

# For one and all: Being an academic citizen on an interconnected Earth

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## Abstract

*The idea of citizen implies a polis, a collectivity of persons contributing their voices and actions to the good running of the community. In uttering and acting as citizens, both the public realm and a public is formed. The university as an institution and its educational processes are doubly implicated here. First, issues arise as to the extent to which the university is itself a kind of public, modelling the public realm, and founded on critical dialogue among equals. Second, issues arise as to the extent to which the university might be able and willing to advance this public realm. These issues generate two questions: what does academic citizenship mean? And, what if potential members of the public are voiceless? I answer these two questions together. Being an academic citizen is a matter of an ever-widening sphere in which this citizenship is located. This entails successively reaching out from one's discipline and one's students, to the world, and to the Earth. The pool in which academic citizenship is enacted is all the time widening, to those who lie beyond the current boundaries of the university, and all the inhabitants of Nature. Ultimately, to be an academic citizen is to be for one and all across this whole Earth.*

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## Introduction

The idea of citizen implies a polis, a collectivity of persons contributing their voices and actions to the good running of the community. In uttering and acting as citizens, both the public realm and a public is formed. All this, I think, is implied in Hannah Arendt's (1958) magnum opus *The Human Condition*. Arendt, in staking out her argument, was at pains to suggest that it was in the public realm (Arendt's term) that individuals made themselves. This public realm was sharply different from

society, in which—as Arendt saw it—people acted according to rules and even commandments. In this sense, ‘society excludes the possibility of action’ (p. 40). Actually, ‘society has conquered the public realm’ (p. 41): the public realm is disappearing.

The conditions of being a fully-fledged citizen, accordingly, are several. Building on Arendt, they include that of an autonomous public space, active citizens possessed of particular virtues and willing to play their part in maintaining this public space, capacities on their parts for critical dialogue, and communicative channels in which those voices might be widely heard. (Echoes of Jurgen Habermas [2005] and Alisdair MacIntyre [1990] may be heard here.)

The university as an institution and its educational processes are heavily implicated in all of this (Pusser, 2012), and doubly so. First, questions arise as to the extent to which the university is itself a kind of public, possessed of the requisite virtues (Nixon, 2008), modelling the public realm, and founded on critical dialogue among equals (Masschelein & Simons, 2012); and the extent to which it promotes these values and models these form of life in the pedagogical situation, so enabling its students to become full citizens (Arthur & Bohlin, 2005; Nussbaum, 1997). Second, questions arise as to the extent to which the university might be able and willing to advance this kind of public realm in the wider society (Rhode, 2006).

I shall engage with these questions, drawing largely on philosophical and social-theoretical resources, and I argue in favour of a wide idea of academic citizenship. Within the argument lies a distinction between the university as an institution and higher education as a set of educational processes. Given the brevity of this paper, I shall focus on the former, and develop an argument for the university as a collective; ‘collective’ here embracing the entities of the whole world. This paper is visionary and utopian in character and unashamedly has universalist and cosmopolitan orientations.

I shall argue that being an academic citizen is a matter, in part, of an ever-widening sphere in which this citizenship is to be understood. This entails successively reaching out from an allegiance to one’s discipline, to one’s students, to one’s institution, to one’s wider academic community, to one’s society, to the world, and now to the Earth. The pool in which academic citizenship is enacted is all the time widening *and* all the time reaching out to those who lie beyond the current boundaries, wherever they may be (including those not accessing higher education in one’s own society and across the world, and all the inhabitants of Nature, first the animals and organic matter and then the inorganic matter). Ultimately, academic citizenship holds the prospect of becoming—à la Bertrand Russell (1967, p. 93)—a citizen of the universe. Ultimately, to be an academic

citizen is to be for one and all. It is to be a scholarly citizen on, in, for and from this Earth.

### **University citizenship**

The idea of academic citizenship has emerged over the past thirty years and, as is often the case with newly emerging concepts in social settings, there are different discursive movements in play. Two counter-vailing tendencies may especially be detected.

