

Rethinking Democratic Pluralism for a Warming Planet

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Abstract: The question of social and political pluralism takes on a new dimension in a planet that is increasingly affected by climate change. If an ecological transition towards a decarbonized society must be achieved, then there is reason to ask whether private choices that — once aggregated at a collective level — have public consequences can or should be curtailed. If climate change is to be mitigated, then, the political question of social pluralism comes to the fore. What behaviors and forms of life are permissible in a warming planet? Must pluralism be sacrificed or at least severely restricted in the name of survival? Or perhaps pluralism may be expected to flourish in post-growth societies that restrict their material output to achieve sustainability? In this paper, I argue that pluralism is an asset rather than a burden for governing democratic societies in the age of global warming. But pluralism will hardly be preserved in the kind of small communities advocated by degrowth theorists. On the contrary, a liberal-democratic approach to global sustainability is a better option for balancing individual autonomy and collective survival. Principles such as neutrality and autonomy are not to be abandoned, but rather refined in the face of climate change.
