

Towards ecological citizenship: Institutional violence and the social contract

Antony Allen

Antony is a writer and scholar who works on pursuing environmental justice and human rights. He lives in England and is currently a student with the Open University, UK.

Mark Fisher (2009) famously said that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” – a remark that highlights the challenges we face in transitioning to an ecologically viable future. This rigidity of thought is an engineered product of the dominant political philosophy of liberalism, which has profoundly shaped both the nature of the state and our self-understanding as citizens. In particular, it has made us into *environmental citizens* – who have delegated primary responsibility for the ecological crisis to the institutions of the state while continuing to live lives dedicated to economic self-interest. We need to reclaim our delegated agency and become *ecological citizens*, actively dedicated to building communities with the capabilities needed to achieve an ecological transition. Even in the face of a political system that is increasingly turning to violence as an instrument of policy to criminalize and oppress defenders of human and environmental rights around the world, there are reasons for hope.

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In our current epoch, the Anthropocene, in which human activity has altered all realms of the planet, humankind faces unprecedented existential threats. With widespread insecurity resulting from climate change, flooding, population displacement and food insecurity, states are able to placate their citizens, consolidate their power and maintain control by propagating a state–citizen relationship rooted in the political philosophy of liberalism. This philosophy, first systematized in John Locke’s 1689 work *Two Treatises of Government*, emphasizes individual freedoms within the framework of a market economy, legitimizing state governance while continuing to fuel unsustainable patterns of development and consumerism. Such ‘social contracts’ have enabled environmental degradation and exploitation to be

framed as an acceptable cost of economic growth, while simultaneously criminalizing and legitimizing the perpetration of violence against those who seek to challenge these anthropocentric arrangements.

In this paper, I argue that replacing liberalism's concept of *environmental* citizenship with that of *ecological* citizenship will help us to transcend anthropocentrism and address the challenges of the Anthropocene. Of course there are significant barriers that stand in the way of any such transformation, as the state increasingly turns to violence – both 'classical' and 'structural' (Galtung, 1969) – as a policy instrument to reinforce capitalist models of development, and silence those who champion the rights of nature. Nonetheless there are reasons for hope – provided (ironically enough) by the flawed notion of a social contract. For that notion reminds us that the state is a creation of our own collective making, and that therefore we are not powerless in the face of it. Just as we continuously recreate and sustain the state through each of our actions and non-actions, so, as ecological citizens, we can remake it.

Citizenship and the social contract

In classical liberalism, a polity or state is considered to derive its legitimacy from an implicit agreement – a 'social contract' – in which the individual citizens voluntarily forgo some of their freedoms in exchange for a greater measure of collective security against the unchecked freedom of others. The social contract is seen as dictating the rights, responsibilities and duties of citizens as subordinate actors under the bodies which govern them (Thomas, 1995).

Liberalism and the idea of a social contract has profoundly shaped both the institutional frameworks of modern liberal democratic states and the self-understanding of ourselves as citizens of those states. In the context of the Anthropocene, these ideas have encouraged us to think of ourselves as *environmental citizens* – permitted to pursue our own desires via consumption within the 'free market' and the rule of law while delegating to the state the primary responsibility for, and control over, the threats to stability and security posed by the looming ecological catastrophe. This has helped to create a culture of passivity among citizens by demanding no significant participation or contribution from them in response to the collective existential threats facing the planet.

As an environmental citizen, the individual is detached from the global collective and assigned duties that are primarily negative in character: *not* to infringe on the rights of other citizens, *not* to knowingly cause direct environmental harm and *not* to otherwise violate the obligations of the social contract. This perpetuates social, economic and environmental inequalities by creating a culture in which citizens need not extend themselves beyond a narrowly conceived sphere of individual interest. In this way, environmental citizenship affords legal and moral protection to individuals, insulating them from moral obligations and a sense of duty towards non-citizens experiencing the consequences of climate change and anthropogenic environmental degradation. This social contract limits the scope of state responsibility and

accountability to those holding legitimate citizenship while fostering a separation between citizens and non-citizens within their sovereign territories and around the world. Furthermore, it reinforces what Latour (1991) has termed a “false separation” between the human and more-than-human worlds – thereby propagating the fallacy that we can each live our unsustainable lifestyle indefinitely without thought to the ecological cost of our activities.

