

Exploraciones/Explorations

Environment and Citizenship in Latin America: A New Paradigm for Theory and Practice

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Abstract: As a reflection of the ecological pressures associated with rapid modernization and globalization, the environment has become an enduring theme of public debate and protest in Latin America. Over the past decade, scholars have made increasing connections between such debate and a range of questions related to citizenship. Meanwhile, a discourse of 'environmental citizenship' has a growing prevalence in policy across the region. While these developments echo similar political and academic trends in the Global North, the Latin American context demands a unique set of theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the intersection of ecology and citizenship, sensitive to the specific historical, cultural, and ecological character of the region. We outline a research agenda spanning questions of land, identity and citizenship; environmental justice and de-colonization; social subjectivity and the state; urban natures and citizens; and the materiality/subjectivity of nature. This array of approaches points to a more acute conceptualization of citizenship, both in terms of its understanding of politics and its treatment of ecology; it also offers a point of view that recognizes citizens and natures as dynamic realities, which mutually condition each other in a sphere of ongoing contest. *Keywords:* environmental citizenship, environmental policy, ecology, nature, social subjectivity.

During the latter part of the twentieth century Latin American societies emerged from an era of authoritarian regimes and began processes of democratic renewal, with the environment becoming one of the first issues around which civil society movements coalesced. As a reflection of the ecological pressures associated with rapid modernization and globalization, based largely on the export of agricultural products and natural resources, the environment has remained an enduring theme of public debate and popular protest. This political ferment around environmental issues has made important contributions to new characterizations of the rights, responsibilities and relations of citizenship in Latin America. Constitutional changes in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela have variously reconsidered rights related to access to land and a healthy environment (Gudynas 2009), while Ecuador's 2008 constitution goes so far as to provide rights to nature itself. Articulating these changes to the global scale, in 2004 the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) launched a Latin America Global Environmental Citizenship Project (Unep/Pnuma 2006). This has been followed by other formal recognitions of the relationship between environment and citizenship, including the Peruvian Ministry of Environment's 2009 Environmental Citizenship Prize, Brazil's Secretariat of Institutional Articulation and Environmental Citizenship and Chile's Youth National Environmental Citizenship Day.

Reflecting these trends, scholarship related to environmental questions in Latin America has increasingly incorporated themes related to citizenship. Researchers working with rural and indigenous peoples have probed relationships that link the politics of land, livelihood and identity, often in the context of struggles for politi-

cal recognition and agency (see for example Latta 2007a, Nuijten and Lorenzo 2009, Postero 2007, Wittman 2009a, Yashar 2005). Others studying democratization and institutional reform in the environmental sector have looked to citizen participation processes as key facets in new modes of governance (Bachmann, Delgado, and Marín 2007; Menegat 2002; Palerm and Aceves 2004; Walker, Jones, Roberts, and Frohling 2007). An emerging literature on environmental justice in the region also crosses into questions of democracy and participation (Caruthers 2008). Finally, efforts to historicize the political ecology of specific resources, such as water, have linked struggles over these resources to the evolution of citizenship and the nation (Castro 2006).

What is to be made of these developments? The increasing linkage of environment and citizenship in Latin America, both within a top-down policy discourse of environmental rights and obligations and as an empirical dimension of socio-political conflicts reshaping citizenship from the bottom up, poses a new series of questions for scholars and practitioners alike. While the literature cited above speaks to many of these questions, to date no effort has been made to draw this work into an integrated research agenda. Consolidating a space of critical inquiry around the links between environment and citizenship in Latin America promises the generation of important scholarly contributions not only to our understanding of socio-ecological issues in the region, but also to broader debates about citizenship within environmental politics, environmental sociology, political ecology and related fields.

