

Governing in the Shadow of Extinction

Political Life in the Age of Ecological Loss

by

Masoud Rostami

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Preface

This book began with a simple question: how do we govern when the future we once imagined is no longer available?

The Anthropocene confronts us with two intertwined crises. The first is a crisis of political imagination: our institutions of democracy, sovereignty, and economic growth were forged in an era of presumed abundance and stability, yet they now struggle to respond to the accelerating realities of ecological collapse. The second is a crisis of meaning: how do we live with irreversible loss—the disappearance of species, landscapes, ways of life—without succumbing to despair or retreating into denial?

Too often, these two dimensions are treated separately. Political theory focuses on institutions, policies, and governance mechanisms, while the environmental humanities explore mourning, memory, and cultural representation. Yet the separation is artificial. As Chakrabarty (2009) argues, the Anthropocene forces us to bring together human history and natural history in ways that unsettle both disciplines. Similarly, Latour (2018) contends that the new climatic regime demands a fundamental rethinking of politics, territory, and collective life. This book attempts to weave these threads together. It argues that any adequate response to the ecological crisis must address both the architecture of governance and the architecture of meaning. In the shadow of extinction, we need not only new institutions but also new ways of understanding loss, responsibility, and hope.

The work draws on political ecology, democratic theory, science and technology studies, environmental history, cultural studies, and

Indigenous epistemologies. It is written for scholars, students, and practitioners who seek a more integrated understanding of our planetary predicament. In doing so, it builds upon the philosophical foundations laid out in Rostami and Zamani (2026), where the framework of ecodualism was first introduced as a comprehensive approach to harmonising human and ecological systems. That framework's principles—interdependence, regeneration, adaptability, and equity—resonate throughout the pages that follow, grounding the political and cultural analysis in a coherent ecological philosophy.

The Argument in Brief

The book is organised around a central proposition: that the prevailing modes of political response to ecological collapse—*denial*, *displacement*, and *deferral*—are not only inadequate but actively destructive. Denial refuses to acknowledge loss; displacement transfers responsibility to technology, markets, or future generations; deferral postpones action to an ever-receding horizon. Against these, the book advocates a fourth response: *dwelling*. Dwelling is the practice of staying with the trouble, of mourning what is passing, of caring for what remains, and of repairing what can be repaired. It is the emotional and political work of loss-driven governance.

Loss-driven governance, introduced here as a novel framework, rests on three principles. *Anticipatory grief* cultivates the capacity to mourn possibilities before they are foreclosed, turning fear into precaution. *Preservation of options* shifts the ethical imperative from expanding possibilities to preventing foreclosure, asking of every decision: what futures does it keep open, and what does it irreversibly close? *Memorial accountability* insists that losses be publicly recorded, that those responsible be held to account, and that remembrance become an active instrument of political responsibility. Together, these

principles reorient governance away from growth and crisis management toward the stewardship of irreplaceable goods.

What Is New in This Book

The present work expands significantly upon earlier discussions of ecological governance by addressing several critical questions that have been neglected or only lightly touched upon in previous literature. Among the new themes introduced here are the following.

The book confronts the political economy of loss head-on. It asks who pays for the transition away from fossil fuels, how workers and communities whose livelihoods are destroyed can be compensated, and how the costs can be shifted from the vulnerable to those who profited most from the carbon economy. A substantial new section on just transition details mechanisms for managed decline, buyouts, retraining, and community wealth-building, arguing that a transition that leaves coal country to rot is not a transition at all but a continuation of the logic of extraction.

A feminist lens is integrated throughout, revealing how ecological crises amplify gender inequalities and how the gendered division of care work becomes the invisible infrastructure of survival in the Anthropocene. The book proposes concrete measures for redistributing care—shorter working weeks, universal basic services, and the valuation of reproductive labour—as essential components of loss-driven governance.

For the first time, children are treated not as passive future adults but as political subjects in their own right. A section argues that the exclusion of children from democratic processes is a structural injustice, especially when decisions made today will shape their entire lifespan. Institutional innovations such as child trustees, proxy

voting for parents and caregivers, children's assemblies, and even a youth veto over irreversible harms are explored in depth.

