The subject of citizenship – Can there be a posthuman civil society?

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the notion of agency and its relationship to our understanding of acts of citizenship embedded in civil society. I focus particularly on the strain under which the idea of human agency has fallen in the context of posthumanist thinking. By building on critical interrogations of posthumanist thought, I shed light on the consequences of distributed agency on thinking about citizenship and civil society, and particularly the normative underpinnings of agency framed in these terms. In particular I show that the idea of responsibility should be further elaborated upon before we can meaningfully consider citizenship in (more than) posthumanist terms. I conclude by briefly outlining a possibility for overcoming the ontological contradiction between humanist and posthumanist thought as a promising move towards rethinking citizenship and civil society in a more-than-posthuman world.

Keywords: Posthumanism; Citizenship; Human agency; Subject; Responsibility; Civil society; Helmuth Plessner

1 Introduction

Citizenship and civil society hold a firm place in the conceptual repertoire of political geography with significant amounts of theoretical work related to issues such as transnationalization, rights, territory, scale, mobility, participation, and resistance (e.g. Desforges, Jones & Woods, 2005; Mohan, 2002; Painter, 2008; Painter & Philo, 1995; Smith, 1989; Staeheli, 2011). The concepts have also always reflected the intellectual shifts and trends that invite us to rethink the sub-disciplines' key notions and understandings. One such pertinent shift is the recent growth of interest in posthumanist ideas related to (human) subjectivity, political agency, and politics in general (e.g. Anderson & Wylie, 2009; Blaser, 2014; Braun & Whatmore, 2010). With different philosophical roots, and variously framed, posthumanism is currently influential in a number of discussions ranging from the politics of biotechnology to new modalities of urbanization (Bingham, 2006; Coward, 2012).

As notions tied to human societies, citizenship and civil society might first seem starkly antithetical to posthumanism's move beyond human-centrism. There is, however, an emerging literature that attempts to find novel ways to deal with the idea of citizenship, particularly in the context of increasingly complex and technologically mediated society-nature relationships (Barker, 2010; Narayanan, 2016). This work has admittedly provided some refreshing conceptual openings to understand citizenship beyond humans, with important political implications related to how human societies could become more sustainable by taking the political agencies of non-human nature more seriously (Greenhough, 2014; Latta, 2014; Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002). Yet, while the idea of

citizenship is often explicitly linked with, or at least implies, one or another understanding of civil society, there is little discussion on how posthumanism views civil society in the context of citizenship.

In this article, I discuss the notion of citizenship, and the idea of civil society it implies, with a focus particularly on the strain under which the idea of human agency has fallen in the context of posthumanist thinking. The latter I approach mainly as accounts of the world ontologically assembled across the non-human, human and/or more-than-human divides, including more or less heterogeneous schools of thought, such as actor network theory, flat ontology, assemblage thinking, and new materialism. While drawing these strands of thought under posthumanism, I do not suggest that they form a coherent ontological position, or that they exhaust the specter of posthuman philosophies. I therefore focus on them as a set of approaches to the extent that they share a radical skepticism toward the notion of the subject and subjectivity in the context of human (political) agency and thereby acts of citizenship. To be more precise, I set out to discuss the aspects of subject's dissolution or dispersion that follow from the idea of distributedness seen as the ontological condition of all agency, human and non-human alike.

By building on critical interrogations of posthumanist thought my aim is to shed light on the consequences of distributed agency on thinking about citizenship and civil society, and political agency more broadly. I argue that citizenship and civil society are particularly fertile concepts for this endeavor because they invite us to consider the normative underpinnings of agency framed in these terms. This foregrounds a variety of evaluative, prescriptive and moral judgements that pertain to conduct, character or condition (Thomson, 2015). I furthermore argue that posthumanism's dismissal of human subjectivity as the basis of normative reflection risks losing from sight the possibility of citizenship as a political agency conditioned by civil society and entangled with non-human nature, yet capable of setting its own goals. This, I contend, is revealed when looking into how the idea of responsibility fits in as part of posthumanist argumentation.

I begin by outlining the conceptual contours of citizenship and civil society in political geography, with their recent posthumanist extensions. I then move on to briefly discuss how posthumanism has emerged in human geography as a strategy of embedding conceptual work within ontological premises – what could be called the ontologisation of social theory (Barnett, 2008; Joronen & Häkli 2016). In general, I view this as a move from engagement with existing knowledge claims to the promotion of radically new conceptions and accounts of the world (Anderson, 2014; Bessire & Bond, 2014). I then take up some ontologising moves that have become influential in human geography, and discuss how they propose the subject's dissolution. On this basis, I approach the question of responsibility in acts of citizenship by assessing a recent case of (anti-)immigrant activism in Finland. I question whether the idea of civil society as a context for normative evaluation can accommodate acts of citizenship seen as engendered by co-generative agency distributed across assemblages "at once human and more-than-human" (Latta, 2014, p. 329). I conclude by discussing posthumanism's implications for thinking about responsibility as an element of citizenship, and briefly outline the possibility for overcoming the ontological contradiction between humanist and posthumanist thought as a move towards rethinking civic life in a more-than-human world.

2 What citizenship in which civil society?

Political geography has a curiously complex relationship with the concept of citizenship. In a progress report reviewing recent literature related to the subject, Lynn Staeheli (2011, p. 393) accounts for this elusiveness by referring to the various dimensions and multifaceted connotations that the concept of citizenship has, noting that "[i]ndeed, citizenship is such a slippery concept and category that it is tempting to try to avoid it". She concludes, however, that the continuing global

struggles for actually existing citizenship are likely to keep the issue and the notion firmly on the political geography agenda, and that we should continue to trace the "acts, practices, and relationships that construct, and sometimes disrupt, both citizens and citizenship" (Staeheli, 2011, p. 399).

