Ecological Citizenship

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Abstract This article explores the main features of ecological citizenship and explains why this form of post-national citizenship is better adapted to facing current environmental issues than traditional forms of bounded citizenship. It draws on Andrew Dobson's *Citizenship and the Environment* (2003), one of the most sustained attempts to examine citizenship from an ecological perspective, but also suggests modifying and complementing this influential account using three approaches: cosmopolitanism, limitarianism, and the planetary boundary framework. These three elements could contribute to giving a fresh start to ecological citizenship, a notion that was much debated from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, but that has been gradually marginalized in discussions within citizenship theory.

Ecological citizenship appeared in the mid-1990s as a renewed and expanded notion of citizenship that would help humanity to face global environmental problems, such as anthropogenic mass extinction, climate change, and ozone depletion (e.g., van Steenbergen 1994; Christoff 1996; Smith 1998; Barry 1999, 2002; Dobson 2003; Valencia Sáiz 2005; Dobson and Valencia Sáiz 2005; Hayward 2006; Dobson and Bell 2006). In contrast with traditional liberal and civic republican approaches, which operated under the assumption that humans organize themselves into bounded political communities, ecological citizenship questions the long-standing association between citizenship and nationality. Due to global environmental changes, the relevant political communities today are not only delimited by national borders, but also by the influence of our economic activities and political choices on distant strangers.

Andrew Dobson's *Citizenship and the Environment* is, to date, the most influential book-length exploration of the citizenship–environment connection (Dobson 2003). Dobson argues that the ecological model of citizenship is:

(1) *Anthropocentric*: obligations of ecological citizenship are owed only to other human beings.

(2) *Relationalist*: obligations of ecological citizenship are based on the particular relationships shared by ecological citizens.

(3) *Post-national*: the community of ecological citizens expands beyond national borders.

(4) *Intergenerational*: the community of ecological citizens includes members of future generations.

(5) *Asymmetric*: obligations of ecological citizenship are owed only by those who make unfair use of their ecological space.

To begin with, ecological citizenship is anthropocentric (1). The main reason for this is that duties of citizenship and citizenship rights are a matter of justice, and justice is about relationships between human beings. The community of ecological citizens is a community of justice, and can therefore only be composed of humans. This implies that our relationships

with non-human beings cannot be citizenly, even if they can be humanitarian. Although some green political theorists, in early contributions, proposed expanding citizenship rights and duties of citizenship to non-human beings (Twine 1994; Smith 1998), the anthropocentric view has become the most widespread in the literature (see e.g. contributions in Dobson and Bell 2006).

More precisely, ecological citizenship is about the relationships shared by people occupying the same ecological space, with each person's share of that space being defined by their ecological footprint (2). The political community of ecological citizens is not given, but created by their ecological footprint, that is, the quantity of natural resources and services they appropriate to sustain their consumption and production patterns. Since our ecological footprint contributes to global environmental changes, the political community of ecological citizens extends beyond national borders (3). Like all forms of citizenship, ecological citizenship is a community of strangers. Given that ecological problems such as climate change are not only global, but also intergenerational, we can be fellow citizens with strangers distant in both space and time (4). Obligations of ecological citizenship "extend through time as well as space, towards generations yet to be born" (Dobson 2003).

But what is the content of these obligations? The principal obligation of the ecological citizen is to have a sustainable ecological footprint. Drawing on the Brundtland report (WCED 1987), Dobson (2003) highlights that "the ecological citizen will want to ensure that his or her ecological footprint does not compromise or foreclose the ability of others in present and future generations to pursue options important to them." Those who occupy more than their fair share of the available ecological space have an obligation (a) to reduce their ecological footprint and (b) to compensate those impacted by their unsustainable ecological footprint. These obligations are only owed by those who have an excessive ecological footprint; those who already make fair use of their ecological space have fulfilled their ecological obligations (5).

In the context of ecological citizenship, changes in behaviors and in underlying attitudes are therefore as important as political participation in the decision-making process that determines the terms of social cooperation. Since both public (e.g. political choices) and private (e.g. consumption choices) contribute to individuals' ecological footprint, the private realm becomes a site of citizenship activity. One can be a good ecological citizen not only as a voter, an elector, or an activist, but also as a consumer, a producer, a parent, or a worker (Barry 2006; Bourban 2020).