Approaching the environment/citizenship nexus in Latin America

Over the past decade an international and interdisciplinary literature on environmental citizenship has rejuvenated debates about the links between ecology and democracy, as well as the socio-political conditions required to cultivate sustainable development. These debates involve a discussion of the lack of continuity between ecological relationships and political boundaries, and the need to re-imagine the scale and reach of citizenship as it relates to the consciousness of social subjects and to formal political and territorial relationships (for example Dobson 2003, Gudynas 2009, Jelin 2000, Newby 1996, Valencia Sáis 2005). The literature also discusses the implications of different political traditions (liberal, republican, communitarian) in terms of the way that nature is articulated to the political sphere through citizenly rights, responsibilities and deliberation (for example Barry 1999, Bell 2005, Curtin 2002, Dobson 2003, Hailwood 2005, Smith 1998).

There is an obvious link between the emergence of academic interest in environmental citizenship and the appearance of the concept in policy discourse. Nevertheless, we argue that current scholarly debates on environmental citizenship have thus far contributed little to our understanding of the specific kinds of issues that predominantly characterize environmental politics in Latin America and other regions of the Global South. In part this is a result of the geographical distribution of existing empirical work, but we assert that it is also fundamentally linked to the analytical orientation of dominant approaches to environmental citizenship. In the existing literature, the concept has emerged most strongly as part of a normative theoretical project aimed at augmenting and rethinking citizenship according to the

imperative of responding to ecological crisis, perceived largely from the Northern perspective of overconsumption. In the Latin American context, the most pressing environmental questions are instead defined by the ecological dimensions of social, cultural and economic marginalization and injustice. In this context, citizenship is not a self-evident category of social subjectivity and the politics of nature are closely interwoven with struggles for recognition and inclusion in the political collective.

In addition to citizenship itself being such a sharply contested institution, there are other significant characteristics that distinguish Latin America as a regional focus for research on the environmental dimensions of citizenship: its cultural diversity, its shared histories of conflict, and the diversity of specific ecological and territorial contexts as exemplified in an array of indigenous cosmovisions. With a fraught and uneven history of conquest, imperialism, ethnic conflict and resource-related economic development, Latin America presents a complex field of socio-ecological relations. Furthermore, it is home to political cultures informed by a range of influences, including European traditions, such as republicanism, liberalism, and Marxism; regional social and political traditions, such as the Bolivarian revolution and Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed; and finally a long heritage of indigenous socio-political institutions, from the Mayan *usos y costumbres* to the Mapuche *admapu*. Each of these various political traditions is embedded in specific visions of socio-ecological relations, from liberalism's institutions of private property to the Quichua's social organization of cultivation linked to reverence for the *pachamama*. These political-ecological inheritances are constantly being re-invented and re-combined, as in the Zapatista autonomous municipalities of Mexico, the Brazilian landless movement, and the indigenous recuperation of the state in Bolivia.

Gudynas (2009), in a recent survey of the practice and prospects of environmental citizenship in Latin America, underlines the limitations of existing citizenship institutions when it comes to incorporating the ecological dimension of social relations into political life. In particular, he argues that traditional (Western) models of citizenship are central to the delegitimation and subordination of diverse indigenous socio-ecological bodies of knowledge, and are also inherently linked to the human/nature dualism that lies at the heart both of modernity and ecological crisis. Coining the term 'ecological meta-citizenships', he looks in part to the literature on environmental citizenship, but more importantly to local and regional Latin American cases, for new conceptual frames that might illuminate a more transformative pathway for the increasing impulse to raise ecological issues as they pertain to the shape of political community. For example, Gudynas examines *florestania*, an emerging socio-ecological culture in the state of Acre, Brazil. At the epicentre of the rubber tappers' movement, *florestania* is a concept that invokes political belonging to the forest, offering a model of human community that is inseparable from the human-nature relationships that comprise the regional ecology. Official territorialities and relations of citizenship are displaced by this embodied model of socio-political thought and practice, and yet this place-based collectivity also exists in relation to formal overarching spatial and political orders.

