

Macalester Civic Forum

Volume 2

Issue 1 *The Environment, Citizenship, and the Public
Good*

Article 13

5-5-2009

Response to Colehour and Jelev

Roopali Phadke

Macalester College, phadke@macalester.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/maccivicf>

Recommended Citation

Phadke, Roopali (2008) "Response to Colehour and Jelev," *Macalester Civic Forum*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/maccivicf/vol2/iss1/13>

This Response is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Civic Forum by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Response

Roopali Phadke

I have very much enjoyed the presentations at the Civic Forum, which range from the personal to the metaphysical, and I am honored for the opportunity to respond. It is certainly a difficult task to follow a long list of articulate speakers.

Since the focus is on student contributions to the Civic Forum, I will limit my observations so that we will have time for more open engagement.

My comments will be framed in three parts. First, I will begin with a portrait of place that represents cogent connections between the various essays. I will then talk about the connectivities between the essays themselves. Lastly, I'll prod us to drill deeper into our understandings of some key concepts that relate to what's at stake—what is at the heart of environmental citizenship.

I will begin with a “postcard” of place. Like many members of our community, I spent my last week on Spring break away from Macalester College. I spent several days in Washington, D.C., a place that was home for me more than a decade ago. I had a chance to visit the National Museum of the American Indian for the first time. As I was walking around the grounds of the museum I found myself reflecting on the themes of the two student papers from my panel.

At that moment, I was struck by how well the site and landscape architecture of the museum represented a strong connection between the essays. Floating in my mind were Alese Colehour's concerns for mutuality and human ecology and Momchil Jelev's pleas for a form of environmental governance that is at once institutional and personal.

The Museum of the American Indian opened in 2004 after a decade of controversy about *purpose* and *place*. These controversies focused on the objects to be displayed that had come from the personal collection of a wealthy New York investment banker. They were also about the lack of voices of dissent in the museum about the genocidal experiences of Native Americans. You've likely heard some of those stories. Many faculty here at the college can talk more articulately about the “museumification” of Indian culture and the significance of what is inside the museum.

Yet I was most intrigued by the landscape design around the outside of the museum. The central concept of the landscape design is the

Civic Forum 2008

reintroduction of habitats indigenous to the Washington region before European contact, including hardwood forests, rivers, freshwater wetlands, croplands, and meadows.

The building is different from the more familiar museums on the national Mall right from its siting. For example, instead of being oriented north and south, like all the other museums, its entrance faces east to greet the morning sun. The north grounds on the Mall side present a hardwood forest. On the south grounds is a crop area planted with beans, squash, corn, and tobacco. On the east is a serene wetland.

The building itself is made up of five stories, curved into cantilevered ridges. We in this state have a special connection to the place. The museum's exterior cladding is of Kasota limestone from Minnesota. The pieces of Kasota stone vary in size and surface treatment, giving the building the appearance of a stone mass carved by wind and water.

You might be wondering what the connection is to today's conversation on environmental citizenship. To begin an answer, the new museum takes the last open museum space on the Capitol Mall and is considered the "first in line" to the U.S. Capitol. In fact, while gazing out over the restored native wetland, you have a direct view of the Capitol's dome and its heroic staircase. As Momchil Jelev tells us, the U.S. Congress may be lauded for its strong environmental achievements in the 1970s, which made us the world leader on environmental policy. We all know that this strong stewardship has lacked in recent years and that the "heavy lifting" has been done instead at the state and local levels.

As I was walking around the building and looking out to the Capitol, I was thinking about the themes of these papers and their concerns for biosphere politics, human ecology, and models for more sustainable living.

The Museum of the American Indian is not simply the sum of controversial representations of a Pre-Contact past inscribed into the arrowheads and bead works that grace its halls. It is very much about the present. It is about how native peoples understand each other, and the relationship between native peoples and the dominant popular culture. It is also about the cosmologies that guide us into an uncharted future and how we reclaim and rewrite the narratives that give us grounding to create the biosphere politics spoken of by our students. I encourage you all to visit and judge for yourselves.

Roopali Phadke

With the museum as a backdrop, let me turn now to reflect on the fluidities in these essays and where I hope they go next. Taken together, Alese's and Momchil's papers challenge us to forge a global environmental citizenship that recognizes boundaries of landscape ecology but not of political purpose. Watersheds, after all, do not obey political boundaries, but their topographies and hydrologies do create very useful management units. This is the basis for bioregional thinking.

The essays span institutions that range from the federal office to the local church. They both call on the institutions and citizens of the United States and the European Union to create models of engaged living that provide examples of the world to follow. I'll return to the need for models toward the end of my response.

