

Communicating global responsibility? Discourses on climate change and citizenship

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1. Climate-oriented political initiatives, such as the Cities for Climate Change programme, have also been noted to speak to 'consumer citizens' (Slocum, 2004).

Some notion of responsibility is inevitably attached to the idea of citizenship. Together with the entitlement to certain rights and benefits, citizenship brings duties and obligations. In a world facing the eminent threat of drastic climate change, what does individual responsibility entail? Is good citizenship about abiding national laws and paying taxes? The view adopted here is that this is insufficient and that climate change demands a form of *transformative global citizenship*, which is nevertheless inhibited by fundamental aspects of liberal market-based democracies and of their social construction in mediated discourses. This essay points out some of the factors that hinder the development and exercise of such a citizenship and the need to devise ways forward in the communication of global responsibility.

The time- and spatial-scales of climate change are at odds with the main rule of the game in the democratic world: to conquer the approval of a majority of national citizens in a few-year cycles by increasing their material wealth. In the most successful of these regimes, a large portion of that wealth depends on the unbalanced and unfair nature of the global economy (in terms of management of resources, labour and capital) and of global governance (as embodied in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). Effective climate politics would require changing some of the core characteristics of market-based democracies: moving from short-term goals to political far-sightedness, decoupling good government from economic growth and correcting the imbalances of the global economic order. Effective citizenship would therefore require that people do more than accept existing political arrangements; it would actually command that they actively engage in questioning those arrangements and in transforming the relation between political power, consumption and global responsibility.

As extensively analysed in a recent issue of *Social Semiotics* (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006), citizenship is largely mediated. Our mental construct of the political world and the political self is grounded on and permanently reinforced by a flow of media-generated imagery. Most mediated discourses construct individuals into a form of political agency that is quite passive and reinforce the dominant forms of governance. As pointed out by various scholars, the media tend to construct people primarily as consumers in the material and political senses. The hegemonic presence of material wealth in almost all kinds of media formats (advertising, movies, contests and, of course, news) constantly foments the desirability of possession, while representations of common individuals' political behaviour predominantly promote passive citizens (Lewis, Wahl-Jorgensen and Inthorn 2004).¹

Mediated discourses that explicitly address the issue of climate change are full of paradoxes. Taken together, they do not stimulate an active form

of citizenship. On the contrary, they strengthen current structures and practices. Let us look at a few examples. In the last two decades, scientific knowledge of climate change has grown immensely and there is currently a wide consensus in the international scientific community in relation to the problem. However, studies have shown that in the United States, the country with the highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions, the media have continuously advanced an image of uncertainty in relation to climate change science, which Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) maintain is the result of the application of the journalistic norm of balance. Given people's dependence on the media to understand the problem, this discursive construction certainly does not help civic engagement with the issue. Coupled with political denial, it sustains business-as-usual and leaves individual behaviour undisturbed. Secondly, as Edwards and Cromwell (2005) point out, the British 'liberal' newspapers that award most news salience to the risks of climate change and call for action carry daily advertisements to cheap air travel and say nothing about corporate responsibility in the causation of the problem. Exposing the impact of big business – especially transnational corporations – on climate change is a necessary (although insufficient) condition of informed economic and political citizenship. Yet, their primarily commercial logic means that the media continue to be silent accomplices of the damaging practices of those agents. Finally, we can think about the media campaigns organised by some governments to promote mitigation behaviours that are not lifestyle-threatening, such as replacing light bulbs, and how climate change has been appropriated in another type of campaign (commercial advertising) by some of the very institutions with more responsibility in the causation of the problem to advance pro-consumption discourses. In this respect, Linder (2006) shows, with a number of examples, how the makers of cars, clothing and drinks, amongst other products, have inverted the meaning of 'global warming' in their marketing messages and used this signifier to create consumer needs. The liberal state and the free market transform a limitation into consumer choice and into business opportunity.

Avoiding extreme climate change would require the worldwide adoption of significant behavioural and policy changes towards the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The only ethically sustainable solution would involve the progressive equalisation of emission rights for all the inhabitants of the planet.² This would mean decreasing emission levels of the population of 'rich' countries by as much as 80 percent. Notwithstanding the predictable difficulties in gaining official intergovernmental acceptance of this principle, there are fundamental cultural barriers that, as discussed above, are related to the discursive construction of democratic politics, particularly the fact that political subjectivity has become synonymous with expectation of continuous material improvement.

Global responsibility not only involves awareness of the impact of one's actions or omissions to distant 'others' but also calls for a cosmopolitan view of rights and obligations regarding consumption, mobility and other lifestyle aspects.³ Global citizenship means accepting a worldwide community of equal people. A sense of connectedness, empathy and accountability in relation to geographically distant others would therefore be a crucial

2. The notion of 'contraction and convergence' advanced by Aubrey Meyer is possibly the best proposal in this respect – see www.gci.org.uk.
3. See Attfeld (2006) for an extensive discussion of the nature of a 'global ethic'.

4. Pogge (2002) points out that there is a large discrepancy between our criteria of national and global economic justice. To properly address climate change, we would need to review our discursively constructed moral standards in relation to the global economic order.

dimension of an ethic of global responsibility. Mediated discourses are hardly conducive to it. In the media, those physically distant places that are likely to be the worst affected by climate change, such as the African continent, are predominantly represented as the stages of despair with the news recurrently offering images of natural tragedy. In the northern person's mental map, earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis are usual and expected events in Asia, Africa or South America. The African continent, in particular, continues to be largely absent from news reports except for natural or man-made disasters and the kind of citizen agency that is promoted in relation to it is charity rather than anything socially transformative. Moreover, the habituation to mediated tragedy appears to heighten its acceptability to most people as we develop psychological mechanisms of self-defence. In this context, 'their' present and future condition as victims of 'global' climate change is significantly less distressing for 'us' than it could otherwise be. The second main point of contact with the developing world is the tourism imagery. The tourism industry sells many of these places to northern people as exotic holiday destinations – fit for relaxation and enjoyment but not for political engagement. Hence, the rich societies are communicatively constructed into a relation of pity or consumption with the poor ones. Despite the media's globalising effect, they seem to be far from generating a sense of global political responsibility.⁴

In 1957, Anthony Downs argued that the aggregative model of democracy led people to develop an attitude of 'rational ignorance' towards public affairs. Given how small the individual's contribution is in determining the ruling power in democratic systems and the effort involved in gathering the information necessary for a well-informed decision, it is rational – Downs noted – to simply ignore politics altogether. Our mediated political culture is conducive to the development of what I would call *rational oblivion* towards climate change. In a society that cultivates the values of freedom of choice and individualism, constantly associating them to consumption and mobility, and in a context of growing disengagement with democratic politics, the perception of lack of commitment of governments and co-citizens in relation to climate change can only lead to 'rational' individual inaction.

Given the unprecedented volume of media coverage of climate change in the last decade, widespread consciousness of the problem is to be expected. Paradoxically, while awareness of humanity's environmentally destructive power may indeed be at its highest point so is the exercise of that same power. Locked in this cycle, individuals go by with a mild feeling of guilt. The discursive fabric of global politics will have to be reworked to get us out of the cycle. Notwithstanding the potential of recent developments such as global activism and citizen journalism for the construction of a global political subjectivity, the mainstream media's professional and ideological cultures appear to continue to block this transformation.

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