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Environmentally Friendly Food Initiatives in Iran: Between Environmental Citizenship and Pluralizing the Public Sphere

Simin Fadaee

Abstract

In this article I analyze acts of citizenship within environmentally friendly food initiatives in Iran. I show that act of environmental citizenship intersects with politics of pluralizing the public sphere within these initiatives. I present original research that shows how these practices are determined by state-society relations. It is shown that the main objective of most of the initiators of these enterprises is to provide a source of information about healthy and environmentally friendly food as well as providing access to such food. In contrast, many consumers also use these initiatives as spaces where they can experience and make a more pluralistic public sphere. This article contributes to a better understanding of the concept of environmental citizenship and demonstrates the relevance of the concept to broader notions of citizenship.

Key words: Iran, environmental citizenship, food, public sphere, civil society

Introduction

The word citizen usually suggests that a person is a member of a nation or a state and this belonging brings with it various rights as well as multiple duties and responsibilities. In this article I have approached citizenship as a practice (Luque 2005), meaning I have focused on how people do things as citizens (Luque 2005; Dahlgren 2006; Isin 2008). Isin (2008) has formulated this as ‘acts of citizenship’ arguing that various processes and contexts produce various subjects

and sites of struggle within the existing web of rights and responsibilities. Hence, what is significant is the focus on the act itself. He suggests examining practices through which various subjectivities articulate claims and contest rights and duties.

The relationship between various subjectivities and their acts of citizenship can be understood by situating acts of citizenship within critical citizenship studies. This framework incorporates emergent strategies and claims which are beyond simplistic understandings of citizenship. For example referring to migrants in Europe Balibar (2004) has explored the idea of ‘transnational’ citizenship through the lens of borders and migration, and he has shown how *sans-papiers* in Europe have contributed to expansion of ‘active’ citizenship. Other scholars have also debated similar ideas with regard to mobility and borders. Rygiel (2010) has emphasized the ‘globalizing’ character of citizenship which governs mobility and Squire (2011) has explored multiple conditions influencing and leading to what he calls ‘mobile’ citizenship. Peter Nyers (2011) concept of ‘irregular’ citizenship draws our attention on processes of irregularization through which citizens and non-citizens define and transform the boundaries of rights and belonging. What is significant in this process according to Nyers is that even citizens ‘may have to struggle for the right to have rights’ (Nyers 2011: 185). Moreover, according to him ‘form and space-time of citizenship are increasingly in motion’ and therefore we need to understand that the ‘processes, conditions and relationships that produce irregular subjects are complex and open to contestation’ (Nyers 2011: 185). One of the most important critical concepts has come from Isin who has called for an examination of the challenges citizenship has faced by emergence of new rights, new subjectivities such as migrants, and migrants who relate to new countries. He argues that ‘The rights (civil, political, social, sexual, ecological, cultural), sites (bodies, courts, streets, media, networks, borders), scales (urban, regional, national, transnational, international)

and acts (voting, volunteering, blogging, protesting, resisting and organizing) through which subjects enact themselves (and others) as citizens need to be interpreted anew' (Isin 2009: 368). Isin introduces the concept of 'activist citizen' or 'activist citizenship' to theorize the new challenges that people face when claiming citizenship. According to him while active citizens 'act out *already* written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting, activist citizens engage in writing scripts and *creating* the scene' (emphasis added) (Isin 2009:381).

