

# Sustainable citizenship

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This article aims to explain the emergence and meaning of sustainable citizenship as an anthropological concept and field of study. As such, it describes the transitions in science and society that contributed to the shifts in approaching cultural diversity within anthropology over the past decades: from studying questions of multiculturalism towards studying questions of citizenship and (social) sustainability. In doing so, the authors draw from developments within the scientific debate, and from concurrent changes within the anthropology master at Utrecht University, which have led to a new name for the program: Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship.

## Simultaneous discourse changes

The social sciences, including anthropology, focus on the development and meaning of the unceasing changes within global social reality. Though particular themes gain more emphasis over time, some debates remain important topics of study. Cultural diversity is one of the themes that continues to be relevant; especially in the context of global movements or 'flows' of people, ideas and finance becoming (re)embedded in national settings. Yet the ways we consider, study and describe such diversity are subject to change. Over the years, debate-shifts have occurred in society as well as in science – that also reflect in the renewed Cultural Anthropology master at Utrecht University. The emergence of sustainable citizenship as a concept and field of research as well as societal goal can be explained by examining the trajectory of how diversity is understood and debated.

For ten years, the master centred on multiculturalism in comparative context. Indeed, during the previous decade the phenomenon, or ideology, of multiculturalism was central to the study and societal understanding of cultural diversity. Accordingly, anthropology students were taught to grasp the organization of cultural diversity in the context of globalization processes and a changing position of the nation-state, in different regions of the world. Without ever pertaining to teach an ideology, the master emphasized multiculturalism as one approach to organizing cultural diversity – yet it is certainly not the only one.

Within the debate on cultural diversity, develop-

ments are discernable on a terminological and analytical level. Between 1970 and the beginning of the nineties, the emphasis was on the ideology of multiculturalism. Later on, issues regarding transnationalism and transmigration started to gain attention. Due to the spread of modern media and increasing access to means of transportation, the notion emerged that migration entails more than a geographic movement combined with the attempt to acquire a position in a new society. This realisation raised the question of how citizenship in the immigration countries should be conceptualized – which in turn resulted in the use of affective terms such as 'home' and 'belonging'. Consequently, the concept of citizenship obtained a more multi-layered meaning: if 'belonging' not necessarily equals the attachment to one specific society, citizenship is not only a matter of political, formal membership of that community or society. It also comprises questions of informal membership, and cultural and symbolic dimensions of citizenship. People are, thus, (non-)citizens in various ways. Citizenship is a multidimensional and flexible term that can be studied on different levels.

Moreover, an important theme in anthropological studies has been the globalization processes that influence the position of the nation-state. Within the contemporary anthropological discourse the nation-state is often associated with an ideology of political legitimacy, demanding that ethnic-cultural, and political and territorial boundaries coincide. Yet in practice this is rarely the case. In this approach, the nation-state refers to the ideal that one particular ethnic-cultural group (for example the 'native Dutch') dominates the state. On a more abstract level, according to Benedict Anderson's definition, the nation-state is an imagined political community which is both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson 2006).

Though in practice nation-states deal with enormous internal diversity, it is true that at the same time they demand a certain homogenization among their inhabitants. The state often turns out to be 'too small' for many border-crossing problems, such as climate change, financial crises, or migration. Indeed, nation-states are no longer the only global forces of power. Various transnational networks,

such as banks, multinationals, and criminal networks, seem to have obtained more influence. Despite these internal and external problems of the nation-state, their central role and influence within the organization of many societies are still undeniable. Nation-states, for example, still are the institutions to ratify international treaties and conventions. Just as nation-states face issues with 'scaling up', they also seem 'too big', as they cannot seem to satisfactorily organise durable, sustainable relations, mutual care, or a local sustainable environment. Consequently, within the overarching frame of the nation-state, we witness the rise of numerous grassroots initiatives and movements. This paradox of the nation-state and its implications at various levels were and still are interesting and relevant research topics.

Over the past ten years, both the curriculum of the masters program and the research themes of our students more or less followed the developments described above. The focus within anthropology remains on cultural diversity and differences based on, among other things, ethnicity, class, gender, age, and health. These variables remain important, also regarding questions of sustainability, citizenship, and their entwinement, which will be explained later on. However variations do exist in the ways we reflect on, and study questions of diversity.

