RESEARCHING ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENSHIP AND ITS PUBLICS

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First draft, obviously: conventional author panic at being quoted at this stage applies

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Introduction: the empirical purchase of (environmental?) citizenship

One of the clearest lessons of the soul-searing events of 11-S and 11-M is a reminder that we can no longer afford ignorance in any scale. The production of hate in faraway, hitherto despised or what simply looked like irrelevant places suddenly mattered more to my neighbours and me than anything else; jihadist readings of the Coran in Moroccan medresses, or Saudi funding of radical wahabite mosques in the outskirts of Madrid, were relevant again to good old Al-Andalus. Things like bombs and the train I had taken daily for ten years and mobile phones and *sura* and illegal immigrants working on scaffolds building our homes became overnight (were shown to have been all the time) entangled, an *imbroglio* of what Bruno Latour calls “hairy objects” (*objets chevelus*), entities whose attachments and foldings and hybridations are exactly the opposite of the transportable, self-contained, free-floating objects of modernity.

Has this got anything to do with citizenship? I take this term to condense all that is related to the ability of people to (re)build, in common, a common world. This view is, I readily acknowledge, deeply biased towards a purely political version of citizenship, and I am slightly surprised myself to see that it shares Hannah Arendt’s vision of politics more than I would have anticipated. From this point of view, all other rights, entitlements and endowments are second-degree traits of citizenship, gained, redefined, secured or challenged from this primary arena of political citizenship. No need to say that health or retirement pensions are hardly irrelevant to people’s lives. But once they have been institutionalised, their language and nature is closer to bureaucratic management, whereas the language of citizens I would like to focus upon is that of describing and prescribing a world in the making, when emerging rights and institutions are still being imagined or justified or decried.

I have for a long time wondered whether a requisite for meaningful citizenship to exist at all was taken for granted, or assumed away from the debate. This component is knowledge. It can be argued that there is always some degree of knowledge involved when people enact their citizenship. We may take for granted political rights, such as universal voting, in Western democracies, but in Florida many of us would have a hard time finding out that one can vote without a photo ID (and in a country without national,
compulsory ID that is no small matter) by casting a “personal affidavit ballot”. Barriers of this kind may have been crucial in keeping minorities in a sort of cognitive disenfranchisement. Or in that same warm state, many poor people eligible for Medicaid effectively get to know at all about their entitlement (granted, of the means-tested, non-universalist variety) when they try and have their children covered by the KidCare programme. Even in a strict bundle-of-rights definition of citizenship, knowledge is a relevant enabling variable.

But I would like to pursue this cognitive underpinning of democracy further. Of course voters’ knowledge has concerned a strand of political science, mainly to the degree that it affected party choice or was related to parties’ stance on certain issues. More on this below. But I am trying to take a wider (or deeper) view here, that is directly related to one of the three dimensions of citizenship as described by Jean Leca: namely, the intelligibility of the political world as a precondition for any meaningful commitment to it. Public-making will be put forward below as an ongoing practice towards increasing this intelligibility. As I will try to explicate below, knowing is itself a hard task, a political activity in its own right, and one that cannot be taken for granted in discussion the scope of citizens’ actions.

Alas, I am a sociologist. My contribution I have chosen to make in finding out what people do, and less in what they should do. I share with the latter normative debate the middle ground of an interest in what they could do, which is informed by both. But in this research effort, it is by no means clear to me how useful the notion of citizenship is for political sociology. Insofar as its task can be defined as the description of the practice of politics, the debate on citizenship may be too removed from “real life” to be of much help. I have often felt like I was somehow betraying research subjects when asking them in oblique ways what they felt about work, autonomy or health and then

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2 According to the New York Times (04/04/04 editorial), Missouri’s Web site states cryptically that voters “must present one of the forms of identification as provided in 115.427”. That would mean a steep barrier to my own practice of political citizenship, were I a Missourian.

3 Whose rules, by the way, the Republican administration has just changed in order to make access cognitively more difficult, providing no information about waiting lists and “frozen out” children.