The theoretical versatility of citizenship is evident in the different ways in which political geography scholarship has approached the notion. In one of the early discussions Susan J. Smith (1989) largely departs from a Marshallian understanding of citizenship as a set of rights provided by modern states to their citizens, yet she aptly points out that this relationship is not straightforward and that there is space for contestation between rights de jure and rights de facto, which makes citizenship both the object and means of contemporary social struggles (see also Kofman, 1995; Painter & Philo, 1995; Painter, 1995). Later scholarship has found further reasons to detach citizenship from being a state monopoly. For example, Ehrkamp and Leitner (2003) point at the growing global mobility and the consequent scalar complexities in enactments of citizenship and belonging as a reason to rethink the notion from a relational perspective (see also Kallio & Häkli, 2017; McConnell, 2013; Secor, 2004; Staeheli, Ehrkamp, Leitner, & Nagel, 2012). They underline that citizenship needs to be "conceived of as a social practice that individuals engage in beyond the state, through organizations of civil society and civic actions at different geographic scales", and thus theorized as the "complex interplay and productive tensions between state and civil society" (Ehrkamp & Leitner, 2003, pp. 131–132). This complexity is, unsurprisingly, reflected in competing ideas of citizenship, ranging from legal concepts to lived experiences, from formal rights-based claims to subversive political practices (Ehrkamp & Jacobsen, 2015).

Even though many debates on citizenship revolve around alternative definitions of the concept, there have been attempts to grasp its key elements and facets (e.g. Ho, 2008; Joppke, 2007; Painter, 2008; Turner, 1997). In what has become a broadly shared understanding, citizenship is seen to contain three dimensions: status, practices, and acts, each denoting distinguishable even if interconnected and overlapping realms of social practice (Hammett, 2014; Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Isin, 2008; Lazar & Nuijten, 2013; Staeheli, 2011; Walters, 2008). All three dimensions are also premised upon the idea of civil society as a context for citizenship, albeit in a sense that varies according to the dimension in question.

Citizenship as status involves issues related to the legal recognition of rights and responsibilities based on membership in a political community defined primarily (but not exclusively) by the national state. Here civil society appears in its most conventional sense as the realm of normative contestation in a national society forming in between the private sphere and the state apparatus (e.g. Mohan, 2002; Rosenblum & Post, 2002). Citizenship as practices refers to questions that open up when citizenship rights are enacted (or denied) in specific contexts and settings. Here civil society is seen as a more dispersed and differentiated context forcefully shaped by transnational mobility and connectivities that call into question statist definitions of citizenship (e.g. Brand, 2014; Jeffrey & Jakala, 2015; Leitner & Strunk, 2014b). Finally, acts of citizenship captures the broadest sense of the concept, coming close to the idea of political agency in general, but mostly in regard practices that challenge, rework and reinvent established ideas that actors have of "themselves (and others) as subjects of rights" (Isin, 2009, p. 371). For acts of citizenship, civil society is the normative embedment for contestation over the realization of human rights across a variety of sites and scales, and thus thoroughly loosened from its statist connotations (e.g. Isin, 2012; Kallio, Häkli, & Bäcklund, 2015; Leitner & Strunk, 2014a; Staeheli, Marshall, & Maynard, 2016).

Importantly, civil society thus understood is a non-essentialist concept that cannot be given a singular epistemological definition as a pre-given (socio-spatial) entity or form (Mouffe, 2011). There is, therefore, no need to assume that ideas of citizenship and civil society necessitate each other, any more than to insist that they should be seen as logically distinct. As the term 'civil' (contra uncivil) readily indicates, it refers to the existence of particular normative expectations

against which social actions are evaluated, independently of how the pertinent 'society' in question is composed (Boyd, 2006; Edyvane, 2016). Yet, as Somers (1995) points out, as a theoretical concept it does not have to imply normative social cohesion any more than spatial coherence. What it does, then, is to point out those facets of social life where actions are subject to normative evaluation, the basis of which may equally well lie in deliberative or agonistic ideals (Mouffe, 2011). In other words – and this is how the notion is here understood – civil society refers to the socially and spatially variable contexts of normativity within which particular practices or acts may appear acceptable to some while objectionable to others, as citizenship to some and non-citizenship to others (see also Eckert, 2011; Edyvane, 2016; Nyers, 2006). This also allows for considerable scalar complexity whereby civil society can be seen at once as a local arena of political contestation between individuals and groups, and a transnational force field constituted around the question of human rights (Häkli & Kallio 2016; McConnell, 2013; McIlwaine, 2007).

In all, the notions of civil society and citizenship, whether as status, practices, or acts, mark out politically contested ideas and practices, the normative implications of which are open to questioning (e.g. Ho, 2008; McNevin, 2013; Smith, 1995). This normative charge is intimately linked with the question of political agency and subjectivity. As Anna Yeatman (2007) argues, for the idea of citizenship to make sense we need to account for the subject of citizenship, otherwise we lack fundamental tools for understanding citizenship as a "mode of being in a world that human subjects share" (Yeatman, 2007, p. 106). Similarly, in discussing how citizenship relates with political subjectivity Engin Isin (2012) underlines the importance of paying attention to "how people constitute themselves as political subjects by the things they do". He equates acts of citizenship with the capacity of humans to break with habitual action and to discriminate "between justice and injustice, between equal and unequal and between fair and unfair" (Isin, 2012, p. 123).

