Greening Citizenship? Inequality in the Stakeholder Society

Andy Scerri
Global Cities Research Institute and Globalism Research Centre, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University

Abstract

Highly normative theories of ‘green’ citizenship extrapolate from sociological observations that a long-prevalent dualistic understanding of society as completely subjecting nature is being displaced by growing support for a holistic view of society as a participant in nature. Theoretical differences between ‘environmental’ and ‘ecological’ interpretations of green citizenship aside, the normative theories share five social critiques: 1) The need to challenge nature/culture dualism; 2) dissolve the division between public and private spheres; 3) undermine state-territorialism; 4) eschew social contractualism; and, 5) ground justice in awareness of finite ecological space. This paper suggests that new insights into the formation of contemporary discourses of equality and inequality can be gained by conceiving of green citizenship, not in normative terms, but as having been partially realised. Following B.S. Turner and others, I argue that the types of social and political participation, contents of the rights and duties and the institutional arrangements of pale-green ‘stakeholder’ citizenship normalise a holistic representational grammar, one in which equality and inequality are cast as diffuse, whole-of-society problems. The tendency of stakeholder citizenship to privilege holistic ‘one-world’ discourses, citizenly rights to wellbeing as individual security from risk and duties to be ‘self-responsible’ for exploiting a ‘stake’ in society blurs distinctions between those advocating positive efforts to expand social equality and those calling for ‘hands-off’, and negative freedoms based on a principle of desert. In this view, it seems that aspirations that some decades ago appeared clearly emancipatory have, in the twenty-first century, come to assume far more ambiguous meanings.

Introduction

Contributing to a fragmentation of social citizenship amidst ongoing legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1975 [1973]), a certain greening of citizenship arose in the mid-1970s, propelled both by popular countercultural, lifestyle and New Age and new social movements, including environmentalism, which sought to universalise expectations that life should be meaningful, grounded in self-reflection rather than status-group expectations and conducted in harmony with nature (Habermas, 1971[1968]: 121-2). By the 1980s, this shift challenged the mass-societal types of social and political participation central to ‘social’ citizenship, which had for several decades been maintained through the institutional arrangements of the welfare state and grounded the contents of citizenly rights and duties in full-time employment, military service, the nuclear family and access to education, healthcare and mass-consumption (Susen, 2010, Turner, 1997, 2001). From the 1990s, it was noted that this greening of citizenship signaled that long-prevalent dualistic understandings of society as rightfully engaged in a collective effort to completely dominate nature were
being displaced by a *holistic* view of society as participating in nature (van Steenbergen, 1994). Against the backdrop of post-industrialization and the rise of the ‘service economy’, declining support for ‘old’ class-based social movements and shift to ‘new’ social movement concerns with identity and community and a loosening of conformist in favour of pluralist individualism, the greening of citizenship was regarded as the product of increasing demands that society, as opposed to ‘government’, address ‘subpolitical’ concerns with quality-of-life and ‘wellbeing’, concerns that were tied up with widespread awareness of ‘risk’ (Beck, 2001, Giddens, 1991).

Building upon observation of these trends, and seeking to ‘green’ classical political and social theoretical concepts, normative theories of green citizenship ground the idea in five central critiques:
1. The need to challenge nature/culture dualism;
2. to dissolve the divide between the public and private spheres;
3. to undermine state-territorialism;
4. to eschew social contractualism; and,

Elsewhere, I examine these five critiques as directly challenging the Fordist, industrial, state-centric politics of the bureaucratic welfare state by challenging ideological dualism as a condition of being ‘alienated’ from nature, mass-produced commodities as sources of inauthenticity, full-time employment and welfarism as stifling personal spontaneity and creativity and, the nation-state as failing to justly redistribute the spoils of industrial exploitation of the ecosphere (Scerri, 2009, 2011a, b, 2012). Something that I began to notice is in this work is that, in the early twenty-first century, the *types* of social participation, the *institutional arrangements* and *contents* of the rights and duties of what might be regarded as a pale-green form of ‘stakeholder’ citizenship partially put into practice the five critiques. Yet, while the post-Fordist, post-industrial state ‘downloads services’ and promotes ‘workfare not welfare’, ‘social entrepreneurship’, ‘triple bottom-line corporations’ and ‘eco-modernization policy’, inequality has increased. This is not to argue that the greening of citizenship has led to increased inequality. Rather, my suspicion is that the five critiques central to the normative theories might be for another time.

