

Democracy in Danger S2 E7: Growing Pains

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:11] Over the past year, we focused on politics and partisanship contested ideologies and the health of democracy around the world. In today's conversation, we would like to zoom out from our usual focus and instead turn our attention to an issue that's threatening our very species and life on this planet.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:31] Yes, we're going to go big today. Our concern usually is democracy and how it's functioning. But democracy can't survive if societies everywhere break down because of this catastrophic and out-of-control human driven changes to the climate that are occurring with every day that passes. At the same time, to deal with this global climate crisis that we're in, we're probably going to need people and governments to work together to focus on scientific solutions, to focus on human health and well-being. And that is going to require some form of democracy to work.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:09] Yeah, you know, we're still a world made up of individual nation states that are all competing against each other for resources, for opportunities, for power. Right. And that impedes any effort to think and act globally about a problem that, as you said, knows no borders. I mean, recently we learned that since the mid 1990s, some twenty eight trillion tons of Arctic ice has melted into the oceans. You know, this sort of crisis doesn't just reflect itself at the polls. It's driving people from arable land. It's creating massive human migration. It's creating suffering and dislocation. It's creating intense storms that destroy property, destroy lives, destroy opportunities and reshape politics around the world.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:57] Look, it does feel like sometimes we're facing a rising tide of gloomy news as well. And that can lead to despair. But we have got to have hope that democratic governments can tackle this crisis if they select the right policies and articulate the right vision. And we're really delighted to have with us today a scholar and a writer who's been trying to point a constructive path forward.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:18] Jason Hickel is on the line with us from the United Kingdom. Jason is an economic anthropologist, a senior lecturer at Goldsmiths College and a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics. He's also a frequent contributor to The Guardian and is the author most recently of Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World. Jason, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Jason Hickel [00:02:41] Hey, thanks for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:43] Well, Jason, you have written about growing up in southern Africa, in Swaziland in the 1980s, and how your childhood there shaped your view of ecology, of society, of the state of human life on our planet. Can you talk a bit about those early years and what role they played and what role they still play in your work, in your agenda and your thinking?

Jason Hickel [00:03:09] Yeah. So, yeah. So I spent most of my life in a small country in southern Africa called Swaziland. It's today called Eswatini. And it's been very influential, actually, that background in my contemporary thinking, mostly because when I moved to the United States for university, then I was confronted with sort of this dramatic reality of global inequality. Right. Like an extremely wealthy nation, like the US with glitzy highways and, you know, huge SUVs and cavernous shopping malls, compared to the largely rural kind of subsistence economy that I grew up in. Right. So that's one thing. In terms of in terms of ecology, one thing that is interesting about Swaziland or Eswatini is that it's characterized by extraordinary amounts of resource appropriation that is directed entirely, almost entirely for consumption in high income nations like the US, like the UK. Right. So in Eswatini that's primarily, you know, sugar like sugar cane and also textiles. So the majority of the country's working population is engaged in producing commodities that are that are designed for consumption on the global north markets. Which to me always struck me as rather strange, given the fact that why not mobilize domestic resources and labor around meeting domestic needs? And so understanding this relationship of extractivism from north to south has been central to the way that I think about the ecological crisis, which is being driven primarily by material demand in the north with impacts that primarily disproportionately register in the global south.

Will Hitchcock [00:04:39] But Jason, if I recall your writing, you talked about how your family was involved in delivering health care, running a clinic, participating in, you know, what is thought to be a kind of global work of benevolence, of kindness, of helping others who are in need. And indeed, there has been a long history of not simply extracting resources from the global south. But also of other kinds of people who are not involved in industry or or corporations, but people who have tried to provide a degree of comfort, a degree of care, a degree of connection and engagement. Is much of that work, in your view, still worth pursuing or does it tend to mask the larger project of extraction that you talked about? I mean, is that kind of a philanthropy of benevolence, of development work, is that kind of a waste? Does it even get in the way? Is it even part of the problem?