The problem of scale in polycentric governance is examined with new attention to the risks of fragmentation. The book analyses scenarios of competing climate clubs, trade wars over carbon adjustments, and the weaponisation of climate policy for geopolitical advantage. It then proposes harmonisation mechanisms—mutual recognition, minimum standards with upward discretion, and binding dispute resolution—that allow coordination without centralisation.

A cautionary section on the dark side of mourning distinguishes between liberatory grief and reactionary mourning. The book shows how the loss of a way of life, economic security, or privilege can be weaponised to fuel xenophobia, resentment, and backlash against the very changes needed for survival. It offers strategies for acknowledging the grief of those who lose privilege without validating reactionary frames, and for building just transitions that pre-empt resentment.

The scope of case studies has been broadened to include examples from the Global South, authoritarian contexts, and conflict zones. Costa Rica's payment for ecosystem services, Rwanda's authoritarian green governance, Bangladesh's climate adaptation and loss-and-damage frameworks, and the Pacific Climate Warriors' canoe blockades all illustrate how the principles of loss-driven governance can be adapted to diverse political and ecological conditions.

The often-avoided question of population is addressed with nuance and a firm commitment to reproductive justice. The book distinguishes between high-consumption and high-fertility regions,

rejects all coercive population policies, and centres the empowerment of women and girls as the most effective and ethical pathway to demographic transition.

Finally, recognising that a politics of loss cannot be sustained by mourning alone, a new reflection on joy, festivity, and affirmation has been added. The book celebrates community seed swaps, festivals of returning species, and the role of reparative joy in building solidarity and preventing burnout. It argues that joy is not a distraction from the work of repair but an essential part of it.

Structure and Themes

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, *The Political Crisis*, examines the structural incompatibility between growth-driven democracy and ecological limits, reimagines sovereignty as ethical responsibility and sovereign mourning, and explores the possibilities of a democracy that does not rest on optimism. It also delves into the political economy of loss—just transition, stranded assets, and the politics of who pays—as well as the gendered dimensions of care, the exclusion of children from democratic governance, and the question of population. A new section on the problem of scale addresses the risks of polycentric fragmentation and proposes mechanisms for harmonisation without centralisation.

Part II, *The Cultural Crisis*, turns to the work of mourning, memory, and narrative: how societies grieve extinct species, how art and literature shape our response to loss, and what Indigenous practices of kinship and reciprocity can teach us about renewal. It also confronts the dark side of mourning—the weaponisation of grief by reactionary movements that scapegoat the vulnerable and seek to restore a hierarchical past. It introduces the concept of *reparative joy* as the stubborn affirmation of life, beauty, and festivity even in the

ruins. New case studies from the Global South—Costa Rica, Rwanda, Bangladesh, and the Pacific Climate Warriors—demonstrate that loss-driven governance is not a Western or Indigenous monopoly but a living experiment in diverse political and ecological contexts.

Part III, *Synthesis*, weaves these threads together, arguing that politics and mourning are inseparable, that responsibility to unimaginable futures demands humility, and that a politics of care is the only adequate response to the shadow of extinction. The book concludes with a reflection on hope without object, on acting without guarantees, and on the quiet, stubborn work of building worlds in common even as the old worlds disappear.

Throughout, the book insists on a stubborn, unromantic hope—a *hope without object* that is not the expectation of success but the commitment to act meaningfully regardless of outcome. It is a hope that learns to grieve, to repair, to celebrate, and to build in common. This is the hope that remains.

The pages that follow are an invitation to that hope—and to the difficult, necessary work it entails.

Part I
The Political Crisis

Chapter 1

The End of Growth, the Crisis of Democracy

Introduction

Economic growth has long served as the central organising principle of modern governance. From the post-war reconstruction to the neoliberal turn of the late twentieth century, the promise of rising prosperity has underwritten social contracts, legitimated political institutions, and provided a seemingly inexhaustible horizon for collective aspiration. Yet this growth imperative now confronts an insurmountable obstacle: the biophysical limits of a finite planet. Climate change, biodiversity collapse, resource depletion, and the transgression of multiple planetary boundaries (Steffen et al. 2018) reveal that perpetual material expansion is not only ecologically impossible but also politically corrosive.

