# Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 1, Episode 9

**Can liberal democracy outlive climate change?**

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**SR**: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast that reflects on the crisis of representative democracy in these troubled times. I'm Shalini Randeria, the Director of the Albert Hirschman Center on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and Director of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. My guest today is Michael Ignatieff. Michael has had a long and distinguished academic career as a political philosopher.

And I would just like to mention his latest book, "The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World." But he has also been a member of Parliament in Canada, where he was the leader of the Liberal Party. And since 2016, he is the Director of the Central European University based in Budapest and now also in Vienna. Thank you very much, Michael, for joining me today.

**MI**: Great to be here.

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**SR**: Before the COVID-19 pandemic that we are currently facing broke out, climate change was on everyone's minds. People had different opinions on it, on how to fight it, specifically also on what our governments could or should do about it. Scientists have been urging us, at least since the mid-late '80s, to take urgent action on the matter, politicians the world over have been slow to react.

So what I would like to discuss is whether liberal democracy is up for the fight against climate change and whether progressive disillusionment with liberal democracy's helplessness on environmental issues can affect the political

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system itself. Mike, let me start with your recent essay, "Liberalism in the Anthropocene." You make a strong argument that liberalism's left-wing critics are mistaken, mistaken in assuming that it is unable to deal with the existential threats posed by the climate catastrophe as well as the COVID crisis.

We are beginning to see how massive deforestation, for example, leads to the rapid spread of infectious diseases, especially zoonotic ones like SARS, COVID, etc. So, let's start with a very basic question. How do you see the ways in which the ecological crisis and the current pandemic are interrelated?

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**MI**: I want to give everybody a government health warning before we proceed. What I am chiefly interested in is the impact of the idea of the Anthropocene on our ideas of liberal democracy. I am not a climate expert, and I'm not an expert on the question you just raised, which is the interaction between deforestation, for example, species depletion and pandemic.

But I do not think there's any question that there are linkages here, and we're vaguely aware that there's a complicated ecosphere, a balance of relationships between species that is been substantially disrupted by human behavior. And that gets me to my chief theme, which is the Anthropocene itself, which is, suddenly, the human species is the driver of natural and biological phenomenon.

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Instead of being part of nature, we are the chief drivers of natural processes everywhere and our management of that process has been terrible. We've done extremely serious damage to other species and to our own natural habitat. And that's a challenge to liberalism, because it's a challenge to liberalism's account of history. Liberalism is very tied to the idea that with science and knowledge, we master nature, we govern on the basis of science and knowledge.

We put nature to the rack, as Descartes says, and we use our mastery of nature to produce bounty for human beings. And liberalism is deeply tied to a narrative of progress connected to that idea. And suddenly, the Anthropocene is an epoch of world history in which suddenly, that relationship between humanity and nature becomes perverse and destructive, is very threatening to the optimism, the managerial optimism on which liberalism is based.

And that was my starting point for the piece. But there's no question, to come back to your original starting question, that we have to see the pandemic in the context of the assault on nature. And then the question becomes whether the assault on nature has reached the point that none of the liberal democratic nostrums, which is, use markets, use regulation, use confidence in science, those three, markets, regulation, and science, are those tools sufficient to reverse the damage we're doing to nature and the harm we're doing to ourselves?

**SR**: And you make a very strong argument in this essay that liberalism is not only able to provide plausible answers to the crisis, it has the tools to manage and master it, but that it is the only political set of values and institutions, which will be able to show a way forward. So, could you explain this optimism that you have?

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**MI**: Well, yeah, that's an absolutely accurate version of my narrative. But people listening to this podcast may say, you know, "What is that guy smoking? I mean, clearly, he's got a delusional attachment to liberalism." Look, the whole piece wants to be very self-questioning about liberalism. But I think probably the target of this piece is a certain kind of radical left-wing environmentalism that says capitalism is the problem.

I think market incentives, in fact, are crucial. If you wanna get carbon out of the atmosphere, you have to have a carbon tax. You have to have carbon pricing. And I would say, secondly, that since 1970, which is my starting date, it was the first Earth Day was in 1970 when I was a graduate student, if you go from 1970 to 2020, you see a transformation in the global energy system.

It's not complete, but it will be complete within 15 and 20 years, and that's the move from fossil fuel dependence to essentially renewables. And that's been market-driven and regulation-driven. The story that we can tell from 1970 to 2020 is not a story that liberal market and government regulation has failed, it's

a story about we haven't got there yet. The only other alternative on the table is China, is straight authoritarian, *dirigiste,* top-down.