Jason Hickel [00:05:34] It's a good question. Yeah. So my parents worked with the Ministry of Health in Swaziland and yeah, I've got a lot of respect for what they were doing. At the same time there are definitely limits to the kind of, let's call it kind of charity approach to solving global problems that you've mentioned. For instance, we know that rich nations in the global north give a tremendous amount of aid or foreign aid to poor countries every year. You know, more than 100 billion dollars a year. That's an extraordinary amount of money. But what's interesting is that flows from north to south are dramatically outstripped by financial flows from south to north in the form of interest payments on longstanding external debt in the form of profit repatriation or tax evasion or other kinds of illicit financial flows, you know, perpetrated by multinational companies and so on. So in reality, when you trace the flow of money around the world, it becomes clear that poor countries are developing rich countries, not the other way around. The aid narrative that we so frequently repeat is actually belied by forms of extraction that lie behind it.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:34] Right. And, you know, you've rightly identified the global climate crisis as the largest threat our species faces today. And you do place a lot of the blame on high income nations like our own. Now, you know, what's interesting is, of course, most of the high income nations that are to blame for pouring carbon into our atmosphere are liberal democracies or something close to liberal democracies. And the worst polluters, with the exception of China, are by and large, not countries we would

identify with illiberal political regimes. So is this an accident of history or is there something deeper here? Why do we see this pattern?

Jason Hickel [00:07:18] Yeah, it's interesting. Well, I don't really think that it has much to do with the political system as such. It really has more to do with the economic system that has defined our world for the past 500 years - that being capitalism. Which, of course, is in its most advanced form in high-income nations. And so this is, of course, why we see high-income nations driving the majority of ecological breakdown, not only in terms of historical emissions, but also in terms of resource use, along with all the other impacts that it has on biodiversity, soil depletion, et cetera, et cetera. But that being said, what's interesting is that, you know, you refer to these countries as liberal democracies, and it's true, they are in name at least. But I think that there are real questions to be asked about the extent to which they function democratically in terms of resource governance. And I think that they don't. I'm not totally convinced that the USA represents democracy in any substantial ideal sense, given the fact that...

Will Hitchcock [00:08:15] Many of our guests have said the same thing.

Jason Hickel [00:08:17] Yeah. So it's kind of interesting observation here. That is, I think, quite important to the argument at stake, which is that when people are given direct democratic control over ecological resources, then they act in such a way as to sustain those resources indefinitely into the future for future generations. OK, even when that means sacrificing some immediate financial gain, right? Now that's interesting and so we might ask...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:08:44] That totally undermines the idea of the tragedy of the commons.

Jason Hickel [00:08:48] Exactly. Exactly. And Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize in economics, was crucial to pointing this out. And it's been demonstrated routinely in anthropology as well. Now, what's interesting is why is it then that the societies that we refer to as democracies don't seem to exhibit this kind of behavior? Why is it that they seem to, in fact, sabotage ecological resources for the sake of immediate financial gain, that being economic growth? And the reason is because we don't actually have democratic governance when it comes to these decisions. Because they're not real democracies. Our media are more or less under the control of monopoly power. And we have arrangements like Citizens United that enable elite preferences to be overwhelmingly, disproportionately represented when it comes to policy decisions. And so I think that really prevents us from having a real democratic conversation about what we might want to see in terms of ecological policy.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:45] You used the C word. We did an episode called the F Word, which was about fascism. But the C word in this case is capitalism. And capitalism is the great Satan in your account. And just remind us, you know, everything seems to come back to this fundamental system of exchange, of extraction, of production and of growth. Capitalism, it sounds like from your reading, is not just bad, not just bad for the planet, bad for human relationships, but it has it carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. But isn't it true, Jason, that people have been waiting for capitalism to destroy itself for well over a century and yet it continues, it carries on. It's as rapacious and as globalized as ever. Was capitalism going to just explode in a in a giant puff? Or is there some policy that we should be pursuing to try to restrain it?