4 “The belief in the intelligibility of the political world to each citizen is logically linked to the first characteristic of citizenship: it is impossible to conflate subjection and government, the actual situation of the ruled and the imagined situation of the ruler, if we do not have a cognitive map of the ‘system’ as a mechanism (causal or effective) which is knowable or able to be mastered, at least in part or at certain levels” (Leca, 1990, p. 153). The other two dimensions are empathy and civility (better represented in post-cosmopolitan reconstructions of citizenship).
recasting all that in terms of citizenship, often without their ever mentioning it once, or even rejecting the notion as meaningless or alien\(^5\). Citizenship theory (the little part of it I know) often fails the main requisite that it should have to be useful for my research, which is to organize what is, not despair over what is not. Many \textit{a priori} formulations\(^6\) of what a citizen is or does (or most often, should be or do) do not help me much, to be honest. They add to my uneasiness about usefulness a concern that I am indulging in that time-honored but unfair intellectual habit of gleefully pointing at the chasm between ideal entities (citizens, in this case) and real people.

What about the “environmental” adjectivation of citizenship? The environmental dimension has been already used (Dobson 1999, 2003) as a way both to enhance and take to task the notion of citizenship. It has proved its worth in confronting the two main strands of liberal and civic republican theory of citizenship with their shortcomings and blind spots. But is it a tool for empirical description? Does it provide any added value, or it simply compounds the problem? I think it may be helpful in highlighting the role of knowledge as a crucial realm of citizenship activity, for a variety of reasons. First, the complexity of the issues involved (e.g., in spatial and temporal terms, in unexpected consequences of action in what we thought were unrelated places) takes us very close to Walter Lippmann’s despair of making compatible wicked problems and meaningful citizen participation in public governance. For any of those acquainted with the original debate, it will be no surprise that I have taken refuge in John Dewey’s rather more upbeat work. Adding an environmental depth to citizenship research provides an analytically valuable tension to it, in that the cognitive burden to citizens is brought to centre stage. One need not fully spouse Downs’ theory of voters’ cognitive free riding to suggest that it is an unreasonable expectation from \textit{all} citizens to invest all kinds of scarce resources \textit{so that} they can then restrict their choices.

But my argument is a different, even simpler one: after investing the inordinate amount of resources to find out what the impact of X action on the environment is, it is simply a painful waste of democratic, collective energy to confine that action-shaping knowledge.

\(^5\) To be fair, rocketing immigration in recent years has somewhat paradoxically increased the currency of the term, since now there is an “other” against which “real” citizens can be identified, not necessarily in xenophobic terms at all, but insofar as the contrast makes evident that it is possible to be lacking in important rights and privileges.

\(^6\) Dobson’s \textit{Definitional Brigade} is a clever, nicely irreverent way to describe this rigidity.
to individual, private restrain in consumption, or even silent voting behaviour. In fact, it can be argued from a Deweyan perspective that we have a “duty” as “officers” of the network of democratic publics to contribute to the primary task of its collective discovery. As important as close-to-home behaviour is, the population of the public sphere with environmentally sensitive discourses is at least as relevant.

Finally, the relevance of knowledge-making as a political activity, making clear that we are to see scientific research and its connections to the public as a contested site, shows that the environment provides a kind of litmus test for citizenship. Partly as a consequence, the role of knowledge mediation and mediators is emphasized.

In what follows, I shall try to show the relevance of a Deweyan understanding of publics as a site of citizenship construction that is relevant for political sociological research, precisely because it is conceived of as an a posteriori result. After that, I will focus into knowledge production and incorporation as a dimension of the political activities of citizens, which I will contrast to social capital theory (or a local-communitarian version of social capital) misreading of its own evidence. I will then have an exploratory look at Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations campaigns, and see whether they can be usefully explored from the coordinate system of public-building. A final section briefly deals with what can be gleaned of some recent surveys about trust on knowledge mediators and their role in environmental public-building.

**Deweyan publics as arenas of citizenship**

*The public and its problems*, a series of conferences delivered by John Dewey in 1926 in Kenyon College, Ohio, is a peculiar book, and contains a peculiar definition of what a public is. It does not take an extraordinary exegetic impulse to learn what that is, since Dewey quite followed Ortega y Gasset’s dictum, “clarity is the courtesy of philosophers”. People carry out actions whose consequences go beyond the borders of

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7 This argument was the source of the preceding title to this paper, but as I hope to have made clear, I meant to avoid as far as possible the normative quagmires in order to have a workable image of citizenship as public-making.
those immediately involved in that action (this strongly resembles the notion of externalities in economics, as many a reader must have noticed). Other people are affected by these consequences, they find out this is the case, and they try and organize to regulate the harmful behaviour, usually by means of officers. That is a public, and the sum of all officers and publics is a state.