One of the first studies which addressed activist citizenship (although the author does not call it this) with regard to the authoritarian context of the Middle East is *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco* written by Susan Slyomovics (2005). She shows how a public human rights activist community in post-colonial Morocco was engaged in activist citizenship through 'performances of human rights' such as literary work, vigils, pilgrimages, etc. Shirin Saeidi (2012) has used this concept to explain gendered subjectivities and the nation-building process in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980–88. She demonstrated how the atmosphere of isolation and personal histories of women had turned them to activist citizens who shaped an autonomous sense of belonging in conjunction with the government's state-building agenda. In another article (2010) she uses the notion of acts of citizenship to address citizenship formation after the war. By examining the ways through which women navigated between collective and individual belongings she elaborates on the formation of socially embedded citizenship in a semi-authoritarian state (Saeidi 2010). These scholarly contributions are significant in that they explore citizenship issues and gender-based mobilization in the Middle East from a bottom-up and emancipatory perspective. Most work on citizenship in the Middle East addresses citizenship in the top-down manner focusing on how structures of state and society have influenced citizenship rights and categories of social membership. Moreover, this body of scholarship

confines citizenship to nationally defined political communities and it emphasizes normative frameworks of rights and belonging. For example the edited volume *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East* (Butenschon et al. 2000) focuses on the dissimilar political trajectories between Europe and the Middle East which have led to the emergence of different manifestations of citizenship. Moreover, it is argued that heterogeneity of the entities defined as states in the Middle East has made a united understanding of citizenship and rights discourse problematic. In *Citizenship in the Arab World* Parolin (2009) takes a broad legal perspective and examines different conceptualizations of citizenship from the perspective of nations, states, religion, family relations, undefined boundaries between the public and the private. Gender is a secondary concern in much of this research, with the exception of Joseph's (2000) work entitled *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, which explores patriarchal structures and women's liberation issues in the Middle East. However, this volume too focuses on gender specificities in the Middle East and its implication on women's integration in society and politics in a top-down manner. It shows how women have been deprived of their rights and how in many cases they have turned to second class citizens in these societies.

In this article I provide a unique bottom up perspective to citizenship in the Middle East and analyze acts of environmental citizenship within environmentally friendly food initiatives in Iran. I also illustrate that although a sense of individual and collective responsibility is at work in these initiatives a sense of global belonging is present as well. I present original research and show how multiple forms of environmental citizenship are at work in these spaces. Moreover, I show that act of environmental citizenship intersects with politics of pluralizing the public sphere within these initiatives. I situate my argument within the broader social and political context of Iran and emergence of citizenship discourse since the late 1990s. The existing literature on

environmentally friendly food largely focuses only on consumers and their motivations for consumption of such food (see Baker et al, 2004, Padel and Foster 2005; Artsens et al 2009; Marques Vieira et al 2013). I emphasize motivations and practices of the consumers *and* initiators of such enterprises at the same time. Moreover, I explore the opportunities these enterprises provide for citizens to contribute to a more vibrant public sphere. Hence, I show that the rapid increase in environmentally friendly food initiatives in Iran should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that reveals complexities of culture, politics and economy.

The existing body of literature on environmental citizenship has broadened our understanding of the relationship between environmental issues and citizenship claims and practices. Moreover, it has demonstrated under which conditions and circumstances individuals act as environmental citizens. However, this literature has so far remained limited to the global North and has not located environmental citizenship within the broader political, social and the cultural contexts of countries of the South and the existing state-society relations. Hence, it remains unclear how environmental citizenship is performed in the global South where citizenship rights are often highly contentious and obligations are ambiguous and in many occasions still contested issues. Consequently transformative implication of environmental citizenship for broader social and political change in these societies has not been explored. In this paper I show that researching environmental citizenship in the global South can help us understand ‘the plurality’ (Latta 2007, 378) of ‘environmental citizenship’ in different contexts and can contribute to better understanding of contested citizenships. I also illustrate the emancipatory potential of the concept of environmental citizenship to promote ‘active politicisation of the human–nature and human–human relationships’ (Latta 2007, 378). Moreover, this research shows that collective responsibility of citizens based on the ethos of care

towards others – as emphasized in the concept of ecological citizenship – does not contrast with the more traditional understanding of citizenship in which individuals negotiate their rights and responsibilities vis-a-vis the state (see Lockie 2009; Turner 1993). This paper presents original research conducted between June and July 2015 and in March 2016.