Areas that (re)gained attention due to recent events and developments in the world are, for example, economic anthropology – related to the developments of global capitalism(s) and local responses – and the 'classical' question concerning the division of resources and the environmental, climate change and sustainability issues flowing from this. One of the remarkable fields of attention concerns food activism and the ways citizens try to reorganize the production and consumption of their food.

In short, the masters' focus concerns contemporary issues within the intersecting fields of cultural diversity and globalisation. These issues are at stake in both local and transnational levels – where the position of the nation-state still plays an important role. Hence the foundational preoccupation with cultural diversity remains intact. Nonetheless, the particular lens through which it is studied has now shifted to sustainable citizenship.

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## ABOUT YVON VAN DER PIJL

- Obtained her Masters degree in Rural Development Studies at Wageningen University Research Centre.
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- Currently, she is assistant professor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology of Utrecht University and director of the Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship master program.

## Studying sustainable citizenship

Over the years, we have seen both the classical idea of citizenship and the classical idea of sustainability evolve. Firstly, citizenship is not only about having rights, but also about actively involved citizens in diverse positions: their roles vary from being consumers to being providers of health care and environmental organizations, and from being social citizens to being stakeholders in the field of political decision-making. Secondly, sustainability is not only about nature, the environment, the economy or the climate: it entails specific social dimensions that demand consideration.

Studying sustainable citizenship from an anthropological perspective therefore means exploring the entwinement of citizenship, cultural diversity, and social sustainability in the Netherlands and abroad. These concepts come together in questions of how people – citizens and non-citizens – are capable of organising their lives and establish social relations in a context of global dynamics and uncertainty.

Research themes within this field range, for example, from global questions related to climate change, such as the massive increase of so called ecological migrants and refugees, to questions of mobility, such as the growing problem of human trafficking and smuggling. Besides researching the political, symbolic, social and cultural dimensions of citizenship, studying sustainable citizenship thus entails non-citizenship issues, for example the position of illegal asylum seekers and migrants within society, both in Europe and in other regions.

Another development that quickly turned into a research topic within the anthropology of sustainable citizenship is the rise of new forms of social contestation. Some well-known examples are the global justice movement, the anti-globalization or anti-corporate movement (with the 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999 as its historical starting point), the globally spread 'Occupy-movement', the Spanish 'Podemos', and many other square protests – for instance in Cairo (during the Arabic Spring), Kiev, Madrid and Rio de Janeiro. This form of contestation is noteworthy, because citizens all over the world unite on squares with the same message. They speak out as citizens and, while doing so, exchange symbols worldwide, such as the Guy Fawkes mask. As such, people ask for more than the rights related to the classical idea of citizenship. Rather, they wish to gain a greater influence on what they can and cannot do, what they eat, what they can do with their

money and what is done with their money. As such, citizens press governments to recognise their voices.

Social contestation exposes itself not only in terms of the 'old' international class struggle, but also shows very local manifestations, in which different sections of society unite, and new community types emerge. This can be seen, for example, in city- or roof gardens, a common pop-up restaurant, the do-democracy, in the protest against shale gas fracking, or a community currency.

Indeed, one interesting form of social contestation is the expansion and rising prominence of community currencies in post-crisis Europe. These locally designed moneys circulate alongside national currencies and enable people to build social solidarity and strengthen local economies. The financial aspect of citizenship – such as a common currency and fiscal regulation – has received little attention in anthropological debates. Yet within the new governance paradigm of participatory citizenship and co-creation, the study of community currencies can reveal the ways in which people aim to create social and economic sustainability on a local level – transforming the parameters of citizenship in the process.

A remarkable development and topic of study within the Netherlands is the transformation of the welfare state, which provokes the emergence of new forms of care. The decrease in both welfare services and the provision of care results in citizens' initiatives, such as communities in which people aged 55 years and up take care of 65+ people. Another example are the so called care cooperatives, in which citizens themselves organize the necessary support in terms of care and welfare for their fellow villagers or neighbours.

As becomes clear, the anthropology of sustainable citizenship remains engaged with the organization of cultural diversity and the position of the nation-state, with an emphasis on questions of (non) citizenship and social sustainability, and focusing on the interacting elements 'People, Planet, and Profit'.

### Sources

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