Jason Hickel [00:10:36] So, first of all, I think it's important to clarify what we mean by capitalism, as a lot of people seem to misunderstand a few basic points there. When you say capitalism, people often assume that what we're talking about is markets and trade - you know, even businesses, even wage labor, things like that. In fact, these things do not are not I mean, of course, there are characteristics of capitalism, but they do not define capitalism in the sense that markets and trade, businesses, labor, all preexisted capitalism by thousands of years. And capitalism is an economy that's organized around and dependent on perpetual expansion. And it's the first such economic system in human history that is organized in this way. And this is what makes it a uniquely destructive economic arrangement. Virtually every government on the planet is focused almost single mindedly on increasing the GDP, on GDP growth, and it's basically a measure of national income. OK? Now what's important to understand is that we tend to take it as a measure of economic activity in general, but in fact, it only measures a small slice of economic activity, namely that which is organized around commodity production for money. So if you, I don't know, grow your own vegetables or take care of your aging parents or clean your own house, that doesn't contribute to GDP. But if you pay a company to do those things, that does contribute to GDP. So we're really measuring effectively the kind of commodity portion of the economy, not general provisioning for people's needs. And we just - all of us - just assume this is natural, this is good, this is desirable, this is important for human flourishing, whatever it might be. The consequence of this is that because there's a very tight coupling between GDP and resources and energy use, this leads to very rapid rates of ecological degradation, such as climate breakdown and other forms of ecological breakdown as well.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:12:28] Well, it's easy to see, perhaps obvious to see the connection between extractive capitalism and climate crisis. And we can see the connection between the sort of policy driven promotion and expansion of capitalism, undermining self-determination around the world through instruments that we've heard described as the Washington consensus. There's the specific aspects of globalization that we saw take root in the 1990s, for instance. But I'm left with a dilemma. Maybe you can help me sort it out. How can we address climate crises and inequality without democratic accountability preceding that? Right. And yet, how can we achieve and maintain democratic accountability with such yawning inequality both within nation states and among them? Like, isn't it a catch twenty-two? Where is there any hope in this?

Jason Hickel [00:13:30] Yeah, it's a good question. So I kind of cut to the chase here in terms of what needs to happen. So effectively, the only way to reverse ecological breakdown is to reduce aggregate resource use. What that effectively means is slowing down the economic production that's happening in high income nations. So it means abandoning growth as an objective and effectively slowing down aggregate production and consumption. Now, here's the thing. What we're effectively calling for when you talk about post growth or degrowth economics is simply this: to abandon the notion that all sectors of the economy must grow all the time, regardless of whether or not we actually need them. This is important because this is it's taken for granted in economics, but also by every policymaker that every sector of the economy should grow all the time. This is bizarre in the sense of it's irrelevant is quite often irrelevant to human needs. And it's also bizarre in the sense of it's ecologically destructive. So what we need to do is have an open democratic conversation about what sectors we actually want to grow or expand, like public health care, renewable energy, public transportation, things like that. And what sectors of the economy are too big and ecologically destructive and should be scaled down, such as, let's say, SUV production, McMansions, private jets, the practice of planned obsolescence, the arms industry, advertising, whatever it might be. There's clearly