It is this fundamental facet of citizenship that some strands of ontologically driven posthumanist thinking have called into question when proposing profound readjustments to our understanding of the ontological nature of subjectivity and political agency. In the next two sections, I will outline the consequences of this challenge starting first with the nature of what Barnett (2008) calls the ontological style of argumentation, and moving then to discuss what a subsequent posthumanist citizenship in a radically altered civil society might look like.

3 Twisting the 'ontological turn'

The proliferation of vocabularies tuned to probing and proposing novel ontological ideas, understandings and conceptual positions suggests that a turn to ontology has gained momentum in human geography and social sciences more broadly. The richness of this scholarship is evident from the many conceptual designations that inhabit the landscape of contemporary ontological thought, ranging from social ontology to empirical ontology, ontological politics, process ontology, flat ontology, ethnographic ontology, and beyond (Blaser, 2014; Escobar, 2007; Law & Lien, 2012; Roberts, 2014; Whatmore, 2013). This vibrant discussion has revolved around and produced a significant amount of novel approaches, vocabularies and conceptual and theoretical propositions that forcefully argue for a need to rethink the ways in which the socio-material world comes into being and evolves.

As the manifold and expanding onto-terminology suggests, the turn to ontology in human geography has not emerged as a coherent or concerted project, but rather it marks out a field of discussion where intellectual positions may diverge strongly. To take up some facets of the recent debates, while some authors argue for the revaluation of philosophies of immanence, others place more emphasis on assemblage thinking, and yet others seek to valorize the vitality of material entities in the constitution of the more-than-human world (e.g. Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Doel, 1996; Roberts, 2012; Shaw & Meehan, 2013; Whatmore, 2006). However, it is nevertheless

possible to pinpoint themes that share a posthumanist orientation and thus are pertinent to the topic of this paper. Among these are the skepticism towards the centrality of 'the human' in modern philosophical accounts of meaning, creativity and change, and the idea that agency, understood as efficacy rather than intentional action, is always distributed across the assemblages of humans, objects, issues, and things that constitute the socio-material world (e.g. Anderson & Wylie, 2009; Castree & Nash, 2006; Shaw, 2012; Squire, 2014).

Variants of assemblage thinking and new materialism have informed a wide posthumanist scholarship, with topics ranging from environmental geography and political ecology to urban studies, critical geopolitics, and beyond (e.g. Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Dittmer, 2014; Roberts, 2012; Squire, 2014). Attention to material and non-human (or more-than-human) realities in connection with social systems and emergent processes has been one of the stimulating outcomes of this work, together with critical questioning of received notions and understandings of causality in large scale socio-technical emergencies, such as the 2003 North American blackout (see Bennett, 2005).

Yet, while these ontological positions certainly have created an influential array of approaches, at stake is more than a novel theoretical tool box set to unravel the complexities of the (geo)political world. In the words of Woolgar and Lezaun (2013, 322) the turn to ontology marks an attempt to "circumvent epistemology and its attendant language of representation in favor of an approach that addresses itself more directly to the composition of the world". What the authors refer to is a fundamental shift in how knowledge claims are no longer grounded on epistemic questioning, but rather upon ontological access to reality itself. Simply put, the proponents of the turn to ontology propose that our (modernist) conceptions of the world are ontologically false, and thereby most of the theoretical constructs set to analyze it are obsolete, the human subject included (Blaser, 2014; Joronen & Häkli 2016).

Hence, the ontology of assemblages and the posthumanist language that it operates tend to blur precisely those kinds of entities and distinctions that theoretical thought in political geography has come to depend on. In a world of multiplicities where human and non-human elements form endlessly overlapping, emerging and mutually constituting networks of conjoint action, the idea of scalar structuration of the geopolitical world appears as an ontologically unfounded and distorted image of the reality (Marston, Jones, & Woodward, 2005). Moreover, when the notion of agency is extended across the non-human/human divide by defining agency as efficacy, it no longer is meaningful to conceive of (human) political agency in terms of reflexivity and intentionality (Dittmer, 2014).

When thinking of the idea of civil society, it is clear that posthumanist thought troubles its foundations by introducing non-human entities as agents on a par with humans, and by distributing the subject of citizenship into contingently emerging assemblages. To this end, those arguing for a "move beyond anthropocentrism" (Hayles, 2014, p. 176) portray it as a necessary corrective to human exceptionalism embedded in "modernity's ontological homage to a Cartesian dualism" (Coole, 2005, p. 125) that separates humans from non-human nature and presupposes "the priority of human intentions" (Bennett, 2005, pp. 455–456). Moreover, by acknowledging the deep co-constitution of the human and non-human worlds, and by showing the position of humans as merely one among many politically consequential events, objects and phenomena, posthumanist thought opens up new avenues for the analysis of political agency (Braun & Whatmore, 2010; Hinchliffe, 2008; Latta, 2014; Whatmore, 2013).

Yet, to deploy new ontological premises to inform research on issues like civil society and citizenship has its challenges. One challenge, from which several more specific problems tend to arise, is related to the nature of the ontologizing move itself, which, by definition, performs a fundamental alienation of our existing conceptions and accounts of the world, and demands these to

be replaced by a new conceptual language allegedly better able to capture how the reality is actually constituted. In the words of Michael Lynch (2013, p. 453; emphasis in original), "proponents of the ontological turn […] want to grapple with things rather than to run things through a GLOSS [Generalized Language of Social Science]".

