition that those other-than-humans *matter*. They matter because they are the food that we eat, the water we drink, the air that we breathe, the homes that we live in, the ground that we stand on. Their sounds are music to our ears. We are in awe as they move across our eyes. Our skin opens against their smooth furs.

Do more-than-humans matter beyond how they relate to humans? I want to say they do, I want to point to those that are beautiful, those that have so much self-worth, bring so much value to their ecologies. But here I cannot escape being human: using human concepts, human thoughts, human words. I could speculate that if humans had never entered the scene, other-than-humans would matter. But at the same time, if humans hadn't entered the scene (a scene we did not enter alone), the forests and grasslands, chipmunks and sparrows, ladybugs and toads, the life that co-inhabits these landscapes wouldn't be here as they are now, either.

Any kind of mattering—both in being meaningful and in having material being—of more-than-human, or even humans, is so entangled with one another that I'm not sure they can be untangled and separated. All that we have accomplished, they—what we call our “resources”—have been a part of and have accomplished as well. This is not to say that they made any such choices to do these things, as enslaved people can't be said to have consented to their work, but, at the same time, they are the ones to have done the work.

Let's go back to the farmer's field. What choices do the confluence of beings—the frogs, blackberries, grasshoppers, and honeysuckle—living on the edge of the plowed field have? Do they have a say about what goes on in the field? Even these questions come from a place of human-centered agency as plants aren't often seen in popular culture as “speaking” or making choices. We live, communicate, and play on human terms. We don't often ask about the terms plants, animals, or bacteria abide. We see the impact of beings living on the edge of the field, the scattering seeds, insects exploring crop rows, and pollinators pollinating, but we conceptualize our intentionality and agency as something different from theirs.

Even among ourselves as humans, we're not quite sure what's going on when we talk about human choice-making and how much we are in the driver's seat. The premise of marketing is that we do not have such complete self-control. The existence of smartphones and an "economics of attention" shows that we do not have such complete control. That one's neighborhood and class are decisive in possibilities of future financial success shows that we do not have such complete control.

"When material conditions preclude 99 percent of your options, it is not meaningful to call the remaining 1 percent—what you are doing—your choice."

[-Catherine MacKinnon](#)



We are more like those beings on the edge of the field than we imagine. While we do not have as much control over our lives as we think we do, we are not 'lessened' to something like plants as if judged on some hierarchy of beings. Our conceptions of the other are inadequate in how they shape of our realities. We are all enmeshed in a something in-between when it comes to

choice-making and agency. This is not to say that particular beings don't hold particular powers. *We are both in control and out of control.*

In economic discussions with socialists, one will hear of the "value extracted from the worker" because of the exploitative class relationship between workers and capitalists who "own" the means of production. One might also hear from a feminist awareness how what is traditionally seen as women's labor (housework, cooking, cleaning, and the reproduction of the working class itself) fuels the economy, yet those who perform this work are uncompensated or grossly under-compensated.

We can go further and examine the role of the more-than-human in our society. As Masanobu Fukuoka wrote, farmers do not produce food themselves, but merely assist nature in doing so. Humans did not create the Earth, soil, trees, animals, nor water. As commodity exchange masks exploitative social relations, humans take from our shared planet, accounting for the costs of extraction as they exact their rewards while neglecting the benefits of creation or the costs of the wastes.

One option might be to compensate those who deserve it. In mainstream economic terms, "positive externalities of production" (creation) and "negative externalities of consumption" (waste), are a framework we can use to price labor into the system. We can pay women equal wages, compensate people who perform housework, child rearing, and those who go through pregnancy. We could commoditize every being: from the animal to soil to rock to air to element. Then with all this information, the market can help us to make the "right" decisions.

While there are circumstances where this approach can be useful, measuring all existence into a gross domestic product fails to account for everything. Human-created numbers cannot map to reality in a way that can guide us well. Numbers numb. We need "more-than-numbers" to guide us in this reality where our understanding will always be exceeded, that we cannot translate to words, much less numbers.

This is a conversation between those of the past, present, and future. We hear advice and admonition from ancestors in one ear and aspirations and fears from our progeny in the other. And it is not a conversation where each one says, "I vote for this" and that's it until the next vote. It's also not like a consensus process where we sit together until we are all agreed, of the same mind. It is a more intimate exchange.



The way forward will not center human experience, perception, and stories. If we continue to center and focus on ourselves, we will continue on our current trajectory of ecological destruction and ecocide. We'll find ourselves, if we survive, in what Charles Eisenstein called a "concrete world" of pavement and human-centered environments and stories, endlessly staring back at ourselves, alone. Of course, concrete, digital screens, and humans compose a new kind of entangled ecosystem.

I fantasize about a different path. Reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer led me to reflect upon what it means to enter into a more reciprocal relationship with the world around me, more so than leaving it alone. How can I show up in ways that help, that contribute to a mutual flourishing and equity with all beings? At the same time, how do we live in a way that is respectful and acknowledges each of our places in this web of life, of living and dying, of eating and being eaten?