In the following section I offer a brief overview of the literature on environmental citizenship and show the necessity of a more contextualized approach. In section three, I illustrate dynamics of citizenship practice since the 1979 Iranian revolution. In section four, I present original data from a number of environmentally friendly food initiatives in Iran and analyze the motivations and practices of the initiators and the consumers. I conclude by discussing the implication of this case study for broadening our understanding of the concept of environmental citizenship and its relevance to broader notions of citizenship.

Environmental Citizenship: A Quest for a Contextualized Approach

Environmental citizenship has within the past two decades become an important field of scholarship. This body of literature started to emerge in the 1990s through the work of scholars such as Brian Doherty and Marius de Geus (1996), John Barry (1999), Mark J. Smith (1998) and Deane W. Curtin (1999). The concept gained momentum with the publication of the edited volume *Environmental Citizenship* (Dobson and Bell 2006) and the special issue of *Environmental Politics* (Dobson and Saiz 2005) on ecological citizenship.

What do we mean by environmental citizenship and who are environmental citizens? Dobson (2007) has provided a comprehensive summary of this question. The most important characteristic of environmental citizenship is its public implications. This means that environmental citizens' behavior protects or sustains the environment. Hence, s/he feels

responsible to ‘work towards a sustainable society’ (Dobson 2007, 280) and has commitment to the common good. Within this framework both private and public actions are considered to have public environmental implications. Hence, environmental citizenship should be understood as ‘a citizenship of the private sphere as well as the public sphere’ (Dobson 2007, 282).

Literature on environmental citizenship has been divided to three categories. The two traditional types debating the relationship between citizens, environmentally friendly behavior and the protection of natural resources are liberal environmental citizenship and civic republican environmental citizenship (Bell 2005; Dobson and Bell 2006; Dobson 2007; Jagers 2009). In both of these conceptualizations environmental citizenship is practiced in the public sphere and is concerned with the relationship between the individual and the state. From a liberal point of view, environmental citizens attempt to enforce the rights discourse into the environmental context. For example, as water is central to human wellbeing, people have a right to clean water. The civic republican tradition highlights the environmental responsibilities and duties of citizens to ensure their common environmental interests. This refers to compulsory actions designed and enforced by states on individuals in order to protect the wider environment.

Dobson’s (2003) concept of ecological citizenship diverges from the two traditional guises of environmental citizenship in that he dismantles traditional perceptions of environmental citizenship with regard to the question of rights and responsibilities practiced exclusively in the public sphere and their focus on the nation-state as citizenship’s sole ‘political container’ (Saiz 2005, 174). In Dobson’s conceptualization of the term, justice is a key component and ecological citizens develop an environmental responsibility on a ‘planetary scale’. Hence, in their private lives and on a daily basis – as well as in the public sphere – they take actions ‘to reduce unjust impacts on others’ (Seyfang 2006, 387). Moreover, Dobson’s

concept of ecological citizenship is based on the postcosmopolitan principle of non-reciprocity. In cosmopolitanism citizens hold reciprocal obligations on a global scale. However, non-reciprocity supports the idea that not all members of the globe are equally responsible for the global community but those with larger ecological footprints have an obligation to those who are exposed to environmental hazards as a result.

Although this body of literature has provided useful conceptualizations of how everyday actions of citizens regarding environmental issues are shaped and directed, the subjects and contexts discussed in this literature remain homogenous and subject to criticism. Latte (2007) for example suggests making a connection between ecological citizenship and environmental justice to foster a greater political participation of ‘subaltern political actors’ who are usually excluded from the ‘dominant socio-ecological orders’. Baldwin (2012) argues that environmental citizenship discourse needs to treat difference from an ontological position rather than an epistemological one. He refers to ‘climate change migrants’ and claims that this example shows that difference and alterity should not be presupposed as a given but that it can result from environmental citizenship discourse. Harris (2011) emphasizes state-society relations and broader political economic changes in understanding debates around environmental citizenship and development of environmental subjects. She argues that we need to bring together concepts of environmental citizenship and environmentality (Agrawal 2005) to understand citizens’ narrations and understandings of environmental problems and their consequent solutions. She draws on the case of Turkey and suggests that both subfields should be analyzed with regard to ‘broad-scale political economic changes that necessarily refashion state-society interactions, identity, citizen responsibility, and notions of the self’ (Harris 2011, 840).