Therefore, the public is always “in search of itself”, since it “depends upon consequences of acts and the perception of consequences” (p. 65). Dewey explicitly chooses to define thus the public and the state so that their concrete contours will be an empirical matter, an \textit{a posteriori} result of the interaction between the ability of citizens to form publics, and to organize them into regulatory agencies, i.e. (sections of) the state. From this point of view, the “primary problem of the public [is] to achieve such recognition of itself as will give it weight in the selection of official representatives and in the definition of their responsibilities and rights” (p. 77). As I hinted at above, when discussing the importance of reflective voting, Dewey notes in passing that citizen-voters are in fact \textit{officers} of the public when performing the tasks of identifying common problems (consequences of “private” actions run amok) and selecting representatives to deal with them. “As a citizen-voter each one… is an officer of the public” (p. 75).

It is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that Dewey is levelling his contribution at Walter Lippman, who had forcefully stated a couple of years earlier that “the individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs”. I see Dewey’s response as boiling down to this: perhaps (surely) citizens are not as able as they should to collectively identify\textsuperscript{8} the consequences of actions, and/or

\textsuperscript{8} In any case, Lippmann’s “omnicompetent citizen”, an ideal that he thought pitifully harmful as “a fat man trying to be a ballet dancer”, was a straw man from the start. Politicians and experts are as far removed from omnicompetency as any lay person, and it is most of all the accumulation within the argument of what are in fact highly fragmented pieces of expertise, coupled with an institutional environment designed not to provide high quality information, that make citizens’ knowledge look hopelessly irrelevant. Let me give you an example. In a recent interview on television, Mariano Rajoy, the candidate in the controversial Spanish elections of the 14th of March, was asked about the Spanish
translate that perception into regulatory action, but there is no other source of political control over our own destiny. That is all there is to it: precious little democratic politics exists beyond that process of collective finding out and reining in.

**Knowledgeable citizens, sometimes**

How much can and should we expect citizens to know? From the work of Converse to this day, the hegemonic view of the public has very well managed to avoid what Lippmann called “the mystical fallacy of democracy” in *The Phantom Public*, namely, to believe that all citizens were competent. In fact, it may have gone too far in the opposite direction.

Perhaps a line on a very successful notion in recent years within political science and sociology can be illustrative here. In the book that ignited the recent interest in social capital, *Making Democracy Work*, Robert Putnam managed to misread his own evidence, or perhaps simply decoupled the data he used from the interpretation he gave of the central “civic community” indicator. In a nutshell, this figure he arrived at by condensing effective, platform-based voting behaviour, and newspaper readership, with sport and cultural associative density a distant fourth factor. The main point is that what he had found was that the more a region approached the ideal of an well-informed citizenry ready to use the ballot as a democratic device for governance of all matters, the better its government worked. Hardly revolutionary, perhaps to be expected, but relevant. But he, and countless others in his wake, have argued that it is associative networks and the norms of trust arising from them, with a heavy leaning towards their

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National Hydrologic Plan, with its huge Ebro out-of-basin diversions and water transfers. He answered that he sincerely could not understand what the problem was. “That water goes to sea! It simply gets lost!”, he earnestly exclaimed. Now, it does not take much reading to find out that the Rhone and Ebro water is crucial for the complex circulation of silt, sand, nutrients and oxygen in the Mediterranean western area. Everything, from tourism to fishing industries, could be affected by the projected diversions. Was Rajoy hiding his knowledge, or had he not read the reports? An argument that is perhaps valid in both cases is that his public justification of the Plan was based on his ignorance or denial of the environmental consequences of the problem. We are not exactly in Lippmann’s technocratic monopoly of knowledge here.

[Goldberg (1996)] was among the first scholars to find Putnam’s methodology objectionable.
local instations, that perform that magic. *Non sequitur*¹⁰. I cannot discuss at length what I consider the underlying reasons¹¹ for this, but I would like to suggest that the neglected argument of *Making Democracy Work* illustrates what I have called “public capabilities”, the effective skills and structures that enable people to form publics in Dewey’s sense.

