



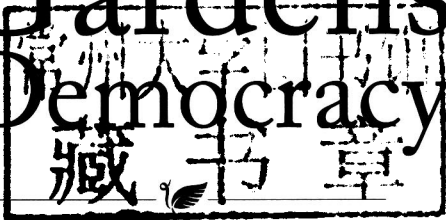
THE Gardens of Democracy



*A New American Story of
Citizenship, the Economy, and
the Role of Government*

ERIC LIU AND NICK HANAUER

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SASQUATCH BOOKS
SEATTLE

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Seattle, WA 98104
(206) 467-4300
www.sasquatchbooks.com
custserv@sasquatchbooks.com

For more information, please visit www.godemocracy.net.

Praise for *The Gardens of Democracy*

"The Gardens of Democracy provides a refreshing new conceptual approach to understanding our economic and political situation, and it will help us move past the fossilized ideas in today's public debates."

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *author of The Origins of Political Order and Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University*

"In highly engaging style, Liu and Hanauer capture the revolution underway in our understanding of how economies and social systems work. They offer a provocative, inspiring vision of citizenship, democracy, and the role of government. This slender book with big ambitions deserves to be read, debated, and read again."

ERIC BEINHOCKER, *author of The Origin of Wealth*

"Society is a garden. Liu and Hanauer's simple metaphor makes the complexities and limits of social policy emerge before your eyes. Statists can't see the interconnections of organic systems. Free marketers can't see that a garden needs some tending. If you're looking for a way forward out of America's dangerous gridlock, read this wonderful book."

JONATHAN HAIDT, *professor of psychology, University of Virginia, and author of The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*

“Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer are progressives who always think outside the box, and that’s why everyone should pay attention to them. *The Gardens of Democracy* shakes up our stale debate over government’s role in a dynamic society, and in a thoughtful, creative, and inventive way. Everyone will find something to disagree with here, and that’s the point: getting us out of our comfort zones is an immensely useful democratic undertaking.”

E. J. DIONNE JR., *author of Why Americans Hate Politics*

“Liu and Hanauer get it right. They powerfully show how the complex, modern world requires new thinking and new policies that recognize the adaptive, mutualist nature of our economic, political, and social systems. This is a fabulous book!”

SCOTT E. PAGE, *author of Diversity and Complexity and director of the Center for the Study of Complex Systems, University of Michigan*

“The great contribution of Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer in *The Gardens of Democracy* is to explain how the very categories we use to think about our political problems prevent us from understanding and solving them. They’re a scouting party venturing upriver for the rest of us, and we’d be foolish not to heed their reports.”

MICHAEL TOMASKY, *editor, Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*

THE Gardens *of* Democracy

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Of Gardens and Gardeners

Effective gardening requires the right setting: fertile soil, good light, water.

It requires a strong view as to what should and should not be grown.

It requires a loving willingness to tend constantly, to fertilize and nurture what we seed.

It requires a hard-headed willingness to weed what does not belong.

Great gardeners would never simply “let nature take its course.” They take responsibility for their gardens.

Great gardeners assume change in weather and circumstance. They adapt.

Great gardens are sustainable only with continuous investment and renewal. Great gardeners turn the soil and rotate the plantings.

Human beings, it is said, originated in a garden. Perhaps this is why all of us understand so intuitively what it takes to be great gardeners.

I. Seeds

Gardenbrain vs. Machinebrain



*The failure of our politics to keep pace with reality—
The way ideology prevents adaption—New science
gives us new sight about how the world works—What
must follow is a new story: about self-interest, the meaning
of citizenship, the nature of the economy, and the role
of government—The gardens of democracy*



AMERICA IS AN EXPERIMENT. It is an experiment in democracy, still the greatest the world has ever seen. But it is also, like every nation, human community, or living organism, an experiment in evolution.

One thing that has made America exceptional thus far has been its ability to adapt. From the founding onward, this nation has reckoned with its own internal contradictions and with external threats—the insufficiency of the Articles of Confederation, the poison pill of slavery, the rise of the Robber Barons, the emergence of totalitarian enemies—and it has evolved successfully in response to such circumstances.

The question today is, can we still adapt? Will our experiment get another cycle? Or has our society's capacity to evolve run its course?

The failure of American politics to address and solve the great challenges of our time—climate change, debt and deficits, worsening schools, rising health care costs, the shriveling of the middle class—is not just a failure of will

or nerve. It is equally a failure of ideas and understanding. And the failure to address these challenges isn't just a matter of politics, but of survival.

To begin with, we labor today under a painfully confining choice between outmoded ideologies on both the left and the right. On the left, too many remain wedded to paradigms first formed during the decades between the Progressive Era and the New Deal. They are top-down, prescriptive, bureaucratic notions about how to address social challenges. These state-centric approaches made sense in a centralizing, industrializing America. They make much less sense in the networked economy and polity of today.