In terms of making knowledge claims this means that established scientific vocabularies, ideas and theoretical propositions become defunct sooner than new ones can be developed to replace them. The consequent 'conceptual lag' is reflected in the tendency to describe phenomena under new ontological conditions by means of an extensive analogy with conventional world descriptions. Take for example the way in which Latta (2014) delineates what he calls matter's "ecological citizenship". Leaning on Bennett's (2010) unorthodox reading of Rancière's thought, he portrays matter's political agency as disruption and transgression in regimes that fail to recognize matter as a legitimate actor, thus animating non-human objects as (potentially) insurgent citizens on a par with humans. While positing that things do not act alone but rather as part of "socionatural assemblages", he nevertheless sets 'things' categorically apart from 'humans' through analogical comparisons, such as "the performances of non-human beings and things, just like the acts of humans", or "things, like humans, are susceptible to different kinds of symbolic, discursive and legal coding" (Latta, 2014, p. 328; my emphasis). Consequently, the understanding of the citizenship of non-human objects remains profoundly implicated in the idea of human acts of citizenship.

The employment of analogy readily points at a further challenge in asserting an ontology as a fixed unequivocal foundation for world description, or a "theory of everything" as Lynch (2013, p. 246) dubs it. When argumentation is grounded upon a radically alternative ontology, its analytical consistency requires conventional understandings not to be employed in addressing the issues studied – the world cannot be described in both humanist and posthumanist terms at the same time (Lynch, 2013). The particular challenge, then, is to construe analytical propositions that are consistent with the adopted posthumanist ontology, yet able to communicate how they push forward research on issues and events identified as important in more conventional terms (see also Anderson & Perrin, 2015; Lundborg & Vaughan-Williams, 2015). The balance is not easily achieved. To fulfil the progressive promise of posthumanism, authors may be tempted to showcase their analytical propositions by means of examples that are embedded in prevailing humanist understandings of reality. Alternatively, if analytical observations are difficult to match with the "theory of everything" at hand, the "incongruity with a described ontology either will not be registered or will be resolved in favor of the ontology through which it is described" (Lynch, 2013, p. 453).

A case in point is Jane Bennett's (2005) discussion of the political consequences of posthumanism in her reading of the North American blackout of 2003. She first lays out an argument for a "radical displacement of the human subject from the center of thinking about agency", positing that "effective agency is always an assemblage" and that human consciousness too is always "constituted by the interplay of human and nonhuman materialities" (Bennett, 2005, p. 454). This means that agency, as it happens in the world, is always distributed across humans and non-humans and, thus, its outcomes cannot be linked to singular causes such as human acts or intentionality, and thereby to the moral citizen-subject. Bennett (2005) then carefully paves the way toward a posthumanist understanding of reality composed of emergent, endlessly evolving, and interconnected assemblages that interact through cascading relations between and across their constituent parts, humans and non-humans alike. This vibrant reality is difficult to conceive in terms of causality and therefore Bennett (2005, p. 461) resorts to a Chinese concept of shi to name within assemblages "the dynamic force emanating from a spatiotemporal configuration rather than from any particular element within it". This allows her to characterize significant actions in specific civil societies, such as an Islamist political movement in Pakistan, or the rise of existentialist philosophy

in Paris, as engendered by the shi of their constituent coffeehouses or schoolhouses as "a mobile configuration of people, insects, odors, ink, electrical flows, air currents, caffeine, tables, chairs, fluids and sounds" (Bennett, 2005, p. 462).

Moving then to discuss the North American blackout, Bennett (2005) considers none of the existing social theoretical approaches viable in unraveling its complexities. Rather, to account for the different ramifications of the blackout, she seeks to grasp the cascading events in ways that follow the posthumanist ideas of distributed agency, emergent non-linear causality and multiple sources of effects. To depart from prevailing understandings Bennett (2005, p. 463) urges us to reject the "empirically false" ideas of humans bearing "strong responsibility" for the harmful effects of the blackout, and instead to look for their sources in the conjoint but unpredictable agency of the electrical power grid as an assemblage including humans, electrons, trees, wind, and electromagnetic fields. She argues that this will lead to a politics that is less interested in moral responsibility of named actors and more devoted to "cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities" in a "world of vital, crosscutting forces" (Bennett, 2005, p. 464). Although not using this language, she posits, with a reading of Dewey, an approach where a civil society and acts of citizenship as its constituents coalesce "as a set of bodies affected by a common problem generated by a pulsing swarm of activities" (Bennett, 2010, p. 101). Key here is, as Bennett (2010, p. 102) has it, that "in naming a problem (rather than an act of will) as the driving force behind the formation of a public, Dewey (almost) acknowledges that a political action need not originate in human bodies at all". Hence, In Bennett's posthumanist reading, politics is ultimately about conjoined problem solving in a temporary ecosystem-like civil society of human and non-human bodies.

An example of how radically different and "fabulously complex" the world appears when seen as a multitude of interlinked assemblages is Bennett's (2005) characterization of speech. "My speech, for example, depends upon the graphite in my pencil, the millions of persons, dead and alive, in my Indo-European language group, not to mention the electricity in my brain and laptop computer" (Bennett, 2005, pp. 462–463). Given how challenging it is to trace the composition of speech as a socio-material assemblage, complicated by the innumerable agential influences possibly coming from its heterogeneous constituents, it is difficult to follow Bennett (2005, p. 464) when she later takes up familiar identities such as "the violation of human rights", "Geneva accords" "Guantanamo Bay", "the torture of prisoners", 'Iraq", "the U.S. military's policy", or "civilian deaths". In all their taken-for-granted familiarity, they seem to belong to the world Bennett (2005) has just proven ontologically false, implying that her ontological position can be either humanist or posthumanist depending on the context of discussion.