First, I want to urge us to dig for a deeper engagement with these ideas. In particular, I want to ask how we make a biosphere politics possible. While the word "democracy" is absent from the title of the forum, Professor Worster reminds us that it is crucially linked to the ideas of environment, citizenship, and the public good that bring us together. Professor Worster also reminds us that environmentalism as a social movement must be seen as an integral part of the democratic revolution—not distant from the struggles for human rights, social equity, and economic security.

I want to articulate how two main concepts of environmental governance—that of citizenship and institutions—must be made to do more work for us analytically and empirically. This is particularly true when we think of them in light of democratic rights and obligations.

We have evoked the term *citizenship* throughout the last two days. Student Héctor Pascual Álvarez's presentation at dinner last night featured "citizenship as an act of the imagination." Professor Christopher Wells talked about citizenship as an act of consumption (i.e., paper versus plastic). This morning, we discussed citizenship as an act of personal self-discovery.

I want to challenge us to think not about citizenship but citizenships. Not only do individuals act out environmental citizenship in the plural, and sometimes in contradictory ways, but we are a pluralistic people and our identities and socioeconomic realities make some expressions of citizenships possible and constrain other acts.

Who is our model "environmental citizen"? What and who do they know? Where do they live? What relationships do they have to the state? What kinds of epistemic communities do they inhabit? How do the rights and obligations of environmental citizenship shift when the

Civic Forum 2008

focus moves away from individuals toward corporations, non-governmental organizations, and governments? We must be cautious about who constitutes the “normal” citizen in our understandings because it predicates how we think about our institutions and how we expect them to look and behave.

The Environmental Protection Agency’s concept of citizenship, for example, includes a belief that everyday citizens have the capacity, time, and interest to respond to Environmental Impact Statements (EIS). These statements may run thousands of pages long and involve processes that unfold for two to three years. The Environmental Impact Statement, by the way, is required by the National Environmental Policy Act—one of the most fundamental and important pieces of legislation in the United States.

We need to see citizens and institutions of governance as being co-produced; as simultaneously reinforcing one another. When designing our institutions to be more environmentally focused, we need to ask what kinds of institutions allow citizens to thrive and to perform acts of citizenship. We need to think about how we configure our institutions as open spaces for different kinds of rationalities—not just technical and scientific rationality, but cultural rationality.

Let me return to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) example and Environmental Impact Statements. If, in fact, the EPA’s normative citizen is one who is able to set aside time and energy to engage in everyday policy creation, then we as a society, and they as a public agency, must guarantee the resources that enable individuals to enact that form of citizenship.

This prompts another tier of questions that ground our calls for better environmental governance. We need to ask how we do policy differently when guided by a biosphere principle. We know some of the answers. We know we need to build on the hallmarks of environmental governance: strong laws, public engagement protocols, and a system of democratic pragmatism that holds government, corporations, and individuals responsible.

Grounding environmental governance also means imbuing citizenship with more than instrumentality. It cannot just be about the EIS. As Sheila Jasanoff, from the Kennedy School of Government, writes:

[C]itizens are not merely accidental inhabitants of geographically or legally delimited political spaces, with formal rights to take part in top-down regimes of governance. They are thinking, knowing and creative

Roopali Phadke

beings, whose consent to be governed may prove a lot less consequential for human development than their role in making transparent and meaningful the very purposes of government.¹

We need to articulate these purposes for government so that we can catalyze a new way of living in the world.

I'd like to return to Momchil's and Alese's call for models of environmental governance from the United States and the European Union that can lead the way. We've heard over the last two days about the phenomenal examples of student work here at Macalester that demonstrate the creative surge of activity afoot.

I'd like to provoke us to think about the models of citizenship and leadership at work beyond the borders of the U.S. and EU as well, in the developing world/Global South, that link up to and provide us with insights about our work in the U.S.

Paul Hawken, in his book *Blessed Unrest*, argues that there are over two million organizations in the world that claim to work toward ecological sustainability and social justice.² I'd like to draw on three, now classic, examples of working models of environmental governance that ought to forever change how we constitute the categories of institutions and citizens in the context of global environmental politics.

I'll begin with the example of the urban environmental transformation that has happened in Curitiba, Brazil. This has been the result of Mayor Jamie Lerner's vision for combining responsive and responsible government with a biosphere entrepreneurial ethic. Curitiba, one of Brazil's fastest growing cities, is a model of how through integrated planning the multiple problems of waste, transportation, unemployment, and lack of education get re-imagined into opportunities for sustainable urban design.