In this paper I investigate the practice of environmental citizenship through the example of newly emerged environmentally friendly food initiatives in Iran. I analyze this with reference to the socio-political context of Iranian society as well as dynamics of citizenship practices in Iran.

Contested Citizenship in Post-Revolutionary Iran

The Iranian revolution of 1979 led to major social, political and cultural transformations in Iran. According to Vahdat (2015) one of the most important consequences of the revolution was the ‘agentification of the subjects’ which ‘catapulted the average person into the public sphere’ (Vahdat 2015, 95). The revolutionary process as well as an eight year war with Iraq (1980-1988) mobilized millions of Iranians albeit in different ways, and led to ‘ubiquitous agentification’ of different groups of people. At the end of the war these people had more expectations from political, social and the economic systems (Vahdat 2015) and this was manifested strongly in their support for the reform movement in late 1990s. The reform movement gained further momentum during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and fostered an institutionalized pluralistic public sphere and civil society. Although the civil society discourse first emerged in the 1990s among Muslim intellectuals it was subsequently embraced by many other segments of society. Indeed it became the dominant discourse during the electoral campaign and after the 1997 presidential election (Jalaipur 2003). During Khatami’s presidency there was a general relaxation of legal constraints to civil society mobilization and people were encouraged to think of themselves as citizens with rights (Arjomand 2002). For the first time in the post-revolutionary era Khatami advocated citizenship rights. As a consequence, citizenship discourse replaced the *khodi* vs. *gheire khodi* (from us vs. not from us) discourse which was one of the most undemocratic narratives of the post-revolutionary Iran. This discourse classified

those Iranian citizens as *khodi* (from us) who were in total agreement with the ideology and practices of the government, and those who were in any way critical of the government as *gheyre khodi* (not from us). The latter group consisted of the vast majority and was nearly excluded from the public sphere and processes of decision making. One of the most important slogans of the reform movement was ‘Iran for all Iranians’. This slogan emphasized the significance of citizenship rather than ideological beliefs or absolute support for the government. Under this discourse, various individuals and groups, gained the opportunity to participate in public life as long as their actions were within the framework of the constitution (Fadaee 2012, 83-4). As control was relaxed under Khatami, democracy (*mardomsalari*) became one of the main themes within the flourishing intellectual atmosphere of universities, civil society organizations, cafes, press, etc. and posed a major challenge to the underlying undemocratic political structure of the regime (Fadaee 2012).

In general the reform era (1997-2005) transformed the state society relation fundamentally and led to the emergence of a mature form of agency among Iranians with new understandings of power relations, rights, resistance and public sphere. Despite these developments however, a number of factors inhibited the expansion of civil society. The greatest obstacle to civil society during Khatami’s presidency was that after two decades of emphasizing the revolution and values from the war such as fundamentalism, anti-Westernization, and martyrdom, religious institutions and most governmental institutions were not unwilling to allow their power to be mediated through civil institutions (Jalaipur 2003).

The reform era was followed by the conservative government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) which harshly attacked these newly emerged civil society and public sphere. Under his term Iranian civil society faced a fundamental transformation. The government aggressively

undermined civil society organizations (CSOs) by rejecting their applications for registration, toughening existing laws and regulations that pertain to CSOs, spreading fear and terror among civil society activists, and by destroying the relationship between Iranian CSOs and their international counterparts (Razzaghi 2007). Some CSOs suspended their operations and others scaled back the scale and scope of their activities. Some tried to adapt to the new conditions, others were prevented from working by the government while other groups continued to work unabated in spite of political repression. The prohibition of any form of public gathering, however, made it difficult for the latter group to work effectively.