This chapter examines the structural incompatibility between capitalist growth imperatives and democratic accountability. It argues that the demand for continuous expansion undermines ecological stability and constrains political choice, leaving citizens with a narrow range of options that seldom challenge the growth paradigm. The end of growth—whether forced by ecological collapse or deliberately chosen as a matter of justice—will fundamentally reshape what democracy can mean. Drawing on ecological economics, political theory, and empirical examples, the chapter maps the contours of a political crisis that is at once economic, ecological, and democratic. In this exploration, the dynamic adaptability at the heart of ecodualism (Rostami and Zamani 2026)

serves as a constant reminder that sustainability cannot be a static target but must evolve with changing conditions.

A Typology of Political Responses to Extinction

The threat of extinction – of species, cultures, ways of life – generates a range of political responses. Not all responses are equally adequate; some actively prevent the work of mourning and repair. Drawing on psychoanalysis, political theory, and environmental ethics, I propose a typology of four ideal-typical responses: *denial*, *displacement*, *deferral*, and *dwelling*. Each names a distinctive way of relating (or failing to relate) to irreversible loss.

1. **Denial.** Denial refuses to acknowledge that loss is occurring or that it is serious. It takes many forms: climate scepticism, the claim that species have always gone extinct, the belief that technology will save us without sacrifice. Denial is not ignorance; it is an active defence against unbearable knowledge. Politically, denial allows business as usual to continue. It is the response of fossil fuel executives who fund disinformation campaigns, of governments that block emissions reductions, of consumers who look away. Denial is the enemy of mourning because there can be no mourning for what is not admitted to be lost.
2. **Displacement.** Displacement acknowledges loss but transfers responsibility to someone or something else. The most common form is technological displacement: the belief that geoengineering, carbon capture, or artificial intelligence will solve the problem, so we do not need to change our behaviour. Another form is market displacement: the idea that carbon pricing or green consumerism will fix everything, so we do not need to confront structural change. Displacement also operates through scapegoating – blaming

China, or oil companies, or previous generations. Displacement allows action to be taken (someone else is doing something) while avoiding the hard work of collective transformation.

3. **Deferral.** Deferral postpones action to a later time. It says: we will act when the science is certain, when the technology is ready, when the politics align. Deferral is the response of incrementalism: carbon budgets stretched over decades, net-zero targets set for 2050, promises of future restoration. Deferral is seductive because it avoids present sacrifice. But it is also a form of abandonment: each year of deferral closes options for those who come after. Deferral transforms intergenerational responsibility into an infinite postponement.
4. **Dwelling.** Dwelling is the response that this book advocates. Dwelling acknowledges loss without denial, accepts responsibility without displacement, and acts without deferral. Dwelling is staying with the trouble – not looking away, not outsourcing the work, not putting it off. It means mourning what is passing, caring for what remains, and repairing what can be repaired. Dwelling is not heroic or optimistic; it is humble, attentive, and collective. It is the politics of loss-driven governance.

These four responses are not mutually exclusive; they often coexist in the same institution, movement, or person. A government may deny the severity of biodiversity loss while displacing responsibility to market mechanisms and deferring action to a future target date. Dwelling is always partial and fragile. Yet the typology offers a diagnostic tool: when we encounter a policy, a campaign, or a personal attitude, we can ask which response dominates. Is it denial?

Displacement? Deferral? Or is there a genuine attempt to dwell with loss?

Throughout the chapters that follow, this typology will resurface. The growth imperative is a form of deferral – postponing limits. Techno-solutionism is displacement. The critique of these responses clears the ground for dwelling: a politics of mourning, care, and repair.