First, the ever-complicated incorporation of institutions of higher education into the machinery and the ideologies of the state, not to mention tight funding regimes, have resulted in those institutions being increasingly tightly managed. Management regimes have developed in which academics are expected to demonstrate their allegiance to their host institution. This enhances not only institutional efficiency (with less waste of ‘human resources’) but also institutional effectiveness, as an institution’s academics are brought more into the sphere of the university’s branding, corporate marketing and self-projection. Under these circumstances, ‘academic citizenship’ becomes a discursive emblem of these *institutional* expectations—expectations that are expressed through rewards and sanctions. One is expected to be visible in one’s university and one’s contribution to one’s university may well be a factor taken into consideration for promotions or salary increments.

Second, there is a *counter-movement* of resistance that also holds to the term ‘academic citizenship.’ It is noticed that massive change has befallen higher education over the last half-century or so, turning it from an academic fiefdom to forming not only part of the state apparatus, but also doing so within a political economy of neoliberalism. (This set of phenomena may be seen to an extent even in socialist and/or heavily state-steered societies.) This countervailing movement of resistance abhors the components of neoliberalism that bear upon universities and higher education of competition, marketisation, the reduction of students to economic units, the pumping up of employability as a measure of programme quality, the reduction of curricula and pedagogy to the inculcation of skills, and the diminution of critical thinking.

In this context, ‘academic citizenship’ becomes a means of reclaiming—or even claiming *ab initio*—collegial values and mutual relationships, not only in a single institution but collectively, across institutions (Macfarlane, 2007). ‘Academic citizenship,’ on this showing, is a discursive means of *combatting*

individualism and institutional competition, and provides a counter to managerial disciplines in which academic actions are valued only insofar as they contribute to the advancement of the university as a corporate entity. Here, the academic citizen takes time to support individual students beyond the set provision, to take particular care in giving feedback to students, to reviewing papers submitted to journals, to examining study programmes and doctoral students at other institutions, to mentoring individuals (both students and academics), to providing testimonials and supportive references, to serving on committees, to contributing to the running of academic societies in one's field, and generally in working collegially with others *even though there be no definite outcome in view*.

As implied, this counter-movement of academic citizenship struggles to make headway for it is running against the grain of the dominant regime (of metrics, of performance with demonstrable outputs and of demonstrable allegiance to the academic's institution). This *collegial citizenship*—as we may term it—takes into account the interests of the *totality* of academic life, and seeks to uphold, regain and help to advance the academic community as a community.

A question arises as to the extent to which corporate academic citizenship and collegial academic citizenship can be carried forward simultaneously. Readily, the two can overlap in practice, though not in ideology; with the managerial form, one may serve on a university working party in response to a senior manager's entreaty to do so *and* serve out of a sense of collegial responsibility. But, as suggested, there are bound to be felt tensions between the two where they pull *against* each other. Does one serve on that institutional working party if asked by that senior manager *or* does one give one's time to taking on a role in a learned society of which one is a member? The point here, however, is that *both* forms of academic citizenship are forms of stretching of the very concept of academic citizenship, albeit in different directions, respectively towards one's institution and towards one's own professional or disciplinary community.

### **Ever-widening, and on multiple trajectories**

Academic citizenship, therefore, is a concept and a set of practices that is all the time in motion and is all the time extending and widening, and on multiple planes. And these movements on those planes are often in conflict.

Being an academic citizen is to feel oneself a part of one's civic community. 'Civic' is, of course, open-ended (Brink, 2018) but has *some* definition, with hazy boundaries demarcating it from what it is not; it could be societal and perhaps even

a whole geographical region. The more fundamental question is whether universities have space and encouragement to become involved as good citizens in *any* civic domain. But then, as intimated, this extra-mural citizenship can go on spreading out amoeba-like, to recognise the nation as a site of one's academic citizenship and then go on spreading still further to large cross-national regions (Africa, Latin America, Europe perhaps stand out). Ultimately, the geographical location of the civic realm may become the whole world of nations.