In the face of this, I argue that we must replace the idea of environmental citizenship with that of *ecological citizenship*. Ecological citizenship seeks to transcend traditional understandings of borders, incorporating both human and more-than-human actors, to achieve a just use of ecological space through systems of asymmetrical obligations. These asymmetrical obligations recognize that rights are not reciprocal and that some actors, based on their larger ecological footprint, have moral duties to reduce their consumption that others may not have. In doing so, it presents citizenship not as a universal global contract, but as a dynamic arrangement in which citizens build their identity on more than their patterns of consumption. This identity, based on a conscious choice to protect the integrity and wellbeing of planetary processes in relation to their capabilities, looks to develop personal and structural capabilities to factor a common humanity and the agency of the natural world into decision-making processes. For ecological citizens, innovation and imagination are crucial in overcoming the constraints of the liberal social contract, the discourse of techno-optimism and the inertia of wider publics to pursue more equitable relationships. This choice can be equated to a process of naturalization in which the individual commits to accepting the positive duties to reduce their own patterns of consumption and challenge those who would take more than their just share.

This process of naturalization occurs when an individual experiences something that shakes them out of the state of inertia that is symptomatic of environmental citizenship. It is often the painful, fearful or otherwise emotional confrontation with the reality of the climate crisis that results in an individual seeking to become an ecological citizen. Yet, for others, it is the reformation of their identity as they find themselves reevaluating their values and lifestyles after exposure to something that challenges their sense of morality. This process of naturalization involves a personal commitment to learning about the world, immersing oneself in the culture of ecological citizens and embodying the values associated with that citizenship.

The difficulty of transitioning to ecological citizenship is in the ongoing requirement to exercise one’s agency in accordance with ecological values. For example, an application for UK citizenship involves an external ‘*Life in the UK test*’ which once passed does not enter decision-making processes, whereas ecological citizenship tests the individual internally and externally by requiring more than the simple acknowledgement of moral obligations to others and the environment. In many cases, it involves the active, personal sacrifice of time, money or other resources that disadvantage the individual within the framework of a competitive capitalist system.

The demands of ecological citizenship are controversial in many societies as they invite a critical examination of patterns of development that have become the norm on both an institutional and personal level. They seek to challenge the wasteful and destructive lifestyles that pose an existential threat to life on Earth by promoting transparency and accountability regardless of artificially imposed borders. They require us to exercise our imagination to situate ourselves outside of the time-space bubble created by environmental citizenship and, in doing so, to look beyond our own needs and the parameters of existing institutions to pursue viable solutions to the challenges of the Anthropocene. The innovation required to achieve such change is not beyond current institutional capabilities; for example, the collective pressure of public concern has already managed to move low-carbon technology from fringe science to a legitimate and established paradigm (Schellnhuber *et al.*, 2011: 94).

The brutal reality

With little over five years remaining to limit climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018), actors at all levels of society are aware of the risks we face. Grassroots activism has combined with an unprecedented wealth of ecological knowledge to create societies that demand more from their governments and corporations. Yet, despite the incorporation of ecological values into global society and the aspirational objectives of international bodies, the transition towards an ecologically just society is being viciously obstructed by the self-interest of political institutions and corporations. While states and international organizations espouse ideals of how the world should be, advocating equality, liberty and justice, they are consistently undermined by discourses that view international relations as a competition. Indeed, with a global architecture dominated by the institutions of liberal capitalism, in which markets are permitted to operate with minimal oversight and accountability, any efforts to redefine the parameters of the social contract are tempered with questions of survivability and are framed as risks to economic security. The entrenched nature of global capitalism continues to resist change, concentrating and consolidating power in spheres of finance, security, knowledge and production (Strange, 1994), enabling influential actors to obstruct the necessary ecological transition.

The stark reality of our current system is one of brutality and violence enforced at all levels to persecute anyone who is perceived as a threat to the established order. Increasingly, when defenders of human and environmental rights campaign against exploitative practices and highlight the negative impacts of economic activity, they are subjected to oppressive tactics, framed as criminals and become targets of violence. There have been over 1,900 reported murders of land and environmental defenders over the past decade (Global Witness, 2023), and there is systematic use of forced disappearances, torture, rape and kidnapping to secure extractive industries and commercial operations around the world (EarthRights International, 2018).

The institutionalization of violence as a policy tool, wielded to suppress and harm individuals and communities, is a dangerous step towards an Orwellian

future in which rights and freedoms are distant memories. Indeed, with the widespread erosion of civil rights and freedoms, there has been a correlative increase in structural violence, the harm caused when social structures or institutions prevent people from meeting their most basic needs (Galtung, 1969). Such processes include the exclusion of Indigenous communities from ancestral lands, the devaluation of traditional livelihoods, and the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples into a capitalist society. The mechanisms by which these processes are carried out can be overt like the systematic use of smear campaigns, criminal charges, arrest warrants, illegal shortcuts and mass criminalization, or pursued more covertly through forms of schooling that encourage the slow genocide of traditional culture and values.