And frankly, their record on environmental control is terrible. It's ghastly. And, in fact, the chief CO2 source of emission, growth and emission of CO2 in the world are Chinese coal-fired power plants. The only place in the world which has got us plateaued in terms of CO2 emissions has been Europe, Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, countries which... They're still putting out too much CO2, I don't wanna give anybody an alibi, but it's plateaued.

It's the only place in the world that has plateaued. Rich social welfare, market capitalist societies are the only people who've actually made any dent at all on CO2. And I'm strongly in favor of environmental activism to put more pressure on these governments. But that would be another point about liberalism. One of the reasons this has happened is not because capitalism is intrinsically wise or political leaders of a liberal variety are intrinsically wise.

No, it's because there's been consistent pressure from below. This is where democracy does its job. And that constant pressure over the last 50 years has been one of the key drivers of environmental change. But that's a vindication of liberal democracy, not a criticism of it.

**SR**: So the market is a bad master, but it's a good servant?

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**MI**: Yes.

**SR**: And the question is, what can we use markets for? Let me first come to the question of the politics of policy. I think you made a very interesting point, when you say, and I quote you, "The one big problem is, in fact, many smaller problems. And the art here is to disaggregate those problems and then prioritize."

And you say, "This liberal politics, as opposed to the progressive summons to the barricades, we might call the politics of policy." What are the kinds of steps do you think it could consist of, and you've been in politics yourself, so you know how difficult it can be to really push through some of those steps also against the interests of at least a part of your citizenry?

**MI**: Yeah, the politics of policy is basically saying, divide a big problem into as many little steps as you can. It's a defensive liberal gradualism. And it's opposed to the idea that there's a kind of fashionable eco-pessimism that I'm hostile to, which is to say, "Oh, recycling, forget about it. It's virtue signaling and doesn't have any consequences." Well, if we had serious recycling, that would make a difference.

We would be put less pressure on the environment. If we have serious recycling. It's a small step, yes, it is a display of virtue when we put our bottles and our plastic in different containers, but it's one of the tiny incremental steps. If you

add a lot of small incremental steps together, you get big effects. You have system effects from small behaviors, and liberalism turns on that instinct. That's why liberals like markets because you have a tiny change to a price signal, and it has a system-wide effect. People buy less of x as a result of a tiny change in price.

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Well, that's how you get social change. That's how you get economic change. But what is happening, I think, in radical environmentalism is a sense that all this incrementalism is just a waste of time because we're all gonna die, right? It's all gonna be over. We haven't gotten enough time to do anything that liberal gradualism can hope to accomplish.

And that mindset, it seems to me, gives the game away before you've even started. And so I think our problem about doing environmental policy is just this broader historical pessimism about gradualism that I just think is false. I think it's false in the sense that, as I said in my earlier example, if you look at what is happening to the automotive industry, for example, we didn't have any electric cars on the market, basically, 10 years ago.

In about 10 to 15 years, they'll be the only cars you can buy. Now, of course, it's not fast enough, but you get a tiny bit of historical perspective. And you see that an entire industry, on which, say, the German economy turns is about to make a huge change, the biggest change since the invention of the combustion engine in 1900. This is epical in its impact on the environment.

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And it's happened because of market signaling, and it's also happened because of activism, and it's also happened because of pressure. So that's the politics of policy at work. I am not saying to those skeptics listening to this podcast the pace we're running at is acceptable. It's not fast enough. There should be more pressure from below to get politicians to act more quickly, to get BMW to act more quickly, and Merc to act more quickly.

But to give up on this process itself and say we're done seems to me to be a kind of fashionable identity kind of politics that's a kind of virtue signaling of its own. That is, "I'm more radical than you. I have more concern for the environment than you because I'm saying it's all hopeless," right? That just seems to me a cul-de-sac. It gets you nowhere.

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**SR**: But there's another question you raised in the piece, and that is on the politics of scale. At what scale should we be aiming to change these things? And interestingly, and surprisingly, for me, in this piece, you are wedded to the nation-state scale, and you're quite skeptical of the international scale at which some of this change can happen.

**MI**: I could be wrong about this. I don't want to say these global climate summits are a waste of time. I think it's always important when the big geezers get around the table and all the environmental NGOs come and everybody shouts and screams and a little communique comes out. I don't wanna satirize it too much. I think anything that's multilateral is better than nothing, but I do think

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that it is just a fact of the modern world that political power is allocated to sovereign states.