This ontological inconsistency in Bennett's (2005) project is paralleled by the way she discusses responsibility under posthumanism. Having called into question the idea of human agency and consciousness as a modernist fallacy to be replaced by an understanding of the necessary distributedness of all agency (and responsibility), she nevertheless finds it appropriate to consider human agency in registers where individual decisions to act in one or another way play a decisive political role. Probing into the issue of political responsibility, she urges us to ask, "do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends?" (Bennett, 2005, p. 464). Hence, an individual 'I' re-emerges here as a political agent vested with consciousness that not only has the capacity to make moral judgements, but also to determine what assemblages to participate in, and whether this is bound to produce beneficial or harmful outcomes.

These inconsistencies might seem trivial, and indeed many scholars have read Bennett with considerable tolerance toward them (e.g. Coward, 2012; Dittmer, 2014; Roberts, 2012; for a critical assessment, see; Squire, 2014, 2015). However, when considering just how laden the notions of agency, politics, the subject, and civil society are in social theory, not to mention their new

posthumanist layers of signification, it is an undeniable challenge to view them at once within the conventional landscape of political issues and as open-ended, distributed and fluctuating assemblages that call into question the very idea of human subjecthood. In the next section, I turn to the consequences of posthumanist conceptualizations of the subject for our understanding of responsibility in acts of citizenship.

4 Citizenship without the subject?

While contradictions in theoretical argumentation may be intellectually provoking, at stake in ontological style of reasoning is more than just the consistency of theoretical claims and the analytical propositions grounded upon them. More consequential for understanding acts of citizenship is the direction to which posthumanist thought on subjectivity is moving theoretical argumentation and ethical positioning on the question of political agency. To grasp how these are influenced by posthumanist ontologies, it is important to consider further the proposition that, ontologically speaking, political agency is (no longer) accountable in terms of human subjectivity but rather should be seen as distributed across a range of elements and objects both human and non-human (material objects, wind, concepts, plants, technologies, animals etc.) (Blaser, 2014).

In one of the few explicit attempts to re-work the notions of citizenship and civil society (or community) by means of posthumanist thinking, Coward (2012) extends the idea of distributed agency to forms of contemporary urban life. For him the citizen is not an autonomous individual but always part of "an assemblage composed of human and non-human materials", so that for example "the shopper is thus part of a wider assemblage that includes the trucks/planes that transport goods, the electricity station that lights the supermarket, and the personal computer through which consumption is shaped (and perhaps performed via online ordering)" (Coward, 2012, p. 473). In discussing what implications this decentered citizen-subject has for how we can think about citizenship, he underlines the need to recognize that "there is no individual citizen and no completed community [because the] urban citizen and their community are complex assemblages that have the material fabric of the city – and the plural alterity to which that fabric exposes them – in common" (Coward, 2012, p. 479). Concluding on an optimistic note he states that we may, and should, gradually learn a new ethics that rests on our being-in-common and mutual exposure to alterity in urban assemblages.

While it would be difficult not to welcome new members to what Latour (1993) has famously dubbed the "parliament of things", and thus radically open up democracy and civil society for other-than-humans (Bennett, 2005; Greenhough, 2014), it is nevertheless important to reflect on the consequences, both academic and ethical, of such a radical rethinking. Several consequences would merit attention, but one stands out as a particularly pertinent one in view of acts of citizenship: What the idea of political agency as projected upon non-humans means for our understanding of responsibility and necessity in political life.

What posthumanist thought in general suggests is that we should reverse our thinking regarding the relationship between responsibility and human freedom so that the latter no longer stands as the guarantee of the former (Dittmer, 2014). This is so simply because ontologically humans are no exception to 'nature' but enmeshed with the rest of the material world, and for this reason the very idea of humans as beings with capacity to choose and to bear responsibility, rising above the natural world determined by emergent causalities, is seen as fallacious (Whatmore, 2013). Some authors take this to mean that in posthumanist thought there is no role at all for human responsibility, and that the idea itself prohibits us from understanding our true place in the world. For example Hynes (2016, p. 31) posits that we need to move "beyond the prejudices of human psychology and the moral purview" to see that indifference, rather than responsibility, is what allows us to "renaturalise

human life" and thus to appreciate the unruliness of nature in contrast to "the false clarity of the moral order of good and evil" (Hynes, 2016, p. 31).

Should Hynes (2016) adhere to developing a posthumanist account of politically productive aspects of indifference, her discussion might well pave way for considering some complex aspects of (post)human citizenship. However, when exemplifying the political pertinence of her thought she runs into a confusing oscillation between a humanist and posthumanist conception of the human subject and its relation to moral judgement. This is evident from the way she discusses a narrative that captures an event where a woman acts in an apparently indifferent manner towards a fleeting incident of banal racism occurring when she is stepping out from a bus. Having first made a considerable effort to argue against the human "capacity for moral sensibility and autonomy", and rejecting the idea of a "subject who pre-exists the event", in her example Hynes (2016, p. 28–29) nevertheless portrays the woman registering in her consciousness that "she has been witness to a racist incident" (Hynes, 2016, p. 32). Besides letting in inadvertently the idea of a singular experiencing subject, she discusses the event broadly in terms of "bystander racism", thus undoubtedly taking for granted that in contemporary societies there are issues such as racism that are already harmful in themselves, and that when encountering everyday racism, there are human beings, such as the woman of the narrative, similarly capable of discerning between good and harmful aspects of social life (Hynes, 2016, pp. 33–35).