A Novel Framework: Loss-Driven Governance

Traditional political systems are optimised for two modes of operation: *growth-driven governance*, which assumes perpetual expansion and distributes its benefits, and *crisis-driven governance*, which mobilises resources in response to acute emergencies. The Anthropocene reveals a third condition for which no adequate political architecture exists: the management of *irreversible loss*. Species do not return. Aquifers do not refill on human timescales. Languages, cultures, and ways of life disappear. These losses are not crises that pass; they are permanent diminutions of the world.

This book introduces the concept of *loss-driven governance* as a response to this gap. Loss-driven governance does not aim to restore what has been lost—restoration is often impossible—nor does it treat loss as an externality to be compensated. Instead, it takes loss as an organising principle. Its task is to enable political communities to *live with* irreversible loss while preserving the conditions for meaningful collective life.

Loss-driven governance rests on three novel principles:

1. **Anticipatory grief.** Rather than waiting for loss to occur and then mourning, political institutions should cultivate the

capacity to grieve *before* irreversible harm. This means building rituals, decision-making processes, and public narratives that acknowledge the possibility of loss without normalising it. Anticipatory grief is not despair; it is the precondition for responsible action.

2. **Preservation of options.** In growth-driven governance, the future is assumed to be richer than the present; in loss-driven governance, the future is likely to be poorer. The ethical imperative shifts from expanding possibilities to *preventing foreclosure*. Political decisions must be evaluated by whether they keep options open for future beings—human and non-human—even when we cannot predict which options they will value.
3. **Memorial accountability.** Losses that are not remembered are losses that become invisible. Memorial accountability requires institutions to maintain public records of what has been lost, to hold those responsible for avoidable loss to account, and to integrate remembrance into ongoing governance. Memorials are not passive monuments but active instruments of political responsibility.

Loss-driven governance does not replace democracy, sovereignty, or justice. It reorients them. It asks: how would we organise elections, legal systems, and economic planning if we assumed that loss, not growth, is the default horizon? This question runs through the chapters that follow, informing the analysis of democracy without optimism, sovereignty as ethical responsibility, and mourning as political practice. In the shadow of extinction, loss-driven governance is not a supplement to politics—it is the politics that remains possible.

The Growth Paradigm: Origins and Entrenchment

The idea that economic growth is both desirable and necessary is a relatively recent historical construction. For most of human history, societies did not expect continuous material expansion (Jackson 2017). Pre-industrial economies were largely agrarian, bound by seasonal rhythms and the finite productivity of land. Growth, when it occurred, was quickly absorbed by population increase or was reversed by famine, war, or disease. The very concept of a steadily growing economy – measured in aggregate output per capita – would have seemed alien to a medieval peasant or even an eighteenth-century farmer. Only with the advent of fossil fuels, industrial machinery, and global trade did sustained growth become a material possibility, and only with the post-war reconstruction did it become a political imperative.

The growth paradigm emerged with the industrial revolution and became hegemonic in the decades following the Second World War. The Bretton Woods institutions, Keynesian demand management, and the post-war settlement in Western Europe all placed growth at the centre of economic policy. Growth was seen as the engine of employment, social welfare, and political stability—a means of distributing the benefits of industrial capitalism without directly confronting class conflict. In this Keynesian consensus, a rising tide would lift all boats: unions would bargain for higher wages, governments would invest in infrastructure and education, and the welfare state would be funded by an ever-expanding tax base. Growth thus served as the great pacifier of democratic politics, deferring hard questions of redistribution and making the system appear self-validating.

Yet the growth paradigm was never a neutral technical choice. It carried implicit normative assumptions: that material wealth is the

primary measure of well-being, that the future will be like the present only richer, and that natural resources are infinite or substitutable. These assumptions went largely unquestioned because they aligned with the lived experience of post-war prosperity. To challenge growth was to appear nostalgic, anti-modern, or indifferent to the poor. As a result, even critics of capitalism often accepted the growth imperative, arguing only for a different distribution of its fruits. The environmental movement, for its part, long focused on mitigating the side effects of growth – pollution, habitat loss, resource depletion – rather than challenging growth itself. Only in recent decades have ecological economists and political theorists begun to articulate a post-growth politics.