Sovereign states have the capacity to change fuel emission standards, have the capacity to put recycling boxes on every street corner in the city of Vienna, and on and on. And so you want to do activism where the leavers are. And I think the leavers just tend to be in sovereign states, and also in municipalities, and also in regional governments. So you just work with those instruments. But if we can get something multilateral, fine.

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But we've wasted a tremendous amount of time, I think, over the last 30 years with rich countries lecturing poor countries at international forum saying, "Do as I say, not as I do." But, again, I think it's national movements in those developing countries that are gonna make the difference rather than external lectures. I mean, they need some foreign assistance, international assistance to make a carbon transition, and we can be smarter about that, but this kind of international multilateral dialogue between developed and developing countries hasn't really done very much.

**SR**: But Michael, sovereign states can also walk out of agreements. As we have seen under Trump, the U.S. government walked out of the Paris Agreement, which is the only agreement we've got so far on cutting carbon emissions to a level where global warming could at least, in the foreseeable future, be

mitigated. On the other hand, what I do see is in a country like India or China, I don't know how much bottom-up pressure there is.

So it may be good to keep the international treaty as one form, not only of exercising pressure through a legal measure, but also as a form of negotiation to see if some cost-sharing on the entire issue were not to be part of the deal, where I think Western liberal democracies have been extremely reticent to really take on the costs of the changes which are necessary by transferring funds.

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MI: Yeah, that sounds right. And I think you're making a particularly strong point about the weakness of environmental activism from the ground up in China and, more surprisingly, in India. Absent those two factors, and all you've got is external multilateral pressure. So that seems to me a good point.

SR: One should correct an impression here. I think, in India, there is a very, very strong movement on very many environmental issues, but the movement on climate change is not strong enough to get the government to act. But what would you say in response to activists who argue that unless there is a radical break with fossil fuel-based capitalist production now, all the measures we take are too little and too late?

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**MI**: It's a serious question and a good one, but it's a question that liberals have faced from radicals for two centuries. That is, there hasn't been a time in which a radical, a socialist, someone to the left of us in the spectrum hasn't said, "You're going too slow on social welfare, or on votes for women on hold." And often, in retrospect, the radicals were right.

I know some radicals who call themselves liberals in a hurry, you know, God bless them, urging everybody to move faster on climate change seems to me, rhetorically, an essential role for radical parties and just don't combine it with empty anti-capitalist rhetoric that deprives you of the instruments you need to get there. The other thing I really, actually, actively hate is the misanthropy in certain finds of radical environmentalism.

The rhetoric that says, "The human species is a parasite, the human species is a violently dangerous species on the planet." That neglects millennia of human care of the environment. We neglect that at our peril, that is, human beings have destroyed the environment, but are also caring for the environment. Some of the best defenders of nature are now human beings. And if you forget that, we might as well give up. Misanthropy is the death of hope.

My difficulty with radicals has always been the same difficulty, "Show me how to get there. I don't disagree with you about the timing, but show me how to get there." You know, and the strength of liberalism has always been its rather boring emphasis on process. "What leavers do we need to use to get where you

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radicals wanna go?" One of the reasons why the greens are stuck politically in most countries, although they're gaining in strength, they're stuck as people think, "These guys aren't telling us how to get there."

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I mean, to give you the flavor of it, I'll never forget a conversation I had in politics when I was a member of Parliament. I'm one of the politicians who ran on a carbon tax. This was more than 10 years ago. And I remember going to a suburban house, and a woman was loading her son into the back of a big SUV to take him to hockey practice on a Wednesday afternoon. And I said to her, "You know, we're here because we wanna get you to vote for a carbon tax."

And she rolled down her window and said, "Mr. Ignatieff, I have to get this kid to a hockey practice in 20 minutes. There's no public transport anywhere. I can't do anything about my carbon consumption unless I have alternatives, and you haven't gotten me a bus at the bottom of the street that my kid can take to the hockey practice." Now, that's the reality of climate change politics right there. You have to get to that woman because this is a democracy and give her a substitutional alternative to a high carbon SUV.

And if you don't, you're just yakking at her, and she's not gonna vote for you because you succeed in making her guilty. The fact about that suburban woman is she knows as well as anybody else that there's pollution. Her kid has asthma. There are all kinds of problems. She's not ignorant of the climate change and pollution challenge, but responsible politics has to show her how to get from A

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to B, right? She's at A, you have to get her to B. And if you can't do that, you're just beating your gums, as we say in Canada.

**SR**: In this particular example, of course, we're talking about alternatives. But one could also, and that's what the right-wing has done, frame the problem in terms of individual freedom. And the question here would be, how much are we going to factor in individual freedom into the political calculus if we really want fast-paced change?