On the right, we hear ideas even more historically irrelevant: *laissez-faire* economics and a “don't tread on me” idea of citizenship that might have been tolerable in 1775 when the country had 3 million largely agrarian inhabitants, only some of whom could vote, but is at best naïve and at worst destructive in a diverse, interdependent, largely urban nation of over 300 million.

Our politics has become an over-rehearsed, over-ritualized piece of stage combat between these two old ideologies. False choice after polarizing false choice emanates from Washington. Both ideologies—indeed, the surrender of American politics to ideology itself, and the abandonment of pragmatism as a guiding political philosophy—

make it harder by the day for America to adapt.

We wrote this short book to offer a new way. We aim to reach not “moderates” or “centrists” who split the difference between left and right. We aim to reach those who think independently. That might mean those who claim no party affiliation, though it also includes many loyal Democrats and Republicans. It definitely means those who are uncomfortable being confined by narrow choices, old paradigms, and zero-sum outcomes.

If you can hold these paired thoughts in your head, we wrote this book for you:

- The federal government spends too much money. The wealthy should pay much more in taxes.
- Every American should have access to high-quality health care. We spend far too much on health care in the United States already.
- We need to eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels. We need to ensure our economy continues to grow.
- Unions are a crucially important part of our economy and society. Unions have become overly protectionist and are in need of enormous amounts of reform.
- We need strong government. We need strong citizens.

Contemporary American political discourse sees these pairings as *either-or*. Independent-thinking Americans

see them as *both-and*. Our goal in these pages is to push past the one-dimensional, left-right choices of contemporary politics—between more government or less, selfishness and altruism, suffocating collectivism and market fundamentalism—and find *orthogonal* approaches to our challenges. The great challenge of this age—and the point of this book—is to rethink how we as citizens create change, how the economy truly works, and what government fundamentally is *for*. The great challenge of this age is to change how we *see*, and by so doing, improve our ability to adapt.

At every stage in history, people operate within a constructed frame of ideas, metaphors, and narratives—and this story frame defines how people think of themselves, what they think is possible in life, and how they think the world works. To put it more pointedly, there is not now and has never been some abstracted social reality “out there”; at every moment in each epoch, in ways influenced by culture, science, and technology, people *construct* a social reality that validates some truths and distorts others. These frames define what we think of as good for us—how we pursue our individual and collective self-interest. It defines what a society thinks is possible.

But these frames are not fixed. Every so often, the idea set shifts radically, and with it our notion of what is good for us. We are in the midst of such a shift right now. A set of

quiet scientific revolutions now demands that we see in terms of systems—and enables us to make sense of them. What kinds of *systems* make up our economy, our society, and the ecologies that sustain us? How are the elements in these systems *connected*? And finally, how do the agents (people) within these systems *behave*?

These are the kinds of questions we are far better able to answer today than we were half a century ago. Science—which we mean broadly to include physical discoveries, insights into behavior, awareness of patterns of experience—tells us today that the world is a *complex adaptive system*, not a linear equilibrium system; that the elements within it are *networked*, not atomized; that humans operate in that system as *emotional reciprocal approximators*, not rational self-regarding calculators.

Taken together, these insights (which we describe in more depth below) suggest a new narrative about how strong societies emerge, adapt, and thrive.

Why does this matter? Why should anyone besides students of science or intellectual history care? Because in every age, those who define the metaphors define the terms of politics. In its time, Darwin's theory of evolution was corrupted into a powerful ideology of Social Darwinism, which treated the weak and marginalized as presumptively unfit for survival (and government aid). Later, Taylorism and "scientific management" led government leaders to

believe they could engineer their way to desired social outcomes. In our own time, the belief that markets follow the equilibrium dynamics of physics has had its own awful results. Consider that policymakers did not foresee or forestall the crash of 2008 because their dominant economic model had, as Alan Greenspan later admitted, “a flaw”—namely, that it didn’t contemplate human irrationality.

This is not just about economics or politics; it’s about *imagination* and our ability to conceive of new ways of conceiving of things. It is about our ability to adapt and evolve in the face of changing circumstances and the consequences of our actions. History shows that civilizations tend eventually to get stuck in the patterns that had brought them success. They can either stay stuck and decay, or get unstuck and thrive.

We posit in these pages that this country has for too long been stuck in a mode of seeing and thinking called Machinebrain. We argue that the time has come for a new mode of public imagination that we call Gardenbrain.

Machinebrain sees the world and democracy as a series of mechanisms—clocks and gears, perpetual motion machines, balances and counterbalances. Machinebrain requires you to conceive of the economy as perfectly efficient and automatically self-correcting. Machinebrain presupposes stability and predictability, and only grudgingly admits the need for correction. Even the word