In this spreading out of academic citizenship, there is a number of interesting settings that do not fit neatly into this geographical linearity. Academic citizenship may become attached to particular locations in distant parts, say those of some indigenous communities; or some peoples in particular situations (say in concerns over women barred from participating in Afghan universities). Here, too, some geographical boundaries may be especially ambiguous. For instance, we see academics and their scholarship being identified as 'Asian' (and apparently happily so), but it is not at clear where the allegiance implied in this citizenship is to be located. China, the USA, and possibly Russia and India also constitute particular cases of regions that provide citizenship settings, in virtue of their size.

### **Spacious citizenship**

As the site of academic citizenship widens, so its discursive space widens. The corporate academic citizen—within an institution of higher education—demonstrates that citizenship by allegiance to the institution in question. Even under the guise of being a critic of one's institution, to the extent that this is permissible, one is still acting and speaking by virtue of one's identity within that institution. One is, in this case, a critical friend of one's institution. Matters are more complicated, however, in extra-mural instances of academic citizenship.

Here, academic citizenship moves especially from place to *space*, even though the two movements are intertwined. What is on view here is a movement in the sheer being of the academic, as one comes to enfold into one's being multiple senses of the world and its entities, and possibilities for relationships and encounters with them, many of them voiceless. The academic citizen becomes a citizen not just of the world but of the Earth—hearing the cries of the dispossessed, in the pavellas of Sao Paula, in the shanty towns of Cape Town, the inuits of Canada and the Maori of New Zealand. But this academic citizenship allows itself also to be sensitive to the silent cries of the disappearing animal species and the dwindling glaciers.

This academic citizenship does not speak for itself or even in the interests of society, still less those of the state. Rather, it speaks in the interests of the totality of the world, including the totality of Nature. Understanding that most of the inhabitants of this Earth are voiceless (both human and non-human inhabitants, whether animal, vegetable or mineral), this citizenship extends academic resources in their directions (plural). Such citizen-scholars (Ackerman & Coogan, 2010) feel—and feelings count here—that the entire Earth and all of its entities are their oyster.

Important distinctions should be observed. The voicelessness of peoples deprived of education and resources in a society is quite different from the voicelessness of animals, plants and geological strata, and poses separate problems of communication and representation for academic citizenship (Latour, 2004). The first, in turn, raises issues of manufactured inequities, of orchestrated and mutual misunderstandings, and of the political sphere and its distortions (and of the geopolitical sphere at that). The second raises particular issues of empathy, wonder and mutuality. Both, however, raise problems of advocacy, of a presuming of the interests of others: what does it mean to speak of the interests of communities without access to higher education and what does it mean to speak of the interests of the rhinos and the glaciers, let alone to advocate for those interests?

### **An impossible calling?**

Is this ecological citizenship—as we may term it—not an *impossible* set of callings? Being ecological in the broadest sense of that term, it is attuned to the many mega-ecosystems in which this citizenship is played out. And in being so attuned, it reaches out in multiple directions and, in turn, is buffeted by numerous forces (at once, ideological, practical, powerful, discursive) and in manifold states of being. There is no stability here. Huge demands befall this academic citizenship—of courage, fortitude, resilience, imagination, empathy, morality *and* practicality. This academic citizenship arms itself with all manner of resources, which may even at times include practical ones.

This academic citizenship is always a work-in-progress. Even as one feels that one has secured some *modus operandi* for negotiating a set of circumstances, foraging forward in entering into relationships in a particular domain, a new challenge arises. The world moves on, presenting new arenas, inviting academic citizenship to be re-thought. A new constituency, a new public, or a new setting claims one attention, and with it a new multiplicity of discourses, a new pool of

resources (or, more probably, their lack), and a new political situation to be negotiated. And so new alliances have to be formed.