My main argument here is that citizens do know a lot, but not all the time about all issues and not without a considerable investment in resources. But then no one does. Two points are in order at this stage. First, citizens have managed to contest, reorient and open up knowledge creation through scientific research, as the fascinating studies of Steve Epstein (1996) in the case of AIDS, or Callon and Rabeharisoa (2003) for rare diseases such as muscular dystrophy show. In the latter case, patients “decided to develop their own capacities and to set up collaborative research with scientists and clinicians… this political choice, based on a certain organization in the production of knowledge has, in turn, produced its own exclusion. To understand this never-ending movement in the reconfiguration of identities, inclusion and exclusion, we have to accept the symmetry between expertise in the wild and laboratory expertise” (p. 202).

Second, participatory democratic experiments such as deliberative polls or citizens’ juries show that, given half the chance, citizens “can make informed and important recommendations on issues that concern the current and future well-being of their fellow citizens”, as the Citizens’ Jury Project at PEALS states. The problem may lie, rather to the contrary of the Lippmannian or Schumpeterian line, in that people are perfectly able of reframing the questions posed to them, recasting the issues and reconnecting the dots of their situations and the alternatives on which they have been briefed. The image that has caught my imagination is a picture of an illiterate Hindu farmer in Andra Pradesh discussing the implications of insect resistance to GMOs or crop-related microbial edaphic biodiversity (see Wakeford, 2002, and Pimber *et al.*, 2001). Of course, this implies that the institutional framework must be reconstructed in order to secure the resources, spaces and connections to real decision-making. But a

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¹⁰ Not only the social capital interpretation does not follow from the evidence, but it points elsewhere. For instance, in spite of a dodgy reclassification of regions into four categories, the levels of aggregated trust correlate very little with the “civic community” indicator.

¹¹ The “hidden agenda” of social capital, like civic traditions, has its roots in the past. In this case, reading Robert D. Putnam’s first article (1966)
Deweyan dynamic view of public- and state-formation is closer in this respect to Michael Saward’s (2003) contention that it is through new democratic devices that meaningful citizenship can be enacted.

**Knowledge-making as a contested arena of citizenship**

After decades of Science Studies and critical epistemology, it is a commonplace to argue that scientists are not neutral truth-seekers whose products are untainted by economic interests or power struggles. The role of “lay” persons has come under scrutiny, and its connections with democratic processes analysed in an increasingly critical way.

I would like to make two points here. The first concerns the invisible (or at least, not too visible) role accorded to knowledge in descriptions of citizenly activity. The second has to do with the political nature of knowledge itself, and the democratic institutions capable of providing a framework for it. If one reads contributions like Andrew Dobson’s to this workshop (2004), one gets the impression that the core of environmental citizenship is related to that daily caring activity so cherished by greens, a kind of intimate, sweeter mirror of civic republican readiness to sacrifice the self in patriotic warfare. But this self-restrained, disciplined ascetic realm of citizenly virtue takes its point of departure after the impact of lifestyle on the environment has been ascertained. “The stress on the quotidian, personal, nature of green politics is one of the strongest currents in political ecology. We are constantly enjoined to link the facts of the form of our daily behaviour with the state of the environment we find around us. Green politics urges us to connect the way we live our lives with the impact we make upon the natural world. We are made to feel responsible for the state of the environment, and simultaneously encouraged to see that we can do something about it” (Dobson, 2004, p. 6). But how do these virtuous citizens get to know what that impact is? What reports should they read? Should issues be revisited? As an example taken from my own experience, eolic energy was hailed 15 years ago almost as a panacea against polluting energy generation. When large wind farms began to populate landscapes from California to Valencia, unanticipated consequences emerged. Fragile birds and bats were killed by the hundreds, environmental impact evaluations of
windmills were contested on the ground that they had not taken long enough to ascertain whether turbines interfered with migration patterns, rural tourism (a highly praised route to sustainable development) was jeopardized. The task of finding out about “environmental impacts” is in itself a highly demanding, collective task. As Sabel et al. (2000) have argued, citizens face “the daunting task of determining what should occur in their backyards—what kinds of activity are productive, yet acceptably sustainable… they must transform their traditionally antagonistic relationships with experts into partnerships for environmental protection; to determine what the tolerable activities are, given continuous change in the nature of risks and our understanding of how to respond to them, they need to fuse the broad experience of professional practitioners with the contextual intelligence that only citizens possess… citizens with their new allies can fundamentally reshape regulatory systems, for the good of democracy and the environment”.