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**MI**: This is an urgent, huge political challenge for any elected Democratic leader. And it's also a regional issue to get into the weeds a little bit. Carbon-intensive industries are heavily concentrated in regions. So you go into one region, you say x, you go into a place, which is a low-carbon environment. You can say, "Why?" and then people say, "You're not saying the same thing."

So the political challenge is to say the same thing in a carbon-intensive region, like Pennsylvania, or Oklahoma, or the parts of Germany that have coal mines, for example. And, in Canada, we have a whole couple of provinces which produce most of our carbon fuels, and they produce a huge amount of our GDP. And a green progressive liberal movement gets no votes there at all.

And so the reason this is important is that climate change policy becomes a national unity issue. That is you're playing with the very unity of the country here. Part of what's tearing America apart is climate change policy. Nobody sees

that. You know, East Coast, West Coast, people are happy with the move out of fossil fuels. The center in the south are against it. And these divisions are part of what is carving America apart.

So you can't have climate change policy that threatens the national unity of your country because there are other things that frankly matter just as much as meeting the climate change. That is, you wanna maintain the viability of liberal democracy itself. I think climate change policy is becoming the central political issue for liberal democracy going into the future.

But watch out. It's highly divisive. It divides carbon-producing regions from low carbon regions, is a class division simultaneously, and a responsible politician has to bear all that in mind because your job, if you're a liberal democratic politician, is to keep the show on the road, to keep the train from jumping the tracks. And given the fragility of democracy everywhere, that's very, very important.

**SR**: So one last diversion that I do want to talk to you about is the generational divide here. The question that a lot of these young activists are asking is doesn't liberal incrementalism, which is so slow, is that not a generational bias? Is it not a betrayal of the future of these children?

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**MI**: Oh, sure, sure. There is a kind of, "You'll be dead, and we have to inherit your mess. And, so could you please speed up?" I mean, you know, I've got

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children, and I hear that a bit from my daughter and my son. And I think it's very real, and that's why I've consistently welcome climate change activism. And a lot of the people who are saying, "Go faster," are in a generation or even two generations younger than mine.

But I also think that the older generation has a stake in this as well. Just because you're old doesn't mean you don't have a stake in the future. I don't think any responsible member of my generation thinks *Après moi, le déluge*. I mean, we wanna hand the world off to the next generation in better shape than we found it, and part of our anguish about being in politics these days is we can't say we will do that.

One of the reasons I'm such a passionate defender of liberal democracy is, in fact, liberal democracies can change very, very quickly when political climates change. The younger generation doesn't remember because they weren't alive when there were no recycle boxes at any corner, when there were no windmills. All the power generation was coal. When every single car on the road was a gas-guzzling, pouring out stuff at the back of the stack.

In 50 years, this has changed enormously, and it is up to the older generation to say, "There has been unbelievable change in this area in my lifetime." And the other probably the most important thing is that in 1970 when I was 21, when I was in that younger generation, we didn't know what an ecosphere was. We had none of the systemic understanding of the interaction between carbon emissions and climate change that we have now.

There has been more improvement in our scientific knowledge of the deep history of climate change going to the Arctic and getting ice cores that tell us what climate change has been doing for 10,000 years. None of that science existed 50 years ago. So, I'm a passionate believer in what the environmental science has done to popular understanding and, in turn, what popular understanding has done to consumption behavior.

All of this has changed massively. And so, part of the message that the older generation can give to the younger generation is don't give up because we've seen more change in our lifetimes than you perhaps understand, and that tells us that things are changing more rapidly than you suppose. So, don't give up. Don't get discouraged. Keep pushing, keep fighting.

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**SR**: So let me conclude on that optimistic note, and thank you for a wonderful discussion. If I were to try to sum up some of the things we've said, I think we could say we live in the Anthropocene, an era in which the chief forces which are shaping nature are of our own work. It is a time, however, of deep ontological insecurity. We are no longer able to take even rain, or water, or the earth, or our forests, for granted anymore.

And COVID epitomizes, I think, this insecurity so that even the air which we breathe is not only polluted, it can really be deadly. The question that you pose is how can we master our mastery of the world wisely? A sustainable, habitable ecologically responsible world is possible only through a politics of liberal checks

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and balances, of consensus, of compromise, and of incremental reforms within a market economy. So what we need is a politics based on reason, not fear, a politics of patience, not of panic. Thank you.

[00:27:00]
**MI**: Thank you.

**SR**: So this concludes this episode of "Democracy in Question." Thank you for listening.