Some scholars are not as unconditional in arguing for limits to human responsibility. Reflecting on the ethical commitments of more-than-human geographies, Greenhough (2014, p. 104) states that while humans should not "be represented politically as autonomous of the world around them", this does not correspond to a "decentering of responsibility" because "as geographers we do not stand outside the worlds we encounter" (Greenhough, 2014, p. 106). Whereas it is easy to agree on the latter aspect, Greenhough's position does exemplify a broader tendency in posthumanist thought both to argue against human exceptionalism, and yet call for a sense of particular human (often scholarly) responsibility (see for example Coole, 2013; Cudworth & Hobden, 2015). Also Bennett's (2005) suggestion for rethinking responsibility is somewhat more moderate than Hynes' as she states that in "emphasizing the ensamble nature of action and the interconnection between persons and things, a theory of vital materialism presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing full responsibility for their effects" (Bennett, 2005, p. 463). Yet for Bennett (2005) too, responsibility is clearly distributed across the human/non-human divide: "Autonomy and strong responsibility seem to me to be empirically false and thus their invocation seems tinged with injustice" and, thus, "in a world where agency is distributed, a hesitant attitude towards placing blame becomes a virtue" (Bennett, 2005, pp. 463–464). Indeed, it seems logically consistent that if (political) agency is always distributed, so is responsibility for this agency.

Yet, as Sharon Krause (2011) points out, if we accept that humans do not constitute a category of agents more autonomous than other beings in socio-material assemblages, we risk losing the possibility of holding human beings accountable for their deeds based on their capacity to reflexivity and responsiveness to norms. To flesh out this issue from the point of view outlined above, I next assess a recent case of Finnish immigrant and anti-immigrant activism, with particular attention to citizenship as acts but also as status and practices where pertinent. I first describe the background of the events and then move on to discuss the consequences of the idea of distributed agency on how we can think about political life and acts of citizenship in differently composed civil societies.

5 Probing posthumanist citizenship: (anti-)immigrant activism in Finland

The question of responsibility in acts of citizenship is effectively thrown into relief when posthumanist ideas as discussed above are brought to bear on agency that seeks to deprive others of

their rights as human beings and citizens. A case in point is the recent rise of anti-immigrant activism in Finland and other European countries in the aftermath of the arrival of large numbers of humanitarian migrants in 2015. While Finland was not among the highest receivers of migrants in Europe, with no more than 32,476 registered asylum seekers that year, the number was nearly tenfold higher than in 2014. This has provoked different kinds of anti-immigrant actions ranging from the proliferation of hate speech in various right-wing web forums to haphazard or premeditated attacks against asylum seekers in many reception centers, all the way to fully organized forms of activism in anti-immigrant demonstrations (Mäkinen, 2016).

In May 2016, the asylum policy of the Finnish Immigration Service (FIS) was abruptly changed, causing a dramatic rise in Iraqi asylum applications' rejection rate from 40 per cent in spring to nearly 80 per cent in the fall that year (Migri, 2016). The rejection rate has since stayed on a high level, which has led to a rapidly growing number of Iraqi asylum seekers with a negative decision on both their application and the appeal on this decision by the Administrative Court. Frustrated by the situation, in February 2017 a group of asylum seekers set up a demonstration camp in central Helsinki to protest the FIS decision to change the criteria for granting asylum and humanitarian protection. With this policy change, they were in effect told by the Finnish authorities that even though their original place of residence in Iraq was not safe, they could live safely as internally displaced in other parts of Iraq. The majority of Iraqi asylum seekers, and a large number of NGOs and other concerned individuals considered this a gross injustice in the face of international human rights and refugee agreements (Right to Live, 2017).

However, the camp formed by frustrated Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers was not the only immigration-related demonstration in Helsinki at that time. Provoked by the asylum seekers activism, an anti-immigration group Suomi Ensin (Finland First) established a counterdemonstration encampment close to the asylum seekers' site, with the intention to support the stringent immigration policy in Finland. While the tension between the camps was tangible, from the authorities' point of view both demonstrations were legally convened and enjoyed police protection. Yet, from the outset it was clear that what was considered as legitimate acts of citizenship by activists in one camp (and their supporters in the broader society) was evaluated as something of the opposite in the other (Gaskin, 2017).

The tensioned co-existence of the two camps testifies to the normative contradictions and scalar complexities that the idea of civil society accommodates. The asylum seekers lack formal status as citizens, and in fact those whose appeal has been rejected by the Administrative Court are facing the risk of deportation. But while they cannot engage in formal practices of citizenship, their acts are undeniably acts of citizenship in the context of transnational human rights, which they have successfully mobilized in the demonstration (cf. Rygiel, 2011; Häkli, Pascucci, & Kallio, 2017). The counterdemonstrators of the Finland First movement, again, enjoy full status as Finnish citizens and thus are able to act in the name of their political rights. Yet, for many other citizens the group's anti-immigrant activism is morally questionable, and as such difficult to discuss under the rubric of citizenship even though it enjoys full entitlement within the society. Hence the use at times of terms such as 'negative' or 'anti-citizenship' (see Pearce & Giacalone, 2003; Walters, 2008).

What happens if we bring the promise of posthumanist thought to bear on these contested acts of citizenship? The first move is to take seriously the ontological position that forces a radical rethinking of who and what belongs to the context in which the above-mentioned acts are normatively evaluated. Here we can turn again to recent work by Latta (2014, p. 327–328) who, without explicitly employing the term civil society, nevertheless proposes that there are 'publics' that "form around specific problems, shaping a context where action plays out in ephemeral and conjunctural encounters with a myriad of networked 'actants' […] generating matters of concern that call humans into knots of publicity". This public sphere, according to Latta (2014), is a socio-material assemblage that is constituted by humans and non-humans, and in which their acts of

citizenship are embedded. Political life in this public sphere is not a harmonious co-existence but rather a "regime [that] determines which subjects, voices and ideas register as legitimate actors, forms of speech and propositions" (Latta, 2014, p. 328).