large sectors of the economy under capitalism that are irrelevant to human need and could be scaled down without any negative consequences for human well-being whatsoever. And the reason we can say that is because take a look at a country like the USA. The USA's GDP per capita is one of the highest in the world. Sixty-five thousand dollars per person. And then compare that to Spain, let's say. Spain's GDP per capita is half of that. More. It's less than half of that. And yet Spain outperforms the USA on every measure of social well-being. Right. Their life expectancy is five years longer. I mean, get that. Education outcomes are better. Happiness indicators are better on every indicator that outperform the USA. What that indicates to me is that at least half of productive capacity in the USA is irrelevant to human welfare and even without it, people could live better, happier and more flourishing lives. That's a conversation we have to be having.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:52] I was interested in your book in which you cited some polling that suggests that, you know, in Britain and the United States, in a few other developed countries, people say, you know, hey, yeah, capitalism is unfair and we should change that and we should be better stewards of our of our natural resources. And the environment's more important than economic growth. You cited a number of separate polls suggesting that there was, you know, significant interest in improving environmental well-being and addressing the ecological crisis. But then I just wonder what to do with that information, because what I see with my eyes and what I read in the paper is that people in industrialized countries behave so irresponsibly with respect to the environment, to the ecology, are so reluctant to think about the greater good - appear to me to be so interested in simply widening their own slice of the pie. Am I wrong? Do I have human nature backwards? Is there actually a significant reservoir of goodwill towards the greater good that we might be able to tap into so that we could shape policy toward the climate crisis?

Jason Hickel [00:16:57] Yeah, yeah. This is interesting. So, yes, you're right. I mean, the polling is really remarkable on this. Like, you know, even in very conservative states in the USA, we see large majorities saying things like they would prioritize ecological protection over economic growth and even at the expense of economic growth. I mean, these are remarkable findings. They suggest that people are ready to break with core principles of capitalism, that being its dependance on growth. So one might ask, like, why then do we find that behavior maybe departs from such ideals?

Will Hitchcock [00:17:28] And electoral choices.

Jason Hickel [00:17:30] Yeah, electoral choices as well.

Will Hitchcock [00:17:31] Yeah.

Jason Hickel [00:17:32] Well, you know, one of the things is this, is that the idea of a post growth economy has never been on the ballot. You know, I've mentioned that that growthism is one of the most hegemonic ideologies in the world in the sense of both the left and the right agree on it. So they might bicker on how to distribute the yields of growth. But on the question of should the economy keep growing, they're utterly united. And that is the main objective they focus on. So there's no space in our conversation right now for this to happen. And I suspect that's one of the reasons why we're not seeing people's opinion polls reflected in policy, because it's not even on the...it's not even on the ballot.

Will Hitchcock [00:18:08] Yeah, I mean, the American way of life, quote unquote, is entirely imbued with the notion of prosperity, which is another way of saying "acquiring stuff" and growth and getting richer and prosperity and opportunity. That's another

keyword that's designed to invite you to imagine America as a constantly expanding economy in which everyone is constantly getting richer. But I just don't know how you square those very dear national myths with what you're calling for, which is essentially a sense of self awareness and indeed self-denial. Who do you pitch that idea to? I mean, I'm just asking you to help me put this into practical terms.

Jason Hickel [00:18:42] OK, yes. I want to address this in two parts. The first is to affirm what you just said about the national mythology of expansion. This is I mean, this is true, of course, in Europe, too, but I think not to the same extent that it's entrenched in the US kind of national narrative, as it were. I mean, think about, you know, the idea of Manifest Destiny, for example. Of course, once you reach the West Coast where you expand, well, you expand your material appropriation for the rest of the world. And we see that clearly in trade accounts where the US relies on a substantial net appropriation of resources from the global south, equivalent to about 50 percent of its total consumption. That's extraordinary. Right. So these kind of expansionary or colonial tendencies remain a very prominent feature of the US economy, and that's entrenched also in the national mythology, I think. Now, how do you pitch this to people? Well, I think the thing is this, right, is that you pitch it as a deal that works for ordinary people, for the working class in particular, in the sense of who does growth benefit right now. Right. The US has some of the highest poverty rates of the industrialized world. It's got extraordinary levels of inequality. Public services are widely privatized, which prices them out of reach for most ordinary people. I mean, if you want to send your kids to university, a decent university, you're looking at spending, you know, quarter to half a million dollars on that.

Will Hitchcock [00:19:59] Tell me about it.