The neoliberal turn of the 1980s deepened the dependence on growth, but with a different logic. Deregulation, financialisation, and the retreat of the state intensified the imperative to grow, while the distribution of its benefits became increasingly unequal. Growth became the primary metric of national success, measured by gross domestic product (GDP), a metric that counts the sale of a clear-cut forest as a positive contribution but does not subtract the loss of biodiversity or the erosion of soil. As H. Daly (1996) and Jackson (2017) have shown, the pursuit of GDP growth came to be treated as an end in itself, obscuring the environmental and social costs that accompanied it. In democratic politics, growth became the unspoken condition for the legitimacy of governments: any party that failed to deliver growth risked electoral defeat. A recession was not merely an economic event but a political catastrophe.

This entrenchment of the growth paradigm is not merely an economic fact but a cultural and political formation. It is reproduced through institutions (central banks, finance ministries, credit rating agencies), habits (consumerism, debt-financed lifestyles), and desires

(the pursuit of ever-higher incomes, the equation of more with better). To challenge it is to confront not only powerful interests but also deeply held assumptions about progress, prosperity, and the meaning of a good life. Yet as the ecological crisis deepens, the impossibility of perpetual growth on a finite planet becomes undeniable. The question is no longer whether growth will end, but how – and what kind of politics will be possible when it does. The typology of political responses introduced earlier – denial, displacement, deferral, dwelling – helps to diagnose the ways that societies have avoided this question. The growth paradigm itself is a form of deferral: it postpones the reckoning with limits to an ever-receding future. To move beyond it is to embrace the more difficult work of dwelling with loss and building a politics of care and repair.

Ecological Limits and Planetary Boundaries

The ecological critique of growth is no longer speculative. The planetary boundaries framework (Steffen et al. 2018) identifies nine Earth system processes that regulate the stability of the Holocene – the benign geological epoch in which human civilisation developed. Four of these boundaries have already been crossed: climate change, biosphere integrity, biogeochemical flows (nitrogen and phosphorus), and land-system change. Crossing these thresholds increases the risk of abrupt, irreversible environmental changes that would undermine the material conditions for human life.

The idea that the Earth has biophysical limits is not new. In the early 1970s, the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* used system dynamics modelling to project that continued economic and population growth would lead to overshoot and collapse within the twenty-first century. At the time, the report was dismissed by mainstream economists as alarmist, but subsequent research has

vindicated its core insight: the planet's carrying capacity is finite, and many critical resources are being depleted at unsustainable rates. The planetary boundaries framework updates and refines this insight, grounding it in Earth system science rather than resource depletion alone. It shifts the focus from running out of things to the stability of the entire planetary machinery. This shift is crucial: it means that even abundant resources can become dangerous if their extraction and use destabilise the climate, the biosphere, or the nutrient cycles.

Climate change alone reveals the impossibility of indefinite growth on a finite planet. Carbon emissions, driven by fossil-fuel combustion and industrial agriculture, continue to rise despite decades of climate diplomacy. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has repeatedly concluded that limiting warming to 1.5°C requires rapid and deep reductions in emissions—reductions that are incompatible with continued growth in resource consumption (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2021). The same logic applies to biodiversity loss, freshwater depletion, and soil degradation. Growth, as conventionally measured, is predicated on the transformation of natural capital into economic output; that transformation is now exceeding the planet's capacity to regenerate.

Beyond the scientific evidence, crossing planetary boundaries raises profound philosophical questions about limits, responsibility, and justice. To acknowledge a boundary is to accept that there are some things we should not do, no matter how much they might contribute to GDP. This is a normative claim, not merely a descriptive one. The planetary boundaries framework thus challenges the value neutrality of conventional economics. It insists that the biosphere is not a mere externality but the precondition for all economic activity.

As H. Daly (1996) argued, the economy is a subsystem of the finite ecosystem, not the other way around. Once this is understood, growth ceases to be an unqualified good; it becomes something that must be judged against its effects on the integrity of the whole.