Whether or not we conceive of alternatives like *florestania* as somehow beyond citizenship or as grassroots citizen 'insurgencies' (Holston 2008) that reshape po-

litical community from below, we fundamentally agree with Gudynas' proposition that current social and political conjunctures in Latin America require that the link between environment and citizenship be conceived of more broadly, not limiting inquiry and debate to more traditional questions of rights and obligations within formal political borders. This orientation takes us beyond the scope of 'environmental citizenship' narrowly conceived in terms of citizenship practice that contributes to sustainability, and instead links the politics of nature to questions of democracy and justice (Latta 2009b, Latta 2007b), providing a new basis for understanding environmental movements and conflicts in the Global South (Latta 2007a, Wittman 2009a). This opens the door to a series of other important theoretical perspectives, methodological influences and empirical contexts for the present project.

A research agenda: points of departure

In the following sections we identify key nested sites where the empirical specificities of the Latin American context provide the impetus for theoretical and methodological innovation in the study of the environment/citizenship nexus. Our aim is not to provide an exhaustive list or definitive classification, but rather to propose potential points of departure. Moreover, we have attempted to include a wide breadth of perspectives rather than develop a single overarching analytical framework. As such, while there are points of commonality between the nested sites there are also a number of latent tensions that promise the opportunity for significant debate.

Land, identity and citizenship

Research on indigenous peoples and other agrarian communities is one particularly rich context within which nature and citizenship become politicized in mutually conditioning ways. In this field, human-nature relationships and the ties of political community are interwoven in issues of land distribution, access to water and the conservation of resource commons such as forests or pasture. For instance, Nancy Postero (2007) underlines the way in which the birth of modern Bolivian citizenship in the late nineteenth century was both philosophically and juridically linked to the elimination of communal property in order to effectively absorb indigenous peoples into the national project. Postero's account also demonstrates that questions of collective versus private property, this time concerning natural resources such as water and gas, were equally instrumental in the ideological and legal battles surrounding indigenous peoples' mobilizations to transform the Bolivian citizenship regime around the turn of the present century (see also Spronk 2007). We can similarly see the way that issues of land and resource control, in articulation with struggles for indigenous and *campesino* identity and autonomy, are constitutive of particular forms of 'agrarian' (Wittman 2009a, Wittman 2009b, Wittman 2010) and 'indigenous' citizenship (Latta 2009a; Radcliffe, Laurie, and Andolina 2002).

Environmental justice and ecological de-colonization

In part related to questions of indigenous citizenship, the analytical frame of environmental justice provides a broad umbrella for studying issues of race, gender, and class in relation to access to natural resources and exposure to environmental risks. It has been argued elsewhere that struggles around these issues present a quintessential example of citizenly identity construction and agency (Latta 2009b, Smith and Pangspa 2008). While scholars have only begun to apply an environmental justice frame to the Latin American context (Carruthers 2008), we suggest that linking such research to questions of citizenship will nourish a growth of the environmental justice approach into matters of ecological post-coloniality. For example, Sundberg (2008) discusses how entrenched frameworks for allocating natural resources were used to define citizenship categories in colonial Latin America, as well as informing contemporary processes of racialization and the exclusion of indigenous people from environmental decision making (37-41). Movements against such exclusionary practices involve the de-colonization of citizenship discourses and the re-valorization of subordinate knowledges (see also Gudynas 2009, 76). As one example of this, many Mapuche communities in Chile have revived their own lexicon for community (*lof*), spokesperson (*Werken*), and Chief (*lonko*) in an explicit effort to reject state-sanctioned measures for constituting 'indigenous communities' headed by 'presidents'. This discursive re-appropriation is combined with efforts to reinvent traditional governance practices and revive inherited ecological knowledge as a counterpoint to the science of ecosystem management used in the context of industrial forestry and environmental impact assessment.

