Urban Citizenship Threatens Democratic Equality

Patti Tamara Lenard   2020-01-21T12:00:00

Cities around the world are growing larger, as more and more people move to them. One consequence of this movement is more focused attention on the political role that cities, and their residents, can and should play in national and international political spaces (e. g., de Shalit 2018). It seems urgent that "urban citizenship" is properly characterised to understand not only the rights and responsibilities citizens of cities may well have, but also their grounding. I have no quarrel with this project. However, so far, accounts of urban citizenship – like Rainer Bauböck's in the piece that launched this forum – do too little to consider the citizenship that is "left over" for those who do not, or cannot, move to cities.

In what follows, I shall make three claims: 1) Bauböck, and others who offer more robust accounts of urban citizenship, mischaracterises those who are "left behind"; 2) this makes it easier to downplay the inevitable challenges that they face and, as a result, to ignore them on the grounds that their problems will naturally recede; and (3) the implied responses to these worries are unlikely to be sufficient, and certainly need much more fleshing out. In particular, more needs to be said about how urban citizenship accounts interact with the (perhaps boring, perhaps traditional) story told about the importance of national citizenship as protecting the equality of *all* citizens, regardless of where they live.

Who does not move to cities?

All kinds of people are making their way to cities, mainly in search of economic opportunities. Estimates are that 55% of the global population live in urban centres, and this number is projected to grow to 60% by 2030. In North America, a full 82% of citizens live in urban spaces. International migrants overwhelmingly choose cities and are a major source of the ethnic and cultural diversity that characterises most of them.

Notice, however, that those who are "left behind" continue to make up nearly half of the world's population. How should we think about this population? Here is what Bauböck says of them, ruefully: the historically greater weight given to non-urban communities has enabled "political victories of illiberal populists who can wreak havoc by destroying democratic institutions." There may be numerical truth to this claim. However, it is worth resisting blanket claims that portray urbanites as progressive and cosmopolitan and non-urbanites as backward, and so susceptible to the outlandish claims of populists who make impossible-to-keep promises about reinvigorating non-urban spaces.

One reason to take more care in how non-urban communities are portrayed is simply the empirical one. Whatever the political and moral views of this population, and their political concerns, they are not homogeneous. Here is one example. Canada has of late gotten some international kudos for its robust (compared to other similarly situated countries) commitment to resettling refugees. One way resettlement happens in Canada is when private citizens step up to collaborate with the government to sponsor refugees, and rural communities have done it so successfully that government energy is directed to supporting rural communities to do more and better for the refugees they support (Haugen 2019).

Cities have real and profound (if incomplete) roles to play in responding to global challenges, says Bauböck. So-called "networked cities" can have a key role (in partnership with states) in "setting agendas for" and demonstrating "the feasibility of solutions for the biggest problems facing humanity." Yet, think again of rural Canadians enacting the profound welcome required to resettle refugees. They suggest that there is no reason to think that only cities, and not rural spaces, can and do have a role to play in confronting global challenges. Why treat non-urban citizens as a monolithic group with retrograde – that is to say, illiberal – ideas? Why blame them for the challenges facing democratic institutions so blithely? Non-urbanites can and should be treated as partners in combatting global challenges, rather than as an obstacle in doing so.

Should non-urban concerns be dismissed as unreasonable?

A second reason to take more care in fairly representing non-urban communities is that their inaccurate representation risks giving support to those who suggest that their worries and demands can be ignored, because they are in some sense unreasonable. Where non-urban communities have grievances against the state (and their urban counterparts), they often stem from an extended and well-documented period of decline; the result is that in many such spaces non-urban citizens struggle to provide for their basic needs. Consequently, they find themselves under pressure to give up the lives they have lived (and loved) and which they had no reason to predict would be treated as obstacles to global justice. Perhaps they have non-cosmopolitan political views (but perhaps they don't) – but this is not a (legitimate) reason to permit urbanites (and their growing numerical, and eventually also political, power-base) to ignore their needs. The willingness to paint non-urbanites as backwards and intolerant, and even as responsible for the demise of democratic institutions, underpins the political willingness to brush their needs, and legitimate grievances, aside.

