



Sustainability Citizenship in Cities: Theory and Practice

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BOOK REVIEW

Sustainability Citizenship in Cities: Theory and Practice, edited by Ralph Horne, John Fien, Beau B. Beza, and Anitra Nelson, Abingdon, Routledge (Earthscan), 2016, 223 pp., (paperback), ISBN 978 1 138 93363 7

Despite the social and environmental imperative to live sustainably, we daily witness new feats of environmental inaction on the global and national stage. With the failure of neoliberal states to engage with the dual challenges of climate change and economic crises, the philosophies and practices of citizens and community activists have attracted increasing attention as sites of innovation in social and ecological stewardship. While urban coalitions and citizens' movements often confound clear political boundaries, they have long played important roles in expanding and contesting both the formal and substantive boundaries of citizenship in cities (Isin 2002). Whether and how the practices of ecologically and socially-minded citizens can offer new resources for urban sustainability is the key focus of the new edited collection *Sustainability Citizenship in Cities*.

Drawing on contemporary environmental scholarship and praxis, the aim of editors Ralph Horne, John Feine, Beau Beza and Anitra Nelson is to develop an "holistic and universal concept of citizenship" (p. 17). In doing so, they turn to the philosophies and practices of anti-consumption movements and everyday households to illuminate a myriad of social and environmental initiatives shaping contemporary neoliberal cities. This is by no means an uncritical celebration of localised community-led projects. Rather, the text also aims to establish whether and how such practices of citizenship can shape Australian and select international cities in politically and materially constrained contexts.

These compelling aims are addressed over four sections. The first, "*Framing sustainability citizenship*", does the heavy lifting in terms of defining key concepts and terms. Here, Anitra Nelson differentiates sustainability citizenship from socio-political models by its concern for the ecological limits of the Earth. In this framing, citizen allegiance and responsibilities are untethered from the concerns of the nation-state and reoriented towards the securitisation of the planet. With reference to *glocalisation* – a term meaning the coproduction of local activities and global effects—membership in society is cultivated through an engagement with everyday life rather than a commitment to the nation-state. While the legal implications of this relational territory lie outside the scope of the text, the strong steer in these opening chapters, particularly those by Trundle *et al.* and Wals and Lenglet is that deliberative and participatory forms of democracy, as well as peer-to-peer and non-hierarchical governance arrangements, are best equipped to cultivate such socio-ecological responsibility. As Ferne Edwards' fascinating comparative study of the autonomous food movement in Sydney and Caracas shows, this need not equate to the withdrawal of the nation-state. Local initiatives and community-led practice can, and have been supported by national governments to radically democratise distribution and consumption networks.

With the core principles of sustainability established – including a focus on ecological limits, a recognition of the global impacts of local actions, responsibility rather than rights, and participatory forms of democracy in practice – the remainder of the text considers whether and in what contexts sustainability citizenship manifests at the subnational level in Australian (and select international) cities.

Beginning with the Giddensian assumption that individuals are embedded in social structures, "*Housing and Social Innovation*" (Part 2) explores the ways that institutional dynamics intersect with individual behaviours to enable or constrain sustainable home and work practices. Ralph Horne's nuanced analysis of two sustainable housing developments in suburban Melbourne and Trivess Moore's and Tony Dalton's forensic account of the institutional and material limits shaping resident investment in sustainable housing, highlight the governance, institutional and material limits in which individual environmental preferences are situated. While I did wonder whether a materialist theoretical

framework may further leverage the fascinating insights developed in these chapters, together they provide an outstanding resource for those seeking policy settings that can leverage diverse stocks and tenures into a sustainable urban form.

Tim Butcher's "Co-working communities" provides a terrific counterpoint to these chapters by delving into the *informal* spaces of "shared member-based workspaces" (p. 94). Making use of hidden and neglected low-rent commercial spaces, shared member co-operatives provide a social and work environment for freelancers and social entrepreneurs working with "a shoestring budget with a handful of friends" (p. 97). While it would be easy to interpret these ephemeral sites as an expression of precarity (and I did wonder whether and how children and their carers might be integrated into such projects) workers themselves see co-working as an unconventional work practice that is "more humanistic, fluid and sustainable than working a factory, office or retail space" (p. 94). If, as McShane suggests in the following chapter, ICT based social innovation owes as much a debt to the social movements of the 1960s as the "Schumpetrian theory of business innovation" (p. 104), the practices and ethics cultivated in the burgeoning co-working community may indeed chart emergent pathways to a socially sustainable city.