Social subjects, civil society and the state

Within the context of a region-wide shift to 'participatory' approaches to environmental politics, Holston (2008) emphasizes the transformative potential of citizen movements from below. His concept of 'insurgent citizens' is a powerful frame within which to consider the agency of popular actors in the environmental sphere. Nevertheless, citizen insurgency has also made way for state-sponsored forms of participatory governance. While there are successful examples of participatory environmental governance, such as the case of Porto Alegre as described by Menegat (2002), other analysts looking at both urban (Centner 2009) and rural (Bachmann, Delgado, and Marín 2007; Walker, Jones, Roberts, and Frohling 2007) cases suggest that participatory decision-making on environmental questions has often been fraught with limitations and contradictions. Moreover, participatory decision-making at one scale is often derailed by political forces operating at other scales. For instance, the 2005 *Plan Regional de Ordenamiento Territorial* for Chile's Aysén region, a product of a rigorous five-year planning process including significant civil society participation, has been rendered largely irrelevant by the national government's political support for multi-billion dollar hydroelectric development proposals in the region.

In many cases, the move towards participatory governance is part of a decentralization and dispersal of governing authority into broader civil-society networks. As participatory governance takes political decision-making closer to the people it

serves it simultaneously opens the way for redefinitions of citizenship, including contention over legitimacy, access to entitlements and standards of accountability. Such redefinition often takes place in the context of power asymmetries that disadvantage less powerful actors. For example, decentralization of forest governance in Guatemala from federal to municipal authorities had the effect of delegitimizing and disarticulating traditional management structures for communal forests (Wittman and Geisler 2005).

Urban natures and citizens

Latin American cities, like their counterparts in other regions of the Global South, have seen dramatic growth during the past four decades. Marked by stark inequalities in terms of the character of urban habitats, these cities provide a unique context where socio-economic and ecological questions coalesce. The vocabulary for describing and analysing urban popular struggles around ecological questions tends to be different, but at root the dynamic relationship that can be observed between environment and citizenship is not dissimilar from that identified in the rural context. The same kinds of linkages are visible between material struggles over access to natural resources (and in the city, environmental services), competition over the shape of political rights and institutions, and battles over the control of space. The ecological dimension is entangled here with a broader set of claims around the possibility for more inclusionary urban habitats, where all citizens have rights to space in which to dwell, seek their livelihood, and build healthy communities.

José Esteban Castro's (2006) exploration of the history of water conflicts in the Mexico City basin offers one helpful example. Castro sheds light on the way that physical-natural, technical and socio-political processes become interwoven in such conflicts. He sustains that from the very beginnings of the colonial period the efforts of governing authorities to administer water resources 'were inextricably linked to processes of social and political control' (67). Indeed, Castro suggests that water has been at the centre of the evolution of the modern Mexican state, with water conflicts embodying the contests over rights and duties that link state and citizens in a long-term struggle over the 'social spatiality' or 'territory' of citizenship. Taking the notion of territory to a more literal dimension, John Guidry's (2003) analysis of urban social movements in Belém, Brazil, draws on the social theory of Henri Lefebvre to analyse the way that marginalized populations' claims to urban space, and to basic services such as water, sanitation and public transit, are actively linked with a broader challenge to the elitism and exclusion that characterize Brazilian democracy (see also Holston (2008)). As Guidry puts it, 'we can say that these movements put citizenship on 'trial by space,' a process in which spaces and spatial relationships become concrete standards by which to evaluate the effectiveness of citizenship and its connotations of political and social equality' (189).