Note the import of this understanding of academic citizenship: that there is no limit to its expansion. There are always more thickets and conflicts to negotiate. And there are always additional constituencies with which one can empathise and assist, by bringing one's academic resources to bear on the impairments, contradictions and possibilities. Of the widening, challenges, dilemmas and responsibilities of academic citizenship, there shall be no end.

There is an important rider to note here. At the outset, we noted Hannah Arendt's philosophy in which the public realm was central, and which was built around concerns for its suppression by an amorphous society largely devoid of personal action and responsibility. A weakness in that philosophy, if one may term it that, was a sense of collective citizenship, by which I wish to point to the possibility of collectives *as such* having and exercising *responsibility*.

We see this diminution of the idea of citizenship precisely in relation to the university, where academic citizenship is largely perceived as a quality of academic individuals. Left out is a large sense of, say, a university exercising its collective citizenship, above and beyond the citizenship of its members. Once this dimension is acknowledged, then the way is open to universities as institutions being understood to possess citizenship responsibilities; and then, in turn, the way is open for *that* citizenship itself to go on widening, to extend to educationally disenfranchised communities, whether in the human or the non-human worlds.

I would make two further points which are, in effect, footnotes. The first is that the idea of universities as collectives being advanced here may be seen as a qualification of the idea of corporate agency advanced by List and Pettit (2010) in their influential book. Whereas 'agency' in that book was seen as a set of properties largely dependent on the internal relationships between the members of an institution and the institution as such, here I am positing an idea of the university having a collective agency that is dependent to a significant extent on the assent provided by *external* parties. This is, in theory, a limitless form of collectivity, possessing aspects of both cosmopolitanism and universality.

Second, and to return to the first sentence of this paper, conditions attach to this citizenship both as to the capacity of members of the collective to speak and to the communicative processes involved. Notions of truthfulness, community spirit, and disinterestedness come into play. Admittedly, such criteria of citizenship are fraught in relation to the voiceless, and not only those neglected amid epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2010), but also the inorganic entities and flora and fauna of the

world (on which, see Bennett, 2010). This in turn raises matters of representation, which we cannot go into here.

## **Conclusions**

In relation to universities and higher education, Arendt was half-right. (i) Action *is* central to citizenship, not least that of academic citizenship. Moreover, (ii) the sense of academic citizenship *is* being suppressed by the onward march of a technicist and exploitative society. In academic life, ‘society [*has* been conquering] the public realm’ (Arendt, 1958: p. 41). But, precisely because the world is in motion, (iii) new possibilities and, thereby, new responsibilities are opening for academic citizenship. The picture is not so bleak as Arendt painted it: we are seeing the emergence of a new ecological age. Further still, even alongside their acquiring corporate and business-like identities, (iv) many universities are beginning to sense that they possess resources that can be coordinated—under the name of each university—to attend to the plight of communities across the world (including communities in the natural world) and so go on extending their institutional academic citizenship. To individual academic citizenship—which is itself spreading out across the world—we now should add a *collective* citizenship to be exercised by universities as institutions.

This academic citizenship is a citizenship for an interconnected Earth, taking its bearings from the totality of the Earth, with all its vicissitudes. It is an ecological citizenship that takes seriously its interconnections with the world and seeks to extend them. It is a citizenship that can easily be daunted as it becomes successively aware of communities that can legitimately claim its sympathies and even its empathies; and where the academic community has many resources to bring to bear and so to act. Challenges will multiply: can the university reach out in quite different directions (to local communities and to the dispossessed worldwide?) How might it act in conflicted situations of utter deadlock?

*This* academic citizenship is a citizenship *for one and all*. Unfortunately, the reciprocal is not present here. The world, still less the Earth, offers little in return to the university: it is precisely *not* the case of *all for one*. But that is nevertheless how matters lie. It is a selfless form of citizenship.



### **Author biography**

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