With these ontological parameters, we can outline the protest camps in Helsinki as conglomerations of asylum seekers and anti-immigrant activists, their supporters in the broader society, but also the material objects that help to sustain the demonstrations in the challenging winter conditions, the technological appliances that build supportive connectivities across distance, and the numerous elements of built environment that belong to this assembled 'public'. Hence, besides human actors, we can appreciate in the camps the agency of literally countless non-human things such as tents, warm clothes, food items, stoves and firewood, pavements, street lights, electric wires and bulbs, and so on. With Latta (2014, p. 327) we can, then, seek to move beyond the humanist notion of citizenship by turning to "things imbued with power, creativity and spontaneity" and with the capacity to citizenship in the sense of producing "a transformative impulse" that challenges dominant order of identity and otherness (Latta, 2014, p. 326).

It is an inspiring idea to consider how the asylum seekers' and anti-immigrant activists' protest camps might form what Latta (2014, p. 329) describes as "the eventful transgressions or insurgencies of marginalized thing-ness, connected to the assertions of voice by those human actors who are in a position of alterity vis-a-vis the dominant regime of citizenship." Yet, while this ontological positioning provides for an interesting thought experiment on insurgent citizenship beyond its "humanist conceit", it has curiously little to say about how the acts of citizenship that non-human things perform will be registered – who or what registers them, by what means, and with what consequences? Latta (2014, p. 328) posits that "matter too is capable of participating in this kind of exclamatory interjection into the public sphere", suggesting that there is a resonant normative evaluation at stake in the question of who or what has the right to legitimate visibility and voice in it. But even with the idea that humans and non-humans always engage in conjoint action, it remains unclear how such normative negotiation can unfold across the human/non-human divide, that is, how can non-human things at all participate in the evaluation of the regime that their acts of citizenship are said to disrupt and transgress.

There are two conclusions that can be drawn from an attempt to assess the demonstrations through a posthumanist ontology. First, seen in these terms, the civil society appears radically altered, with non-human elements performing acts of citizenship to be appreciated as its legitimate constituents. This reading of civil society has considerable potential to shift our understanding of contemporary political life. Second, the problem of normativity that this political life entails is not adequately addressed when it comes to the role of non-human things performing insurgent citizenship. Therefore, posthumanist ontology has little novel to say about the reasons or the consequences of the normative contestation between the asylum seekers' protest and their anti-immigrant counterdemonstrators. Without a proper grasp of what exactly are the consequences of the "moments of political becoming that are at once human and more-than-human" (Latta, 2014, p. 329), I argue, the posthumanist notions of civil society and citizenship remain normatively hollow, tied to the world of human signification, and as such, parasitic on precisely that kind of humanist conceptions they set out to transgress.

A further difficulty in the idea of posthumanist citizenship is related to its troubled relationship with the question of responsibility as an aspect of (non)human agency. To discuss this issue, it is helpful to turn again to the case of asylum seekers' demonstration in Helsinki. On 8 March 2017, a young male asylum seeker tried to commit a suicide by hanging himself from a tree near the protest camp. The act was most likely provoked by his desperate situation after his asylum application and court appeal had been rejected, and he had been expelled from the reception center that hitherto had provided him food and shelter (Kantomaa, 2017). What was striking about this attempted suicide was not only that it was carried out in public but also that it was video recorded by one of the anti-

immigrant demonstrators and quickly disseminated through several right-wing oriented web sites, followed by derogatory commentary in the attached discussion forums (Oksanen, 2017).

Now, when the act of video recording is read through a posthumanist ontology, a very disquieting imagination begins to take shape where an assemblage composed of a mobile phone, an activist body holding it, the physical site of recording, the favorable weather conditions, the presence of other demonstrators, street lights and wires, and numerous other non-human elements that contribute to the production of a video recording of an attempted suicide, share agentic capacities and thus also (some) responsibility for the event and its aftermath. In such a case we might assess the act of video recording in terms of a posthumanist politics that consists "less of citizens and their communities than singularities – the materialities [… like] stone, glass, concrete, wire" (Coward, 2012, pp. 478–479). Yet, in this case, it is clearly difficult to view the anti-immigrant agency through a lens that transforms "the idea of citizenship […] from a question about the negotiation between individuals and communities to questions of singularities unfolding around the shared urban fabric that articulates the assemblages of contemporary urban political subjectivity" (Coward, 2012, p. 479). Adding to these upsetting images is the fact that the man who recorded the four-minute long video did so in total ignorance of others' ongoing attempts to help the injured person, and despite pleas to stop in the name of decency.

It is very difficult to consider these acts as merely deplorable side effects of a tensioned protest situation, belonging to the "radically indifferent forces that course through the world" (Hynes, 2016, p. 29). Instead, the video recording and the uses to which it has been put in the internet contribute to the defamation of asylum seekers as abjects and morally inferior persons. From this vantage point Hynes' (2016) plea for a move beyond good and evil, or Bennett's (2005) statement about sharing responsibility instead of placing blame, gain truly dark overtones.

An attempted suicide and its video recording serve as a useful reminder that, when posited as an ontological condition, the distributedness of agency and responsibility pertain to all phenomena, irrespectively of what their status is when evaluated in moral terms. Sharing these concerns, David Chandler (2013) has criticized posthumanism's emphasis on the immanent emergence of complex and overlapping processes, arguing that in a new materialist world of assemblages, where the distinction between subject and object is obliterated as ontologically false, there is no role left for "human subjects, collectively understanding, constituting and transforming our world" (Chandler, 2013, p. 528, emphasis in original). Hence, in a world where objects rather than subjects transform objects "we no longer have the sense of a capacity to choose our own ends – a sense of freedom. Instead we have merely a world of blind necessity" (Chandler, 2013, p. 525).