Jason Hickel [00:20:01] That puts things that many countries consider to be a basic human right out of reach for the majority of people. Now, what's crucial is that we know that when it comes to human well-being and human happiness and flourishing lives and so on, what matters is equality of opportunity, an equitable distribution of income and access to robust universal public goods. Right. So how does Spain, for example, outperform the USA with so much less GDP? It's because they share it more fairly and everybody has access to the resources they need to live flourishing lives. And so the key to a post growth economy is that you expand access to public goods, which enables people to live flourishing lives without needing ever increasing levels of private income in order to do so.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:20:45] So recently we saw the deposition of Aung San Suu Kyi as the leader of the titular leader, at least of Myanmar, in a coup that reestablished the full dictatorship of the military in Myanmar. And Myanmar, formerly Burma is perhaps the best example, the most vivid example of a former colony under the boot heel of global resource extraction. It's been such a troubled country, such a poverty ridden country, such a drug gang-riven country, an anti-democratic country, an oppressive government. And yet it is so rich with minerals, with petroleum, with other natural resources. Right. When you look beyond Myanmar and you look to Venezuela or you look to Nigeria, you see the fragility of democracy, the shakiness of democracy everywhere. What is the connection between resource extraction or being a resource donor and the fragility of democracy?

Jason Hickel [00:21:55] Yeah, well, let's first kind of establish why global south countries feel they need to engage in extractivism. The reason is because they need foreign currency and the reason they need foreign currency, such as the US dollar, is because they have to pay off debts. So many of these countries have a long history of indebtedness in US dollars, largely as a consequence of the structural adjustment period. This dates

back to the early 1980s, the debt crisis. So effectively when you are in debt bondage, then you're compelled to look at everything for what you can sell it for money, basically. Right. So there's this deep incentive for countries to plunder their own resources, even on poor terms, for the sake of earning foreign currency. You know, honestly, I think that dealing with this legacy of over-indebtedness through fair mechanisms for default and cancellation is really essential to liberating global south countries from the need to engage in extractivist economic activity. In terms of the relationship between extractionism and democracy: yeah, I mean, virtually everywhere we see that economies that are dependent on resource extraction have a really difficult time with democracy. I mean, this is this is a classic resource curse that's been theorized to death. Now it's very well established. And so, yeah, you want to you want to avoid that at all costs. And so the question becomes, how do we shift to a situation where global south countries don't have to rely on extractivism in order to meet human needs.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:14] But of course, extractivism is where the quick money is and if you have endemic corruption, that's going to just perpetuate that system domestically as well, where you have even more resistance domestically.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:23] Yeah. Jason, let's try to end on a note of optimism, which is that there are solutions that are being discussed at the highest levels of government in the United States and elsewhere that are really trying to address the climate crisis. We don't know if they'll come to fruition or not, but there is a green new deal that's being debated in Washington and has gotten further than we ever would have expected, I think, over the course of the last few years. But if I'm right about this, the Green New Deal sounds pretty good. It's good for the environment, but it could also be good for jobs in the economy. It sort of doesn't necessarily threaten growth so much as it thinks about new technologies and greening of energy and so forth. Do you see the Green New Deal as a breakthrough or might it be a little bit more of the same?

Jason Hickel [00:24:05] So I'm a huge proponent of the Green New Deal, but the way that it has been manifested in US policy and also in EU policy is problematic. Basically, here's what's going on. For decades, the right have been saying, you know, we can't do climate action because it's going to threaten growth. And a green new deal is unthinkable because that's going to threaten growth. They're still saying this.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:25] Yes.

Jason Hickel [00:24:25] They're still saying that.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:25] Yeah, absolutely.