Here is one example of how the elevation of urban concerns over non-urban concerns manifests itself. In the recent Canadian election campaign: One key issue was the perennial inability of the federal government to provide access to clean water in certain remote Indigenous communities. Of 600 First Nations communities across Canada, nearly 400 have laboured under a "water advisory" at some point since 2004; members of the Neskantaga First Nation have been boiling their water

for [20 years](). A reporter interviewed New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh about his vocal support for Indigenous communities, asking whether it wouldn't simply cost too much to provide clean water to them. [Singh responded](), "If Toronto had a drinking water problem, if Montreal had a drinking water problem, would you be asking the same question? No, you would not." Singh's point is at least in part wrapped up in the historical, deeply problematic ways in which Canadian political actors have engaged with, or failed to engage with, the ongoing struggles faced by Indigenous peoples (Coulthard 2007). In attending to the needs of densifying cities, justified in part by the portrayal of non-urbanites as morally and politically retrograde, we risk ignoring or downplaying the struggles of those who are not swept up in the wave of movement to urban spaces.

One response to the decline of non-urban spaces is to support, or perhaps encourage, their citizens to join in the great migration to cities. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the provincial government has been [offering financial incentives]() to isolated communities to do so, as long as residents vote 90% in favour of moving. The provincial government expects to financially gain from this: the incentive is offered if and only if the cost of paying it is lower than the expected gains from being discharged of the responsibility for paying for services to the isolated community. If the community decides to move, all services are cut off, leaving holdouts with few options. One [resident]() of Little Bay Islands, a community that ultimately made ([unanimous]()ly) the choice to move, said "I've lived here all my life, I've been employed here all my life, I'm still employed now…I've got a different perspective on it than anyone else in the community."

What can advocates of urban citizenship say in response?

Some suggestions for a response feature in Bauböck's piece, but they are insufficient. One response is, simply, that this is what national level citizenship is for, i.e., to make sure that the democratic commitment to equality is protected for all citizens, whether urban or not. Remembering this key role for national citizenship, Bauböck might just say, resolves the tension that might appear to be generated by accounts of urban citizenship. But does it? Isn't the challenge posed to Mr. Singh, that it is simply too expensive to protect basic human rights access for far-flung communities, evidence that national citizenship rather than urban citizenship requires revitalizing? Isn't Mr. Singh's response – that this wouldn't be a question if we were focused on such basic rights access in major cities – an indication of the kind of problem that Bauböck's account exacerbates rather than resolves? To repeat, the danger of an over-emphasis on urban citizenship is the willingness to, and justification for, ignoring the needs – and correspondingly, the valid moral claims – of non-urban citizens.

A second hint at Bauböck's likely response lies in his calling for understanding urban citizenship as based on "*ius domicilii*" (that is to say residence) that is "uniquely appropriate for cities" – but which can somehow apply "just as much to rural municipalities and small towns as to large cities." Yet what is this residence-based

citizenship that "applies" to both spaces, with their radically distinct needs and priorities? The vision seems to be of an entirely differentiated sub-state citizenship that applies separately to rural citizens and urban citizens, with their distinct visions, orientations, and preoccupations, based in their respective residential locations.

There is a real danger that celebrating residential-based citizenship – as I have done myself with respect to the importance of granting non-citizens the right to vote (Lenard 2014) – will exacerbate rather than remedy the democratic challenges faced in diverse democratic states.

I do not mean to suggest that the project of developing an account of urban citizenship should be abandoned. Rather, I mean to ask its advocates – note that Bauböck describes his enthusiasm for urban citizenship as "ambivalent" only – to think through the challenges that are posed by describing and defending it more robustly. The answer that we should remain attentive to the importance of national-level citizenship, as the main vehicle for delivering remedies to inequalities among citizens, suggests we should be circumspect about giving urban citizenship a more robust status, since doing so threatens to divide urbanites and non-urbanites in ways that will render the project of democratic equality more difficult to attain. The answer that we should treat residence as the basis for urban citizenship, which can just as well translate into non-urban spaces, seems not to fare much better, especially when the resources to manage so many problems faced by non-urban spaces are being absorbed by urban spaces. The path forward is not clear, except to encourage urban citizenship advocates to avoid the homogenisation of non-urban views that lends to downplaying their struggles.

References

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