Echoing these concerns, Schmidt (2013) probes into the posthumanist claim on the "empirical falsity of the human subject", arguing that it effectively shifts away from any "normative ethics that addresses the choice-making", thus viewing humans as accountable in material but not moral sense (Schmidt, 2013, p. 180). For considering acts of citizenship, embedded in a moral landscape of constant negotiation, this view presents immanent problems because, as Schmidt (2013, p. 180) notes, for posthumanism "there is no purpose, meaning or choice involved in the agentic participation in the world and its self-generating products. There is no outside to the constant, nonlinear flow of 'immanent generativity' of complex processes". Instead, the socio-material world is conceived in terms of self-organizing and self-generating processes of bare necessity within which humans are immersed. What this entails is a troubling withdrawal in posthumanist thought, as outlined above, of any "attributions of personal responsibility" that are key in democratic citizenship (Krause, 2011, p. 300). In all, without the possibility to link intuitive or intentional acts of citizenship to normatively charged situations it is difficult to account for the political dynamism that results from human attentiveness towards felt injustice and harm, and willingness to act towards correcting them.

6 Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that while certain posthumanist ontologies in human geography and cognate disciplines have brought important novel ideas and approaches to bear in several scholarly debates, they have a troubled relationship with the idea of citizenship as responsible agency, and civil society as its normative embedment. In exposing some key dimensions of this relationship, I have not sought to argue against all aspects of posthumanist thinking as it clearly has potential for challenging us to rethink aspects of complex socio-material developments and human-nature interdependencies (Abrahamsson, Bertoni, Mol, & Martín, 2015; Bingham, 2006; Braun, 2008; Head & Gibson, 2012). Instead, I have shown what particular problems follow from the idea of distributed agency as coupled with the idea of symmetry between human and non-human actors when considering normative valuations as an aspect of citizenship.

The question that follows is, can we reconcile the fundamental differences between these posthumanist ontologies and the inherent normativity in ideas of civil society and citizenship? The answer depends largely on whether posthumanist and humanist ontologies are seen as complementary or rival – an issue that has received little attention in posthumanist literature (Murdoch, 2004). The way in which posthumanism is typically presented as a corrective to modernist fallacies that we should detract from, makes it difficult not to think of it as an exclusive ontology that is rival to its humanist alternative (Korf, 2008). Indeed, posthumanism is often proposed as an explicitly monist position based on the premise that "researchers already 'know' ontologies, and empirical research is a way to show how a specific ontology, or even a specific 'thing', came into being" (Aspers, 2015, p. 452). Yet, its analytical (and political) efficacy risks being compromised by the consequent difficulty to communicate with bodies of existing research building on alternative ontological premises (Lynch, 2013; Joronen & Häkli 2016).

Could we extend the notions of civil society and citizenship by moving beyond the humanism/posthumanism controversy, towards "humanizing posthumanism" (Murdoch, 2004, p. 1359)? Promising in this regard is the idea of positionality originally developed by German philosopher Helmuth Plessner (1969; 2003) and taken up by Ernste (2004) and Korf (2008). Positionality refers to the inescapable condition that links humans with the environment "through dynamic bordering" whereby "the human being is structured as both centered and eccentered", that is as both entangled with and detached from the natural world of contingent emergence and causal necessity (Ernste, 2004, p. 444). Unlike things or non-human animals, humans live mediated lives in the sense of both having physical existence and distance to it, which leaves no option for humans but a reflective relationship with the world of praxis.

It is this detachment that for Plessner (2003) constitutes human subjectivity – not in the sense of a centered, sovereign, and coherent subject, but a worldly being in an ever-continuing process of becoming and living in ontological ambiguity (Korf, 2008). Humans cross nature and culture in the "double aspectivity" of being, which means a genuine duality of physical being and (intersubjective) reflection of that being – a duality that "can't be modified, neither by monism, nor by assuming a dialectical process" (Lerch, 2014, p. 206). Consequential for thinking about ethics and responsibility, this duality bestows humans with the power of putting themselves in the place of any living (or non-living) thing, other humans included (Ernste, 2004).

Plessner's "ontology of possibility" (Korf, 2008, p. 729) may open up avenues for extending ideas of civil society and citizenship precisely because it helps overcoming the forced choice between either humanist or posthumanist stance on human ethical agency. As of yet, few authors have taken on the challenge of working out what it actually means to extend citizenship to non-humans, which testifies to the difficulty of linking normative aspects of citizenship and civil society with ontological positions that obliterate such subject-dependent valuations. In what remains a deliberately speculative move, Hayles (2014, p. 179) claims that "every real object possesses – or

even more strongly, has a right to – its own experience of the world, including biological, animate, and inanimate objects". But without a grasp of rights that cross humans and nature, it is difficult to see how this statement could ever resonate with politics in a (civil) society.

To take steps in that direction, in issues where it seems particularly fruitful such as ecological citizenship, I suggest that we should study further the idea of a humanised posthumanism, building on an ontology of possibility that acknowledges our assembled entanglement with the non-human world but also accords an important role for humans in acknowledging these interdependencies. As a move beyond monist posthumanism, instead of portraying mastery over passive nature, this position builds on the idea of political responsibility for the vulnerabilities, injustices, and hazards that our assembled life of dual being in and with the nature entails. It also acknowledges that all ontological claims and arguments remain meaningless without the audiences to which they are directed – audiences concerned with how to lead a civic life in a more-than-posthuman world.

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