This violence and systematic oppression is not confined to the Global South – the same processes implemented against Indigenous communities are being used by governments and corporations around the world to protect their interests and pursue patterns of ecological exploitation and destruction. Increasingly, legal systems founded to uphold individual liberties and offer a recourse for harm are being weaponized against those they are charged with protecting. In the UK, for example, this process has seen the use of illegal shortcuts to criminalize environmental protesters striking at the very heart of British democratic values (Gayle, 2023), resulting in the Civic Freedoms Monitor downgrading the UK to an “obstructed regime” (Civicus, 2023). Likewise, the reinterpretation of criminal legislation has abolished the burden of proof principle in targeting defenders of human and environmental rights, who upon suspicion of activism can be arrested for ‘conspiracy’. This vague charge allows the state to carry out the search and seizure of goods and property – effectively criminalizing activists before conviction, and tearing apart families and reputations in dramatic displays of state power.

Defiance and hope

Despite the human and environmental cost of resistance, people around the world are mobilizing to resist the tide of destructive development and institutional violence. The power to share knowledge and create networks in response to ecological degradation and human suffering is no longer controlled by the elite and we are witnessing the rise of grassroots transboundary activism. Indigenous advocacy groups have been instrumental in identifying the scale of the problems in some of the most remote regions of the planet, bringing them into the public domain and finding the tools to uphold indigenous and environmental rights. For example, the case of the Dongria Kondh of India’s Niyamgiri Hills against the encroachment of the Vedanta mining company illustrates how legal institutions, responding to the power of public pressure, can be used to challenge ecologically destructive activities (Survival International, n.d.). By involving people from around the world, the campaign created the opportunity for global publics to unite their own agency with that of the Dongria Kondh, empowering the community in defiance of the institutional forces arrayed against them.

The use of legal institutions to uphold the rights of nature is, however, a contentious arena. For example, while Kings College London’s Legal Clinic

(2024) has produced a toolkit to champion ecological agency using legal institutions, we must remember that these are the very same courts and institutions that actively criminalize defenders of human and environmental rights. Too often, institutions and states hide the plight of people and places behind the veil of authority, silencing the voices of those standing in defiance through rampant abuses of power.

Yet this pervasive culture of fear and oppression exists, ultimately, only because we collectively allow it to be so. For example, in the UK, when three non-violent environmental activists faced trial for civil disobedience, they were prohibited by a British judge from mentioning the climate crisis as the reason for their actions. Refusing to be cowed by the threat, they spoke against the destruction being wrought on a global scale and were subsequently imprisoned in contempt of court (Laville, 2023). Faced with the choice of protecting their own liberty or upholding their moral duty as ecological citizens, they refused to legitimize the authority of the judge over their own individual freedom of speech and spoke against the ‘business-as-usual’ mentality that drives ecological degradation – thereby opening the issue for wider discussion.

We are not powerless

Whilst liberalism’s idea of a social contract has, historically, been understood anthropocentrically, it can – in the face of so many reasons for fear and apparent hopelessness – serve a powerful ecocentric function by reminding us that the state, its environmental policies and the institutions that enforce those policies are all *beholden to us*, its citizens. They remind us that the state is not an all-powerful entity, separate from us, but is rather our collective construct, and therefore something that we can collectively change (*cf.* Holloway, 2002). It is thus down to every individual to decide whether they will continue contributing to the legitimacy of current social structures and institutions through passive acceptance and an inward-looking mentality – or whether they will help to bring about a better future for the Earth by actively seeking change as an ecological citizen.

As ecological citizens we must look beyond a singular social contract centred in institutions and global structures, to develop an understanding of social contracts as multidimensional, dynamic constructs that emerge and dissolve according to need. Rather than focusing on contractual arrangements and the passive delegation of our obligations to bureaucratic institutions, the objective should be to build the capabilities of all ecological citizens to actively identify issues, facilitate solutions and redress inequalities in all their forms. These multifarious contracts will need to be flexible and temporary, as they otherwise run the risk of reverting to the institutional arrangements they seek to challenge. Such transient, flexible social contracts, driven by the collective power of ecological citizens, offer the potential for a transition towards a more just socio-environmental future, underpinned by systems of polycentric governance, that serve the needs of the entire Earth community rather than transnational corporations and unaccountable bureaucracies.

Faced with the uncertainties of the future, we are left with a choice. We can continue to engage passively with the present social contract as environmental citizens. We can live for ourselves in each moment within the rule of law and socially accepted patterns of consumerism, whilst striving to ignore all the signs of a planet in crisis. We can pretend it is someone else's problem in a faraway land or a faraway bureaucracy— or we can do something about it. We can undergo the process of naturalization that empowers us to become ecological citizens. We can consider the agency of the human and more-than-human world in decision making, and demand better from those who represent us. We can stand collectively against the instruments of violence used to coerce us into accepting the authority of a system that fails to recognize its own ecocidal destructiveness. In this, we can pursue ecological justice and a transformation of society to work towards the collective future of all life.

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