"*Place and equity*" (Part 3) makes a significant theoretical contribution to the collection by explicitly tying sustainability citizenship to matters of social justice in unequal societies. As Annette Gough points out, women have differential access to property, economic livelihoods and political influence than (many) men in patriarchal societies, so the campaign for gender equity should be seen as part of a broad commitment to sustainability. A politics of recognition also means acknowledging that capacities to live sustainably are often most developed among those groups that most trouble the boundaries of citizenship. Working with communities in informal settlements in Bogata for instance, Jaime Hernandez-Garcia shows that home and place-making efforts of residents in the *barrios* "constitute alternative, positive examples of sustainability citizenship in practice" (p. 10). In Melbourne, David Jones and Beau Beza reveal the anxious reiteration of colonialism in Melbourne's former Carlton and United Breweries site, locating the resources for sustainability citizenship in a politics of indigenous reconciliation. Expanding the boundaries of sustainability citizenship by focusing on social difference marks a refreshing change from the "technological fix" that dominates debates around environmental transition. As Beau Beza suggests in his account of urban planning, this is something that the technical professions can and should get involved in.

The final section "*Citizen Participation*" (Part 4) highlights the social and communicative practices through which habits and new social approaches can be cultivated. As Cathy Greenfield points out in her analysis of sustainability discourses in Australia, the term is far from "settled" and any attempt to advance sustainability citizenship needs to engage with a crowded ideological space that includes conservative free market environmentalism and ecological modernisation favoured by centrist parties and their supporters. Developing more holistic understandings will need more sustained discussion and debate, such as the opportunities enabled through the "Learning Cities" paradigm explored by Bruce Wilson, or the intimate micropublics that form around community art projects documented by Tammy Wong Hulbert. Tania Lewis brings the collection full circle by exploring the transformations of suburbia currently underway through the active participation of everyday residents in hard waste recycling. While Lewis makes explicit the privatised and local-scale of ethical consumption, she also notes that these projects help "broaden the base of legitimacy of political environmentalism" (p. 206). While navigating the boundary between "business as usual" and emergent practices requires care, Lewis's chapter, like the collection more broadly does an excellent job. Indeed, the collection is at its best where projects are situated within the wider political, social and material contexts.

I have no doubt that the normative framing and empirically rich materials in this collection will be of great interest to students and course co-ordinators of undergraduate subjects in sustainability, environment and planning. Several chapters also fit comfortably, if somewhat tangentially, within the post-capitalist and post-human literatures presently animating contemporary human and environmental geography. Many of the chapters will also be of interest to postgraduates and professionals researching social movements, community participation, planning, urban governance and sustainability.

While normative theorisation can be risky—not least because citizenship is a wholly contested process—it seems to me that the gamble taken by the editors in identifying a “universal concept” pays off. Amongst a generation of young scholars who reject neoliberalism but for whom Keynesianism is a flawed mechanism for socio-ecological change, the text establishes identifiable principles that separate the “anxious ... and apathetic worker-consumer” from “social change agents” (p. 21). In setting out a model of sustainability to argue for, the text also has a political advantage: it provides a set of clear principles for guiding policy development and discourse. All processes of subject formation should be relentlessly interrogated, but the editors achieve a nuanced touch: the processual quality of citizenship is recognised as “a work in progress” (p. 17), while the reader is left in no doubt as to why an environmental model of citizenship cannot afford to abandon the political search for social justice.

Overall, in charting a definitive framework for Earthly citizenship, and exploring techniques through which to advance sustainability, the text doesn't just point to the complexity of contemporary social and environmental issues, it jumps off the fence and develops something to aim for. That such movements are leading the way in new configurations of socio-ecological citizenship suggests that they are important resources for institutional and policy transformation. In doing so, the text offers an explicit counter to discourses of neoliberalism, reveals a myriad of sustainability initiatives often concealed by larger scale studies, and firmly locates sustainable futures within our midst. A lively, inspiring and accessible collection, *Sustainability Citizenship* makes a vital contribution to contemporary urban environmental scholarship and practice.

Reference

Isin, E., 2002. *Being political: genealogies of citizenship*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

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