The materiality and subjectivity of nature

The problem of engendering participatory models for political deliberation is undoubtedly a key dimension of the research agenda we propose, but it is no less important to inquire into the question of how nature itself, in its distinct regional and

ecological contexts, might be seen to ‘participate’ in the contestation and evolution of both environmental governance and socio-political subjectivity. A number of potential points of reference exist as we consider nature’s agency within human political systems. In *The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres (1995) offers one provocative way of recognizing and constituting nature as an interlocutor in political life. Near the outset of the book he asserts that ‘river, fire, and mud are reminding us of their presence’ (2), thus calling for a ‘natural contract’. Like the imaginary (but no less powerful) social contract that serves as the basis for orderly human society, the natural contract would enshrine the rights and responsibilities providing peace and order in the human relationship with the planet. Latin America offers immediate examples of this kind of eco-political innovation. The 2008 constitution of Ecuador explicitly recognizes ‘nature’s rights’, and the resolution from the 2010 Cochabamba First People’s World Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth’s Rights reads in significant part like a political contract with the planet.

The broader literature related to actor-network theory (ANT) provides another analytical path to understand nature’s ‘participation’ in the environment-citizenship nexus. Rather than *bringing nature in*, theorists of ANT proclaim that it is already integral to the evolution of the dynamic assemblage that we have previously labelled *society* (Callon 1986, Latour 1993, Latour 2000, Law and Hassard 1999, Murdoch 2001). Human and non-human elements alike are understood to be intermingled in the co-construction of agency, such that action at any one node of a network is a product of relationships with other nodes. These scholars provide empirical evidence of natural and human systems (re)acting in symbiotic response to mutual stimuli, allowing us to consider the material agency of nature and even conceptualize nature itself as an ‘actant’ or independent force within a larger encompassing socio-natural system. This work, along with studies in related fields, has spurred new interest in analytically engaging the ‘lively’ materiality of nature, its relational properties, and the shaping and interactive role that nature plays in the formation of social systems, including citizenship (Bennett 2010, Castree 2002, Goodman 2001).

Conclusion: dynamic subjectivities, living institutions, contested natures

There is much to be learned about Latin America from studying the numerous ways that questions of environmental and citizenship intersect in the region. At the same time, we submit that the empirical context provided by Latin America, and by other parts of the Global South, will help to reshape debates around the environment/citizenship nexus currently taking place in fields like environmental politics and sociology. As part of that transformation we suggest that it is necessary to move away from the more limited notion of ‘environmental’ or ‘green’ citizenship, with their normative emphasis on promoting sustainability. Rather, we propose a conception of citizenship that is both more acutely political and more integrally ecological—a conception which recognizes the way that citizens and natures are dynamic, contested and mutually conditioning elements within the politics of the environment. Such a conception takes rights and responsibilities not as theoretical blueprints but rather as living institutions that are perpetually being contested and transformed by claims for social and ecological justice.

The theoretical re-orientation we propose, along with the points of departure we outline above, suggest that a research agenda for studying environment and citizenship in Latin America must take historical, ideological and geographical context seriously. As citizen-subjects enact and perform both the maintenance of existing citizenship regimes and the insurgencies that transform those regimes, their political actions are legible because they speak into (and against) shared histories. Hence, understanding their actions requires that we put attention to lived experiences of those histories, and to the way that broader ideological and material forces are worked out in and through the geography of specific places.

These commitments correspond to a constellation of methodologies, including inductive ethnographic approaches to registering the perspectives of different actors; archival research into the legal and governmental instruments that form the administrative and judicial skeleton of citizenship regimes; an archaeology of socio-ecological discourses and artefacts, with a view to revealing the way that citizenship and nature are embodied and performed; ecological science, deployed with the aim of describing the material interpenetration of human and natural systems; and a political economy sensitive to the many and multifaceted ways that economic inequality becomes intertwined with socio-ecological change.

Together these theoretical and methodological approaches promise deeper understanding not simply of the way that citizenship in Latin America is becoming 'environmental' in scope, but rather of the diverse ways in which rationalities of environment and citizenship become co-mingled, both in the broader context of social and political life and in the specifically ecological conjunctures that are the signature of our age.

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Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the external reviewers for helpful comments and also the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for supporting the Environment and Citizenship in Latin America Workshop held at Simon Fraser University in April 2010.

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