Although the election of the moderate-reformist president Hassan Rouhani in 2013 re-opened opportunities for civil society activism and pluralized the public sphere, struggles for claiming new rights and to create a more diverse civil society and an inclusive public sphere have become an everlasting component of Iranians' lives leading to emergence of multiple publics and counter-publics (See Calhoun 1992; Keane 1995; Warner 2002).

Environmentally Friendly Food Initiatives in Tehran

The 1990s and the early 2000s witnessed the emergence of a wave of environmentalism which was rooted in the reform movement. Kahatami was extremely popular among youth and women. Consequently these two groups became the main advocates of the newly emerged social movements including the environmental movement (Afrasiabi 2003; Fadaee 2016).

Technological changes such as satellite television and the internet also played an important role in shaping and increasing environmental awareness. Moreover, the Iranian Department of Environment in 1997 was restructured and led to the launch of an action called the National Action Plan for Environmental Protection, which called for collaboration between

related official organizations and civil society. A committee on the issue of public participation was organized, and it concentrated on the implementation of different programs to unite various groups of people, associations, and unions, around environmental issues. Moreover, in 1998, the Public Participation Bureau was founded within the Iranian Department of Environment and its aim was to assist environmental NGOs. Masumeh Ebtekar became the first female vice president and the head of Iranian Department of Environment during Khatami's administration, and she played a significant role in shaping and encouraging environmental activism. During this period environmentalism was largely embraced by the well-educated and politically conscious strata of the middle class (Foltz 2001; Fadaee 2011, 2012). However, within the past few years the environment, broadly defined, has become a popularized issue among ordinary citizens. A series of environmental problems have intensified concerns of ordinary people. Hence, people have become sensitive towards environmental issues and more people feel threatened by environmental problems. For example, recently some of the western and the southern provinces have suffered from poor ambient air quality which led to many protests. Lake Urmia, one of the largest lakes in Iran, and Zayanderud, the largest river of the Iranian Plateau in central Iran, dried up and this has inspired many demonstrations. Within the last years the air pollution in Tehran has led to serious asthma problems forcing the government to close down schools and public institutions on multiple occasions. The intensification of environmental problems has also increased the frequency of officials' engagement with environmental issues. Perhaps the most important recent reaction to environmental questions came from the supreme leader in November 2015 before the COP 21 meeting in Paris. In an unexpected move he emphasized the significance of battling climate change and encouraged the officials to move towards green economy and the

implementation of a renewable energy strategy. Also, President Rouhani has called his government ‘the government of environment’ on different occasions.

The growth of vegetarianism and a proliferation of vegetarian restaurants and organic food shops, increased numbers of people who use public transport and recycle their garbage are a few examples of how people increasingly address environmental issues. Although only a minority of youth and the educated middle class embrace these practices, they are becoming part of an ever-growing subculture which is increasingly influencing the wider public (Fadaee 2016).

It is within this context that a number of environmentally friendly food initiatives have emerged in mostly rather upscale neighborhoods of Tehran (See Fadaee 2016). Many of these initiatives have emerged within the past ten years. They vary from shops selling locally sourced organic food to vegetarian restaurants. Many of these shops and restaurants are also platforms which provide a source of information about healthy and environmentally friendly food through their newsletters and websites and organization of workshops and seminars. Some are linked to environmental NGOs, are spinoffs of these NGOs or are founded by current or former activists of these organizations.

This paper presents research findings from the empirical investigation of these shops and restaurants carried out in June and July 2015 and March 2016. It is based on visits to 7 organic food shops and 8 vegetarian restaurants. In these sites 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with owners and managers of these enterprises. This was complemented by 30 semi-structured interviews with their customers and analysis of their newsletters and websites.