**Assimilating critique: we’re all green citizens now**

Recognizing the partial and problematic realisation of the five central critiques highlights what for Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello is a defining feature of political change over time; ‘The price paid by critique for being listened to, at least in part, is to see some of the values it has mobilised to oppose the form taken by the accumulation process being placed at the service of accumulation in accordance with a process of cultural assimilation’ (2005[1999]: 29). In this perspective, it becomes important to explore how possibilities for debating equality and inequality are being reframed in light of the partial success of the normative green critique. Emerging in the 1990s as a product of the politics of the Third Way and more recent Big Society initiatives, stakeholder citizenship brings with it types of social and political participation that operationalize holism, non-contractualism, de-territorialization, eschewal of the division between the public and private spheres and raised subjective awareness of the finiteness of ecological space.
My point is that the major parties began in the 1990s to underplay what T.H. Marshall saw as appeals to citizens as the bearers of ‘social’, ‘political’ and ‘civil’ rights and duties in relation to the welfare state, representative democracy and the Rule of Law. Rather, the major parties took up new holistic discourses of ‘beyond Left and Right’ to appeal to ‘stakeholder’ citizens as the bearers of rights to wellbeing and security from risk and duties to be self-responsible for taking-up opportunities to participate in society (Giddens, 2000, Kelly et al., 1997, Glasman, 2010, Scott, 2010). Its proponents define it as ‘the ethical and human capital development of the self organized around the possession of stakes’ in society (Prabakar, 2003). The key premise is that improving the economic and social capabilities of citizens will produce a more efficient and productive, cohesive and inclusive, socially and environmentally sustainable, globally competitive society that is geared to supplying ‘existential’ needs, most often through consumption but also community participation (Miller and Rose, 2008, Rose, 1999). The state in this sense gestures toward but is not bound directly to address socially created inequalities. Rather, policymaking channels the ‘trickle-down’ of individual opportunities while simultaneously managing, often with great public fanfare, the transition to a globally competitive green economy. Stakeholder citizens needing to access social services are called upon to demonstrate their willingness to act as self-responsible individuals, while as stakeholders in a firm, individuals are called upon to deal with employers on a one-to-one basis. This eschewal of social contractualism is demonstrated most clearly in the ‘downloading’ and deregulation of employment markets that extended across the West, beginning in the United States and Britain in the late 1980s, Australia, New Zealand and Canada in the 1990s and European states in the 2000s. This is not to argue that ‘welfare’ is completely dissolved but rather, that ‘claims upon the state [are] linked to judgements of individual behaviour’ (Rosanvallon, 2000[1995]).

Closely associated with this shift has been the embrace by the state of the global corporate social and environmental responsibility movement and the ideals of ‘triple-bottom-line capitalism’ (Scerri, 2003, Banerjee, 2008). Indeed, many global businesses and all of the major independent global corporate social and environmental responsibility reporting initiatives — the Standards International AccountAbility Standard, the Global Reporting Initiative, the International Standards Association and the United Nations Global Compact — refer to their signatories’ embrace of horizontal negotiations with stakeholders (2003, 2009, 2008, 2010). Such discourses represent a combination of high-technology development and ever-further rounds of marketization and privatization as dragging society out of a depressing and dirty, polluted and uninspiring, socially homogenous and class-hatred ridden, heavy-industrial past: one that failed to compete in globalized markets and offered few opportunities to innovative and creative stakeholder citizens. Indeed, major Codes of Conduct, such as the United Nations’ Global Compact and the Global Reporting Initiative, refer explicitly to the failed dualisms of industrial society and advocate a benign holism (2008, 2006) promoting an image of corporations as voluntary collectives whose members share the same values and aspirations and hold in common reciprocal obligations that do not depend on rules and discipline but on consensus and shared responsibilities to deliver ‘excellence’ (Salmon, 2007). That is, the state is effectively side-stepped in relation to its regulatory capacity to convert ethico-moral duties into political obligations. Both the Third Way and Big Society policy platforms promote social and political participation based on private choices — to work for ‘ethical’ firms or consume with ‘green’ discrimination, for example — but do not provide an adequate regulatory framework for ensuring that remuneration
or employment conditions are in keeping with community standards or that the claims of ‘ethical’, ‘green’ or ‘fair’ producers are verifiable or should be responsive to political obligations.