Jason Hickel [00:24:25] So the left comes back, and the left's only available retort is to say, don't worry, the green new deal is going to improve growth. Right. Because everything must be adjudicated in the USA and in EU, incidentally, by growth. You can only do it if it's good for growth, which is a ludicrous way to think about ecological policy and dealing with an ecological crisis. But anyways, here we are. Here's the problem. I think it's quite likely that a green new deal will, in fact, contribute to growth. I mean, why would it not? This is massive public stimulus, but if so, that would be a bad outcome. And here's why. Because the more you grow the economy, the more resources it requires and the more energy it requires. Because it requires more energy, it makes it more difficult for you to cover that energy demand with renewable alternatives. If you do achieve growth of the Green New Deal, you effectively shoot yourself in the foot. It makes it much more difficult

for you to win. And if the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports are anything to go by, it means you will fail. Because the only scenarios they have that actually succeed in rapid decarbonization do the opposite. They reduce energy demands by reducing aggregate production and consumption. That's the way that you solve the problem. The less energy you use, the easier it is to cover it with renewables in a very short period of time. So the second thing is this is that even if that wasn't a problem, the relationship between GDP growth and resource use remains a problem in the sense that maybe you solve the climate crisis. But what about deforestation, soil depletion, species extinction rates, overfishing, biogeochemical flows, et cetera, et cetera? All of the other planetary boundaries that are presently being overshoot remain a problem. And so this idea that we can focus on climate change to the exclusion of the broader ecological crisis is nonsensical. And this is why a more coherent approach to the Green New Deal would be a green new deal that abandons growth as an objective. Now, what about employment? Right. Spain has high levels of unemployment, et cetera, et cetera, or underemployment. The reason that nobody can talk about degrowth is precisely because of the question of jobs, right? In an economy where our livelihoods depend on wage labor, then any reduction in aggregate production is going to mean unemployment. And that's untenable, like socially untenable. It would cause a kind of collapse. And we see this every time there's a recession. So what's the answer to this? Well, the answer was proposed by John Maynard Keynes as early as the 1930s as you improve labor productivity then shorten the working week. Right. And so we leverage that idea to say as we scale down unnecessary production and consumption, again, SUVs, private jets, the arms industrial complex, etc, etc, then shorten the working week and share remaining necessary labor more fairly. So you take the yields in the form of leisure time and that can be accomplished without any loss to income for the working class by sharing existing national income more fairly, with a living wage policy, with a maximum income policy, progressive taxation, whatever it might be. This can be accomplished without any loss to the welfare consumption of ordinary people. And so that has to be, I think, on the table. And the Green New Deal, fortunately, does have policies like this, right, that are embedded within it. And I think that we should leverage that and build on it to say let's have a green new deal that targets human well-being and ecological stability, but abandons the idea that we have to pursue economic growth perpetually.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:42] It feels like democracy might not save the planet, but if we save the planet, then we will save democracy along the way.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:50] Or you can't save the planet without democracy.