Organic Food Shops

Most of the organic food shops are strongly involved in building backward linkages with organic farmers. This close collaboration with farmers involves two strategies. Some of these initiatives are spinoffs of environmental NGOs which promote organic agriculture among farmers. These NGOs are active in promoting organic agriculture among farmers who had previously used non-organic pesticides and herbicides. Through workshops and educational programs they work closely with farmers and encourage them to embrace traditional organic farming by promising that they would find a market to sell their more expensive organic products. Other initiatives are only in direct connections with those who already produce organic products. One of the shop owners even comes from a farmer family so he considers himself an insider and he sells products from his family and his relatives.

Some of the organic farmers have been certified by *Iran Organic Association* but many are small farmers whose products do not have any official certificate. Initiators and managers of some of the shops actively search for the latter. Some are involved in both, i.e. they work with the already certified producers and at the same time they continuously search for unknown/less known organic farmers. *Iran Organic Association* was established in 2006 and since then they have actively been participating in the process of legislating the organic standard. However, they are not fully recognized by some of the shops as trustworthy. Hence, although many of the shops also sell products certified by the *Organic Association* they have doubts about the integrity of the organic standard. Therefore, they are actively involved in promoting independent organic farming in order to gain firsthand knowledge of their supply chains. Many sell organic products which are not certified by the *Organic Association* but provide their products from farmers whose organic provenance they personally attest. This demonstrates the importance of 'networks of trust,' as the manager of one of the initiatives formulated it, rather than certification.

Here is all about trust! There are no clear mechanisms for approving if the food is really organic. We work within a network of trust with the customers and the farmers. The customers believe in what we say and I also think they feel the difference between different products. Before we used to take volunteers to the farms to show them how actually the food is being produced but even then you could never actually prove that the food is organic. At the same time we trust the farmers we work with and believe in what they tell us.

Some initiators and managers are proud of the personal connections they have with their customers which have been built over the years of close relation with them. One of the initiators explained:

I have really good relations with my customers and this is very important before. I know most of them personally. When they come here we talk about many things. When we announce our new products in Viber, Telegram or through text message, some of them call and order and I keep things for them until they come and pick them up. They only pay me after they pick up their stuff but I am sure when they ask me to leave aside something for them they will come by.

Belonging to these networks of trust is something which seems to be a major motivation for many customers. In recent years several food scandals eroded the trust between consumers and large companies linked to the government, and as a result issues of food safety have become a serious concern for many people. The following quote by a 34 year old woman summarizes concerns and motivations of many customers:

I like shopping here because I like the feeling that the food I buy is directly coming from the farm and it is with no chemicals. So I'm not nervous about what I eat. It is also comfortable shopping here. We [customers] have a Viber group. So each time new products arrive we are informed and we can then come get fresh stuff. People also share related news in Viber. So I feel I belong to a group, to a community with similar concerns.

Because of the existence of these networks of trust, people also feel free to talk about different issues with the sellers or managers. One can often hear people discussing food prices, health issues they or their relatives have or the air pollution. In the course of this small talk many accuse the government and criticize its incapability to provide a safe and healthy environment for its citizens. These discussions address broader social and political issues and go beyond environmental related problems. Customers are usually young and from educated middle class strata of the society. Dominant perceptual orientations among customers of these shops are food safety, health and a belief in increasing environmental problems. Hence, they buy these products because they perceive them to be 'safe', 'healthy', 'natural' and without pesticide. Moreover, they recognize these products as less harmful for the environment. However, for many the satisfaction comes from the fact that they can be part of a trustworthy network which helps them stay healthy and at the same time provides a platform for them to do something for the environment.

From the initiators' point of view these initiatives are places which provide safe and healthy food. They also support small scale farming with traditional organic methods. Moreover, they see themselves as promoters of environmentally friendly consumption as well as providers of educational platforms for raising personal, environmental and social awareness about food.