Politically, the recognition of planetary boundaries forces a confrontation with the growth imperative that has structured modern democracy. If growth is ecologically unsustainable, then democratic politics cannot remain focused on its delivery. The question shifts from how to grow faster to how to govern well within limits. This requires new institutions, new metrics of success, and new forms of political accountability. Yet the dominant political response has been to deny, displace, or defer the implications of biophysical limits. Denial takes the form of climate scepticism. Displacement outsources responsibility to technological fixes. Deferral postpones action to distant future targets. None of these responses dwells with the reality of limits. The typology of political responses introduced earlier – denial, displacement, deferral, dwelling – thus applies directly to the planetary boundaries: crossing a boundary is a failure to dwell with the limits of the Earth system.

The crossing of four planetary boundaries is not a future threat; it is a present condition. Each day that emissions continue to rise, each hectare of forest that is cleared, each tonne of nitrogen that runs off into rivers, deepens the transgression. The politics of extinction must therefore begin from this starting point: we are already beyond the safe operating space. This does not mean that action is futile. On the contrary, it means that the window for prevention has closed, and the work of adaptation, mitigation, and repair has become urgent. But it also means that we must abandon the fantasy of returning to a pristine Holocene baseline. The task is not to restore a lost equilibrium but to navigate a new, more turbulent one – with

humility, care, and a clear-eyed acknowledgment of what has already been lost. This is the work of loss-driven governance: to manage irreversible change without succumbing to despair or denial.

Growth and Democracy: The Political Constraints

The ecological impossibility of growth would be troubling enough, but the deeper problem lies in how the growth imperative shapes democratic politics. When the economy must grow to avoid crisis, political choices are severely constrained. Governments are compelled to prioritise policies that stimulate production and consumption, regardless of their ecological consequences. Subsidies for fossil fuels, resistance to carbon taxes, and the relentless promotion of consumerism are not merely failures of political will; they are structural responses to the requirement that GDP continue to rise. The growth imperative thus operates as a kind of political straitjacket, forcing governments into a narrow range of options that all share the same underlying logic: expand or perish.

This structural constraint generates what political ecologists call the “growth imperative” (H. Daly 1996). Investment, employment, and public revenues depend on economic expansion. A recession threatens unemployment, fiscal crises, and political instability. Consequently, governments pursue growth even when it contradicts other goals—including environmental sustainability. The result is a depoliticisation of economic policy. Debates over what the economy is for, how it should be organised, and who should benefit are displaced by a narrow focus on growth rates. Citizens are offered only variations of the same growth-centric model, leaving little room for alternatives. In this sense, the growth imperative functions as a form of structural violence: it forecloses the possibility of imagining a society not organised around perpetual expansion.

From a political philosophy perspective, this depoliticisation is a betrayal of democracy's promise. Democracy is supposed to be the arena in which citizens deliberate about the kind of society they wish to build. Yet when growth is treated as an exogenous requirement – like the weather, something to be managed rather than chosen – the scope of democratic deliberation shrinks dramatically. The great questions of the Anthropocene – How much is enough? What should we protect? What are we willing to sacrifice? – are pushed to the margins, replaced by technocratic debates about efficiency, competitiveness, and investor confidence. The growth imperative thus acts as an anti-democratic force, even in societies that formally respect democratic procedures.

As Meadowcroft (2009) observes, the politics of sustainability is trapped in a paradox: transitions toward sustainability require long-term planning and structural change, but democratic politics is oriented toward short-term electoral cycles and the maintenance of growth. This temporal mismatch undermines the capacity of democratic institutions to respond to slow-burning crises like climate change. The growth imperative thus operates as a form of structural constraint, narrowing democratic agency and foreclosing transformative possibilities. The mismatch is not merely a technical problem to be solved by better forecasting or longer electoral terms. It is a deep structural feature of modern democracy, one that ties the legitimacy of governments to their ability to deliver short-term material benefits. To break free would require a fundamental reorientation of democratic theory and practice – a shift from growth-driven to loss-driven governance.