Jason Hickel [00:27:52] Yes, I think that's right. I think that we need democracy in order to have a conversation about this. You know, what's interesting to me also is the fact that, like, you know, the core principle of democracy is that you should be able to question received wisdom. Right. This is the key enlightenment principle that lies behind our claims to democracy. But why is it that that is never allowed to apply to capitalism and specifically to the growth imperative? If you dare to criticize growth people look at you like you're crazy. You're not allowed to say it. And so I think that at minimum, we have to democratize our conversation about the economy, which right now is more or less totalitarian in its objectives, which is every sector must grow all the time. We can surely have a more rational, democratic conversation about that.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:32] Jason Hickel, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Jason Hickel [00:28:36] Yeah, thanks for having me.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:44] That was Jason Hickel, an anthropologist at Goldsmiths, University of London. He's the author of *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:54] *Democracy in Danger* is part of the Democracy Group podcast network visit democracygroup.org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:10] Will, Jason Hickel gives us a tremendous amount to think about, my head is spinning a bit. Jason's approach requires us to be able to imagine life in 50 years. And for a significant number of people on the planet, imagining life in five years is a luxury. It runs against the dominant sense of what makes government go and what makes the economy go, right? We are certainly hooked on this notion that economic growth is necessary and is the key to the good life in so many ways. And I think I think he's right in unwinding that. But I still don't quite get how so many billions of people who are worrying about survival are going to accept the notion that maybe they should have a different goal than growth. What if we had massive wealth distribution from north to south and all of those people living on the outskirts of Mumbai all of a sudden have a significant amount of cash that they did not have before? They're buying a lot of plastic the next day. So we actually might be spiking consumption with rapid wealth distribution. That's not to say we shouldn't do it. I actually think there's a really good case for engaging in massive wealth distribution, but I don't think we should pretend that it would unwind the attachment to consumption, which is still based on the collective behavior and desires of people, many of whom are desperate.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:54] I mean, let's just stipulate that for Jason, there's a whole package. You know, it's a it's a big package and it does require a major reconceptualization of our ideas of growth and of well-being globally. There is this optimistic and you might even call it utopian call to a global consciousness, a sense that people everywhere, if they buy into a world of slow growth or degrowth, can, in a sense, restore the commons. Invest in the public sphere so that the family of three that's hustling just to make ends meet on a fixed hourly wage actually has free goods available to it. Free education, more shared space, more free transportation, free public health so that the limited resources go further. And it sounds utopian. And, you know, it also sounds like it could work. But let's just let's just agree for the moment that the pragmatic politics required to get there are really, really hard and maybe impossible. All right. In that case, what if we agree that investing in green technology, investing in green growth, if you like, green energy, developing alternatives to fossil fuels and other kinds of polluting energy, that is going to be the road that we can build a coalition around. Is that going to be enough to make a difference? I think it can make a difference. It may not be the answer to the engine of crisis that Jason identifies, which is capitalism, but it might at least ameliorate the immense damage that we're doing to the planet today. And if so, that would be a victory for democracy, because it would it would mean that we had reasoned our way through a compromise position that allows some growth but also allows amelioration of the ecological crisis.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:32:38] I mean, I think there are a couple of steps before we get to championing democracy through that process. But I do think that reducing our dependence on extraction in general has many benefits. Right. So if we were to shift to many forms of renewable energy and away from our many forms of extractive energy just to put energy in one place, it doesn't even talk about plastics, doesn't talk about building roads, all of which are extractive and destructive. We would be shifting wealth in many

cases to the sunnier parts of the globe. But look, we may be facing trade offs. We may have to figure out the consumption problem 20 years from now once we've leveled off the melting of the ice caps.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:21] But as a point of departure, it's actually very insightful in this regard, which is the last time the world experienced a global crisis that was long enough and awful enough and vast enough to bring about really substantial structural change both to our politics as well as to our global economy was the Second World War. And 60 million people or more died all around the world. And it was clear that our way of life, we simply had to change. And the responses were imaginative. They were creative. They did create institutions of global governance. By and large, those institutions have been hollowed out. The global crisis that whatever it is, it has to be prominent enough in our lives, threatening enough to our livelihoods to make us change. And I'm not sure that global warming or the pandemic has yet had that trigger effect. But but maybe it's just because we're not looking hard enough.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:20] Well, that's all this time on Democracy in Danger, we'll have activist Srdja Popovic with us next week to talk about why some movements for democratic reform around the world succeed where so many others fail.

Srdja Popovic [00:34:34] So you want to help things in Burma? Take a look at the companies which are making their cheap apparel in Burma. Stop buying from this company and write an angry email. You engage them wherever you are.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:48] Please stay in touch with us. You can tell us how you think democracies might address climate change. Shoot us a tweet @dindpodcast. That's at DIND podcast. You can also catch up with all of our episodes and go deeper with all of our background reading by visiting our website. It's DinDanger.org.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:12] Subscribe to the show wherever you get your podcasts. And please take a minute to leave us some stars and to review.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:19] Democracy in Danger is produced by Roberto Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:27] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA is Deliberative Media Lab, we're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast Network of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:43] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.