To sum up, ecological citizenship represents an expansion of traditional accounts of citizenship on three counts: from the public to the private realm; from the national to the post-national community; and from present to future generations. The public realm, the national community and present generations remain relevant, but to become properly ecological, the notion of citizenship needs to be extended beyond these features.

Despite these promising conceptual innovations, relatively few political theorists are working on ecological citizenship today. After a decade of sustained development from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, ecological citizenship has been progressively marginalized from normative debates on citizenship. The notion therefore needs a fresh start to make it the center of attention again. Three approaches could prove helpful with this in mind.

The first approach is cosmopolitanism, which also supports a distinctive model of citizenship. Just like ecological citizenship, cosmopolitan citizenship is (a) unbounded and (b) less about vertical relations between citizens and the state than about the horizontal relationships between citizens themselves. Surprisingly, Dobson went to great length to distinguish his model of post-national citizenship from cosmopolitan citizenship, claiming that ecological

citizenship is “a specific instantiation and interpretation of post-cosmopolitan citizenship” (Dobson 2003). He criticizes in particular the “thin community” of common humanity advocated by cosmopolitans, which he contrasts with the “thick community” of historical obligation he supports, which he believes is the only one that can lead to a truly political community. It is nevertheless possible to see these two forms of citizenship – ecological and cosmopolitan – as mutually reinforcing, making it possible to go beyond national citizenship, which remains dominant both in theory and in practice. In particular, a cosmopolitan account would ground the principal obligation of ecological citizenship in the universal right to a fair (whether sufficient or equal) ecological space. A recognition of this right would reinforce the idea that the obligation to adopt a sustainable ecological footprint is a duty of global and intergenerational justice (Hayward 2006).

The second approach is limitarianism, a view of distributive justice according to which “it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life” (Robeyns 2017). While sufficientarianism sets a lower threshold on the quantity of goods people should own to live a decent or flourishing life, limitarianism sets an upper threshold on the quantity of goods people should be allowed to possess. So far, limitarianism has focused on economic resources such as income and wealth. But wealth limitarianism can be complemented by ecological limitarianism, which sets an upper threshold on the amount of ecological resources individuals ought to appropriate. Limitarianism is directly related to the core commitment of ecological citizenship: both are based on the idea that individuals should adapt their lifestyles to the natural limits to economic and population growth. By setting an upper threshold on the legitimate use of natural resources and services, ecological citizenship makes it possible to develop the content of ecological limitarianism. The use of the natural capital by a moral agent should not be so great that, if it were to be universalized, it would foreclose the ability of others in present and future generations to pursue options important to them or to live a fulfilling life.

Where would the upper threshold be set by such an ecological limitarian account? This is where the third approach proves useful: the planetary boundary framework, which highlights nine biophysical thresholds that should not be crossed (Steffen et al. 2015). The disruption of overarching, planetary-level systems causes environmental changes taking us out of the stable environmental conditions of the Holocene. Four planetary systems have already been pushed beyond their critical limits, marking our shattering entry into the Anthropocene: the climate system, biodiversity, the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, and land use. The planetary boundary framework also makes it possible to separate the ecological footprint into its different components, such as greenhouse gas emissions contributing to climate change and ocean acidification, fertilizer use contributing to the disturbance of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, pesticide and herbicide use together with fishing and hunting practices contributing to biodiversity loss, and so on. Each time, a corresponding planetary boundary represents an upper limit not to cross, an absolute line below which humans can produce and consume sustainably.

A restatement of the notion of ecological citizenship would represent two major advantages. On the one hand, a reconceptualized and updated notion of ecological citizenship based on cosmopolitanism, limitarianism, and the planetary boundary framework could contribute to putting this original model of post-national citizenship at the center of debates in political theory once again. On the other hand, drawing on the conceptual innovations of ecological citizenship theorists, especially their extension of citizenship activity beyond the public sphere, together with their inclusion in the political community of strangers distant in both space and time, could allow scholars in climate ethics, environmental ethics, and global justice to find new normative resources to move the debates in their fields forward. Since the

most pressing ecological issues, such as climate change and biodiversity loss are genuinely global and intergenerational, we are in urgent need of theories that expand key normative notions such as justice, responsibility, and citizenship beyond national borders and present generations.

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