Contemporary citizens are in this view not the self-interested social atoms of Randian conservatism nor are they the agents of social solidarity championed by progressives in industrial society. Rather, contemporary citizens are enlightened and articulate, self-responsible individuals who hold ‘stakes’ in local communities while inhabiting an ambiguously ‘greening’ ecostate that competes on the global stage by reducing societal ‘on-costs’ (Supiot, 2006). Stakeholder ‘politics’ emerges when it no longer makes sense to situate or orient one’s Self according to an assumed collective viewpoint (Gauchet, 1997[1985]), where what defines politics is a shared belief in the veracity of self-realization and personal authenticity as the final arbiters of ethical and moral duties and political obligations. Whereas ‘social’ citizenship had been anchored in rights to a ‘fair share’ of the spoils of industrial despoliation of the ecosphere and duties to serve in the armed forces, reproduce offspring and reject ‘communism’ (Turner, 2001), stakeholder citizenship is anchored by rights and duties that build upon a normalizing of Beck’s subpolitics of risk, where inequality is defined in terms of low levels of wellbeing, an absence of security from risk or lack of opportunities for self-responsible participation in decision-making on ‘existential’ issues such as ‘liveability’. However, such ‘existential’ rights and duties make it difficult to claim that wellness extends beyond personal health or wealth, or that the provision of personal choice and local action themselves do not necessarily constitute steps towards ensuring social equality. Moreover, emphases on subjective wellbeing, and self-responsibility for it make it difficult to delineate clearly between discourses and actions that have as their objective private ends, such as profitability, or social ends, such as environmental reparations or social equality.

Conclusion

If there is an advantage to conceiving of things in these terms, it may be that it sheds light on the reframing of discourses of equality and inequality away from a dualist frame, wherein social classes challenged each other in a Manichean struggle to divide the spoils of industrial subjection of nature, and towards one in which citizens act collaboratively across a local-global frame of reference to ‘steer’ the social development trajectory within the systemic constraints of the ecosphere. That is, stakeholder citizenship normalizes a holistic representational grammar, one in which equality and inequality appear as diffuse whole-of-society problems and where the distinction between the bearers of rights and of responsibilities is blurred. In contrast with views that it is no longer possible to clearly delineate between reactionary and progressive positions (Giddens, 1998, Delanty, 2000, McKnight, 2005), recognizing the partial assimilation of the five critiques amplifies divisions between the two. The progressive task — enunciating claims that the presence of social inequality is an injustice — has become more complex, while the conservative position — that inequality is inevitable, and that justice is a by-product of policy that enforces a principle of desert — is somewhat simplified.

On the one hand, whereas reactionary politics had long sought to ‘conserve’ structures of privilege based in particularist rather than universalist principles of desert, and sought to justify this through claims to be upholding tradition, fact over utopia or essentialism over contingency (Hirschman, 1991), such indirectness seems
no longer necessary. Contemporary calls to preserve social privilege demand directly the ‘unburdening’ individuals and communities; as with calls to privatize insurance against risk or pursue wellbeing through consumption. What is central are ever-expanding negative freedoms to realize an unbounded selfhood. Such post-dualist conservatism is expressed by the United States’ Tea Party but also emerges in the Netherlands, Australia and Britain, for example. The Dutch politician Geert Wilders and the Cronulla Beach rioters make clear that what is at stake is not so much the need for tradition, strong leaders or exclusive ethnicity but the perceived threat to a relatively affluent quality-of-life. Similarly, for the British National Party/English Defence League, ultra-libertarian interpretations of freedom support a kind of untrammelled consumer philistinism (Scerri, 2011c).

On the other hand, whereas progressivism had sought to universalize freedom through economic redistribution —within a state that is committed to subjugating nature — the industrial solidarity underpinning such claims is no longer available. Stakeholder citizenship implies a rethinking of the idea of employment or, indeed, of the nexus of employment with equality: income, as well as access to life-long education and professional training and independence, mobility, inclusion and participation are all demanded. Wellbeing itself emerges as a social problem of the provision of capabilities and capacities to confront risk in ways that respect future generations and the capacity of the ecosphere to support society at a global scale. Moreover, no longer can a single group in society — ‘white male industrial worker’ — monopolize citizenship to the deliberate or accidental exclusion of others. The progressive political position is bound to support political institutions that redistribute rights to ecological space fairly, recognize as equal all social participants and provide transparent representation or participation, while delineating the territorial reach of the political community of citizens against global aspirations to remain within the capacity of the ecosphere to provide for present and future generations (Schlosberg, 1999, 2007), such that ‘it is not only the substance of justice, but also the frame, that is in dispute’ (Fraser, 2009).

**Keywords**

Environmental/ecological citizenship; stakeholder society; left/right ideologies; individualization and risk; selfhood and the new economy

**References**


UNGC (2008) About the GC. New York: UNGC.