The typology of political responses introduced earlier helps to diagnose how democracies have responded to this constraint. Denial refuses to acknowledge that the growth imperative is ecologically

unsustainable. Displacement transfers responsibility to markets or technology, pretending that green growth can square the circle. Deferral postpones action to a future date, allowing growth to continue in the present. Only dwelling – staying with the trouble, accepting limits, and building a politics of care and repair – offers a way out. Yet dwelling is the response that democratic politics most resists, because it demands that we confront the very thing the growth imperative was designed to avoid: the question of limits. The political constraints on democracy in the Anthropocene are therefore not merely external; they are internal to the logic of growth that has structured democratic legitimacy for the past century. To overcome them, we must reimagine democracy itself.

The Growth-Democracy Contradiction

At the heart of this chapter is a claim about contradiction: the growth imperative is not only ecologically unsustainable but also politically incompatible with genuine democratic self-determination. Democracy, in its deliberative and participatory senses, requires that citizens have meaningful choices about collective futures. Yet when the economy must grow to remain stable, the range of feasible alternatives shrinks dramatically. Policies that would reduce consumption, redistribute wealth, or transition to steady-state systems are framed as politically unrealistic, economically dangerous, or electorally suicidal.

This contradiction is not accidental; it is structural. Democratic legitimacy in capitalist societies has become tethered to the promise of rising living standards, and rising living standards have historically depended on growth. To question growth is therefore to question the very basis of democratic legitimacy. Politicians who advocate for post-growth policies are accused of wishing to impoverish the population, of being indifferent to the unemployed,

of betraying the aspirations of the working class. The terms of political debate are thus rigged in advance: any alternative to growth appears as a threat to the existing social order, even when that order is hurtling toward ecological collapse.

This contradiction is compounded by the ways in which growth shapes political subjectivity. Consumerism, indebtedness, and the constant promise of future prosperity generate attachments that make it difficult to imagine life beyond growth (Jackson 2017). Even those who recognise the ecological necessity of change often find themselves trapped by the material and psychological dependencies created by growth-based economies. The result is a form of political paralysis: we know that growth cannot continue, yet we cannot imagine how to organise society without it. This is what the psychoanalyst might call a double bind: the very conditions that make life livable (employment, credit, social mobility) are also the conditions that are destroying the planet. To escape the double bind would require a fundamental transformation of desire, not merely of policy.

The growth-democracy contradiction also manifests in the temporal structure of political accountability. Democratic representatives are held accountable for short-term outcomes: the quarterly GDP figure, the monthly unemployment rate, the annual budget deficit. The ecological costs of growth, by contrast, accrue slowly and are distributed unevenly across space and time. A politician who prioritises climate action over immediate growth may be punished at the polls, even if her policies would avert catastrophe in the long run. The growth imperative thus operates as a disciplinary mechanism, aligning democratic politics with the logic of capital accumulation and against the logic of ecological survival.

From the perspective of the typology introduced earlier, the growth-democracy contradiction is a machine for producing denial, displacement, and deferral. Denial says: growth does not really harm the environment; we can have both. Displacement says: technology or markets will solve the problem; we don't need to change our growth-based politics. Deferral says: we will act later, when the costs are clearer or the technology is ready. All three responses avoid the fundamental contradiction. Dwelling, by contrast, would require acknowledging that the contradiction is real and that a politics of limits is necessary. But dwelling is precisely what the growth-democracy contradiction makes difficult, because it demands that citizens and politicians alike give up the very promise that has legitimated democratic politics for a century.

To move beyond the contradiction, we must reimagine democracy itself. A democracy that is not organised around the growth imperative would not ask "how much more can we produce?" but "how can we live well together within limits?" It would measure success not by GDP but by well-being, equity, and ecological integrity. It would cultivate the virtues of attentional resilience, anticipatory grief, and memorial accountability. This is the vision of loss-driven governance that this book advances. It is a vision that faces the growth-democracy contradiction squarely, without denial, displacement, or deferral – and without despair.

The Question of Population: Between Malthusian Panic and Reproductive Justice

No discussion of ecological limits is complete without addressing population. Yet the topic is a third rail of environmental discourse, avoided by many who fear being labelled Malthusian or coercive. The manuscript has mentioned population only in passing, but