As to the second point, the crux of the matter lies in the separation of values and technical knowledge. “I consider sustainable development to be at least as much about values as about techniques and technologies […] The key questions, then, are not technical—they are normative” (Dobson, 2003, p. 183: italics not added). This stark separation is hardly tenable in a scale-one experimental world (Latour, in press, 1999). In fact, the intermingling of technical and value matters take us from the world of “matters of fact”, where Science had a pretense to Truth, the low world of politics started and kept silent after It had spoken, to “states of affairs”, where researchers and all kinds of stakeholders attempt to be acknowledged as legitimate spokespersons for different collectives. This Latourian model of politiques de la nature resonates well (as the author has repeatedly acknowledged) with Dewey’s notion of the public. Citizenship, if it is going to be meaningful at all, cannot begin after the bigger picture, the encompassing framework has been canvassed outside its domain.

The actions of environmental organizations

What dimensions of citizenship activity are environmental non-governmental organizations promoting? Can they meaningfully described as public-building in the sense discussed below? If that were the case, we should see their actions geared towards
1) contesting environmental knowledge production, 2) helping identify externalities and 3) connecting those inchoate publics to the regulatory agencies. As a side note, it is implicit here that we are addressing ENGOs as likely sites of citizenship construction, but by no means the only or even foremost among them. However, public-forming as a research guide in the political sociology of citizenship enables us to be as experimental as the Deweyan description of the process itself: we only need to formulate working hypothesis of where and how public formation is taking place, and then check empirically whether this is the case. The contours of citizenship activity will thus begin to emerge.

Let us simply, in a methodologically naïve way, take a look at their current campaigns. As I browse their websites, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have a set of campaigns that nicely fit the bill of Deweyan public formation. Greenpeace.org features a call to keep building “the second superpower”, global public opinion, that anti-war demonstrations in 2003 had allowed us to glimpse. We then find a head-on denunciation of chemical industry lobbies attempting to roll back anti-pollution laws in California, and a quite “technical” reassessment of research done on the Exxon Valdez oil spill consequences. Foe.org prompts ecologically-minded individuals to ask their representatives in the US Senate to prevent William G. Myers III from being appointed to the 9th Court of Appeals; it denounces unethical behaviour by the Deputy Secretary of Interior; in the “externalities” side, a delightful Flash movie, The Meatrix, educates the visitor on the truth about factory farming and its consequences on animal cruelty, food quality, massive pollution, antibiotic resistance, and farming communities destruction. A link to the Your Vote Matters campaign wraps the public-building practice of environmental citizenship in these websites.

To balance, a version of environmental citizenship closer to ascetic discipline can be found at the WorldWatch Institute website, that currently emphasises responsible consumption, among other things through its consumption guide *Good Stuff? A Behind-the-Scenes Guide to the Things We Buy*. However, the emphasis on learning the “behind the scenes” consequences of commodity production and trade, the explosion of translocal implications of consumption, take us again towards the “collective discovery” pole of public formation.
Bruno Latour, who has recently begun to cast his *politiques de la nature* in Deweyan terms, has described this set of practices as the core of political ecology (chastising simultaneously those who represent ecologists’ actions as “the defence of nature”). The activity of ENGOs campaigns can also be read as providing a publicly available and legitimate grammar of justification, to enable bridging the “public” and the “private” (and these are obviously to be taken as shifting, *a posteriori* categories to be empirically looked into).

**Who knows about this?: knowledge mediation and trust [section to be developed]**

In a recent Eurobarometer on Europeans’ attitudes towards the environment (58.0),

**Conclusion: environmental citizenship and its publics**

I started out from a very basic, research-oriented question: does seeing citizenship activity as public-formation provide a useful guideline for finding out about political action as it is practiced? Does adding an environmental outlook on citizenship make it less or more adequate in this sense? I think the tentative answer may be in the positive. First, the nature of citizenship becomes a contingent matter and an empirical question. Here the environmental dimension exercises its “disruptive” influence in that the territorial, public-private, passive-active, rights-responsibilities prescriptions are to be shown to be relevant in concrete contexts, losing their “Procrustean bed” quality. It also highlights the relevance of knowledge, since complex, tangled, unbounded and non-anticipatable describe quite well what ecological problems are like.
References