After twenty years of sustained investment, Curitiba has the finest bus system in the world, 580 square feet of public park space per resident, and a recycling rate that challenges even that of our local Mac-Groveland area. What's more, the city spends 27% of its budget on education, and dispenses eighty of the most common generic medicines free to families through the city's 24-hour clinics. The web of innovation in Curitiba goes on and on and it is the basis for new city planning from Bogota to Los Angeles. In Curitiba, municipal institutions are mapped to fit the kinds of participatory engagement that create sustainable communities. This serves my point that institutions of governance and models of citizenship must be co-produced.

Civic Forum 2008

The second example comes from Kenya and is about the work of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement. Many became familiar with Maathai's work when she was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2004. Wangari Maathai was born in Kenya and holds a doctorate in biology from the University of Nairobi. As chairwoman of the National Council of Women of Kenya, she introduced a broad-based, grassroots campaign to empower women to plant trees in school and church compounds. Since 1993, Kenyan organizations have planted over twenty million trees. This led to the creation of 2,000 public green belts in Kenya alone. Maathai went on to found the Pan-African Green Belt Network to extend these efforts to many other African nations.

The Green Belt Movement uses tree planting as an income-generating activity that promotes food security and biodiversity protection. In recent years, Maathai's own work has focused on the human rights situation in Kenya. Standing up for a democratic, multi-ethnic Kenya, Dr. Maathai served as an elected member of Parliament and as Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources between 2003 and 2005. Her work signifies how strong environmental leadership creates opportunities for remaking landscapes that support people while protecting place. It also makes clear that we need to expect seamless connections between environmental and political leadership.

My last example comes from rural Bangladesh. The Grameen Shakti Company, founded by Dipal Barua, is part of the Grameen Bank's microfinance model. Grameen Shakti has installed more than 110,000 solar home systems in rural Bangladesh. This company uses the Grameen Bank's experience in microcredit to evolve a financial package based on installment payments, which reduces costs and helps reach economies of scale. Grameen Shakti trains and employs women technicians who pay monthly visits to households to collect installment payments and maintain their systems. This work is supported by institutions including the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility, the Bangladesh Ministry of Finance, and USAID. For the same price that families were buying kerosene, this decentralized approach to rural electrification provides low-income families with access to electricity.

These examples should be familiar to many of you. You've likely encountered them in geography, anthropology, political science, and environmental studies courses. I want to make the point that these examples are not small-scale or isolated cases. They have reached economies and ecologies of scale. They represent the kinds of material and constitutional changes in the ways that people and landscapes work

Roopali Phadke

(and perform work) that should ignite our imaginations. They also posit models for delivering a “Green state,” a state that enables instead of disables—one that while still fraught with complexity and unequal power is not paralyzed by it. These cases were generated by phenomenal individual leaders, but they were also coupled with powerful alliances among local government, NGOs, and development institutions.

It is these networks of power that enable a reverse technology transfer to begin from Global South to Global North; where experiments in sustainable living, often born out of necessity and scarcity, come to be powerful models for re-thinking the purpose of government and citizenship. It represents what my colleagues and I have written about in an upcoming volume called “The Ecologies of Hope.” Our concern is for bringing the same analytical clarity and depth that is applied to development failures to critically theorizing the “success” stories of development. Our interest is to understand how entrenched values get supplanted with new ones, how institutions learn and change from internal and external pressure, and how local and expert knowledge systems are hybridized.

To conclude, I agree with Alese and Momchil that our calls for a Green state must be imbued with strong ideals of leadership and citizenship, and that this ought to be premised on principles of a mutualistic human ecology.

I’d like to end with the words of Paul Loeb, a celebrated activist and writer, who visited the Twin Cities last fall and met with some of our students working at the Ford automobile assembly site. Loeb begins the last chapter of his book, *Soul of a Citizen* (which I highly recommend as an introspective read about how we stay engaged as citizens through the decades and lifetimes it takes to make fundamental changes in society), with these words:

However we promote social change, we do so in time: We link past, present and future in our attempts to create a better world. Some historical eras, however, seem more pregnant with possibilities than others.³

The student essays seem to suggest that our moment is what Yale legal scholar Bruce Ackerman has called a “constitutional moment,” a pivotal period of time when the ground rules that connect citizens to government and the rules of society are up for renegotiation.

Civic Forum 2008

It has been fascinating to hear through student voices how this re-imagination and renegotiation is happening—at and through—the work of this college.

Notes

1. Sheila Jasanoff, "Science and Citizenship: A New Synergy," *Science and Public Policy* 31, no. 2 (2004): 90–94.
2. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming* (New York, N.Y.: Viking, 2007).
3. Paul Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time* (New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999).