"The earth is an organically interwoven community of plants, animals, and microorganisms. When seen through man's eyes, it appears either as a model of the strong consuming the weak or of coexistence and mutual benefit. Yet there are food chains and cycles of matter; there is endless transformation without birth and death."

-Masanobu Fukuoka

## Stillness and Movement

If life is a web, what do we do when a thread unexpectedly breaks in a strong wind? When a fly gets caught in the web and the spider moves to consume its meal? When a new thread is laid? When the spider, which calls this web its home, ages, and dies? Is it our role to attempt to maintain Earth—the relational threads in the web of life—exactly as it is for as long as we can? Or should some other goal or value guide us?

I don't believe that our role is to maintain this web exactly as we find it into perpetuity, nor would we be able to. Change will continue to be the rule. The Earth is not a botanical garden in a greenhouse nor should it be tended to as a museum. Changes can be guided by our particular

values, which shift over time. We see out of our own eyes, the eyes of our ancestors and our progeny, and we act out of that ever changing seeing, which is a with-nessing rather than a witnessing.

We are continuously co-evolving with our wider web of life. For example, humans have been using fire for controlled burns for tens of thousands of years; our environment has changed drastically because of this. Our wider relations—from the landscapes we inhabit to the dogs that walk by our sides—have co-evolved in turn. When a fire sweeps through a forest—whether human intended or not—numerous beings are harmed, but many will also benefit. How did people decide to begin using fire? Was it by noticing fires from lightning strikes and seeing what happened? What was lost when the intentional use of fire became more widespread? How much do the harmed beings matter?



The environment evolved in response to these human actions; we now have an environment whose stability depends on the use of fire, whether it's a matter of remaining or returning to particular stages of ecological succession, or supporting those who can only co-exist because of fire. The regime of actively preventing fires is predicated on the maintenance of a web of

relationships independent of fire, a regime which leads to massive wildfires later on. Fire cannot be truly disentangled from the web. Fire and humans and forests have co-evolved together. This web of relationships calls for the active participation of humans and fire to maintain.

If we accept controlled burns, how different is the burning of coal or oil? Is oil the new fire? Whether it is the use of fire, the development of language, the advent of agriculture, or fast forward to coal and oil in recent centuries, the ruptures of the internet, or watching ourselves across digital screens, there have been many times of enormous change in how humans have been in relationship with our planet and the more-than-human.

We are dependent on place, and place is dependent on us. Beaver-built dams complement and vitalize ecosystem in innumerable ways, deepen the web of relations, heighten the productivity of the system. Beaver-being can inform our own human-being. Human dams and solar panels and wind turbines are only built for human power consumption. We don't yet approach the expansiveness of the beaver in our thinking.

With humanity's destructive impact on Earth, some people feel a lot of negativity about their fellow humans. In these conversations, it's easy to impose narratives of blame. "Humans are a disease whose core essence is rotten." Do we, like a virus or a cancer, enter bodies, whether they be cellular, organism, or planetary, and turn its mechanisms towards our own reproduction to the detriment of that body? Are we parasites feeding on our host planet, sucking it dry until there is no sustenance left?

The ways of being in relationship exist in larger functioning interdependencies of life. Humans are not the first species to terraform, to radically change the landscape of Earth. We follow a long line of terraforming ancestors. Theia crashing into Earth. Glaciers carving out valleys. Bacteria transforming atmospheres. Lichen chewing away rocks. Mycelial networks mapping the ground. Air facilitating multi-species relational work. Insect swarms devouring fields. Forests migrating. Humanity isn't the first nor will be the last to play the role of "invasive species."

We are not terraformers alone, but play many other roles within our web of relations. To say a species is "invasive" is a small slice of reality. We are an invasive species, and we are also a refugee species, a migrant species, a hibernating species. We are the seed eaten by the bird and pooped out miles away. We are mussels making sanctuary on a ship's hull only to find themselves transported to another land. We are squirrels hoarding acorns, bears taking a long rest. We are parasites, invasive species, friends, neighbors, family, something of all of this,

continually shifting. We are collaborators with all beings, in all their complexity, from the friend who works with you towards a common goal to the enemy who works towards your demise.

In all this, we judge where one went astray—became “invasive”—as a means to make sense of these changes. To stray connotes a path to stray from. Democracy is such a path. While democracy is valuable, it isn’t totalizing. Democracy is not one central idea that can be applied to everything (if anything can). It is human-centered in a more-than-human universe. What is the guiding principal so we can determine what are helpful and unhelpful actions? More versus relatively less harm? More versus less biodiversity? Compassion, love, integrity, resilience? What is our value here? How do we know how to move or how to be still?

*“The question ‘by what vision or plan will society be organized after capitalism?’ is a covertly dogmatic operation that is really asking: ‘What visions and plans are going to be repressed in this new society?’”*

[[Distri Josep Gardenyes](#), group]

Creation doesn’t occur in a vacuum. Creation requires movement and entails destruction. Distri Josep Gardenyes also holds “revolt as the rebirth of society...as the chaotic condition of a healthy society, a permanently creative and regenerative cycle without restrictions, like springtime and its explosion of new initiatives and projects born from the corpses of old achievements.” Bundles of values are guides which are often in tension with one another. Resilience and impermanence, simplicity and complexity, eating and being eaten, death and rebirth.

## Human Nature

In the science fiction book *The Sparrow* by Maria Doria Russell, a species of carnivores rules at the top and dominates a species of herbivores. Both are sentient. The carnivores have strict protocols to ensure that they keep their population low relative to the herbivores who they consume. Is that what we are, apex predators atop the food chain? Humans are on top of not just the food chain, but the being chain, as we consume or look to consume everything. We

even dream of capturing all the light from stars with Dyson spheres. There's a tension between wanting something different—something better—and acknowledging this reality.

Shall I relax into this role as apex predator? What choices exist? For the rabbit and the fox, a story I tell myself is that they both accept, or live, their seemingly locked roles, their dialogue. Am I just not accepting my own role, not just between species but the hierarchies of roles among humans as well? Am I just a whiny lefty white social justice warrior guy who can't accept things as they are (I ask this, half-jokingly)? If I'm just an apex predator, why am I having these thoughts and experiences? We can choose to eat animals, choose to burn forests, choose to harness life to our bidding, to exploit other humans, to burn fuel and poison water. Something tells me these are not all the same actions. I am looking for what speaks to that.

Domination, or power asymmetry, will always be a part of our relationship with the world, with other life. We as humans will continue to make choices for others among us, for those who come after us, however attractive the principles of democracy-for-all-beings might be. In the same way, others will continue to impact us, such as a virus inhabiting our bodies. It's hard not to be skeptical or cynical about a human asking a tree's permission to cut it down, as if we'd listen to or understand a refusal. Democratic decision-making doesn't fit neatly in the forest.

## More-Than-Democracy, or Scavenging in the Ruins of Democracy

Change is inescapable. Democracy speaks to how we matter to one another and what the practice of mattering to one another looks like. Especially when we're faced with uncertain futures, the word 'crisis' is often used to describe the multiplicity of turning points that we have in front of us now. With democracy in mind, facing crises in the past, [a tendency is to reduce democracy](#). As Bayo Akomolafe writes, "perhaps how we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis." Perhaps we could go the other direction and have more democracy, [emergency democracy](#), to better listen to the complexity of our times to inform the choices we make together.

A confluence of voices speak for their futures and presents and pasts: trees, rivers, ecological communities, viruses, and humans: parents, children, teachers, bankers, workers, politicians, terrorists and freedom fighters, conservatives and social justice warriors, ancestors and offspring. We each thread these voices and struggles together in different ways towards diverse outcomes.

Just as the future was dim to those first setting fires to forests, it is for us now. We are co-evolving with others now and our actions are our responsibility to this process.

I want to fantasize we can eventually live the life we want to live. Life won't feel so messy. We will exist without any sort of tension between how we live and our ideals. But tension will always be with us, which isn't an excuse to stray far from where we want to be. Life is too complex for anyone ever to get what they want, this 'wanting' being wrapped up in a reality beyond our knowing.

Across human cultures we have needed to learn each others' languages to enter more deeply into relationship with one another. With changes in technology, both the ease with which we can communicate and the impacts we have upon one another have increased. So it is the same with the other-than-human. More yet is unknown as we tread the path of further relational technologies.

When I rant and rave against capitalism, I am questioned on what the alternative might be (cue the refrain around our inability to imagine what might come after capitalism, however much we have a powerful imagination in preparing for a zombie apocalypse). I can't lay out a detailed plan. Capitalism itself did not arise neatly packaged out of a committee meeting or from an individual human's mind, but was Earthed or Universed into existence. All I can share is that we discern this together, *all of us*.

People are seen as the primary movers of these movements of history in a top-down dynamic: the writers, musicians, generals, politicians. It is less accurate to say they are on top than it is to point to those doing the holding up. Whether it is the next economic or political system, the next best-selling book or the melody to the next hit song, these are all much wider collaborations than can be attributed to a small group of originators. It is the ongoing engagement with one another that matters, especially the engagement that we as humans have faltered in our responsibility towards: our engagement with the more-than or other-than human.

All beings need to have a seat at the table. Yet writing “all beings” or a democracy of “citizens” points towards atomized individuals, as if we are separate from one another. A “democracy of all beings” plays with the tension of the group and the individual, of violence and nonviolence, the embrace of subject and object. The egalitarian individualism of democracy is not suitable because autonomous, separate beings do not exist.

The democracy that began this essay is different than the more-than-democracy we might find in the ruins of our projects and fantasies. It will be something different. This isn't to ignore the real suffering that humans experience around the world or distract from the struggle against capitalism. Democracy-of-all-beings is an integral part of the wider struggle of challenging relations of domination. Part of the work to be done is the movement towards one another, especially for those who are alienated from place. The “one another” are the beings—human and more-than-human—inhabiting the land and waterscapes and airscapes we are enmeshed in and with, our more-than-human relatives.

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