Although different initiatives differ in their emphasis of these aspects, they are united in the above mentioned goals. Most of the shops have a section where they provide pamphlets and newsletters regarding organic and healthy food. Those that are spinoffs of NGOs also familiarize people with activities of the NGO and link their activities to broader social and environmental issues and concerns. For example one food shop had just started a second branch with the same name. However, the second shop focused on selling traditional handcrafts. The manager explained the reason behind this:

You know, all regions of Iran used to have their traditional handcrafts for example each region used to have a special doll or a specific form of embroidery. But now these traditions are being forgotten. The sirs [the government] do not really care about it. So what we [in the NGO] do besides promoting and supporting organic farming is that we ask them to restart these traditional crafts. For example we ask them to make mobile covers instead of just a piece of cloth so that we can sell it for them. This means the embroidery does not change but it becomes a bit more practical so that we can sell it to the people in Tehran. So we help these communities revive!

Vegetarian Restaurants

The first vegetarian restaurant in Iran was established as part of the *Iranian Artist's Forum* in 2001. The *Artist's Forum* is a cultural complex located in one of Tehran's central districts. It is home to variety of exhibitions from photography to painting and sculpture. Furthermore, it hosts concerts, theater performances and movie screenings. The restaurant serves fresh and meat-free food in an extra-ordinary convivial atmosphere with an indoor-outdoor terrace looking into a park. Recently it has expanded and started a shop next to the restaurant selling vegetarian

products. Most of the customers in this restaurant are artists or art lovers visiting the complex. According to the website of the restaurant, its main objective is to introduce healthy food to the Iranian public and encourage them to better take care of their health and their environment. They emphasize the significance of the conscious choice of ecologically friendly food as a step forward to protect rivers, soil, air and forests.

A few other vegetarian restaurants are spin-offs of the Artist's Forum restaurant although they are independent. Many of their proprietors are in good contact with the founder and managers of the Artist's Forum restaurant, who support similar initiatives through sharing their expertise with the new comers. These restaurants all have sought to reproduce a simple and convivial atmosphere, sometimes with gardens and outdoor areas and accompanied by pleasant music. The food served is not only meat-free but very diverse. Depending on the restaurant it varies from meat-free Persian traditional food¹ to varieties of pizza, pasta and Indian food. These restaurants are also pioneers of serving traditional Iranian herbal beverages (*damnoosh*) which were never served in restaurants and cafes before. Most of them have a section where they provide pamphlets and newsletters regarding benefits of vegetarianism from medical and environmental perspectives or they sell vegetarian cooking books. Some have a small section where ingredients for vegetarian cooking can be bought.

Many of these proprietors define similar goals and objectives for their restaurants, seeing their work a significant contribution to changing lifestyles and perceptions of people regarding their choice of food and its impact on their personal health and the environment. In spite of these commonalities, however, diverse narratives are at work. For example one founder criticizes the dairy industry in Iran and emphasizes the fact that they are the first *vegan* restaurant in Tehran.

We advocate animal rights and promote vegan food. You know about the recent dairy scandals! It became known because they [those in power] had conflicts among themselves. We need to make people aware of these issues. Everybody is dying of cancer. Mr. X [for the sake of anonymity] invested millions in his company who produces vegan but he does not sell enough. Last year he advertised his products in TV but then they did not allow him doing it again. We all know why: because their own [the establishments'] dairy companies would go bankrupt.

Another founder emphasizes the importance of consciousness raising about individuals' rights. He told me a story of a man who was angered when he realized the restaurant did not sell meat. The manager explained that he tried to talk to him: 'I am just trying to tell you one thing: you have the right to live healthy and you can make a conscious choice about what you eat and how you live'. The manager continued:

People should be aware that they can change things. How is it possible that they think they have the right to vote and if their vote is not counted properly they pour to the streets and protest² but can't stand up for the food they eat?! I feel responsible. I see myself as someone who should awaken people. I see myself responsible for protecting the earth.

A young couple who decided to return to Iran after spending a few years in England to 'do something for the people' explained that they felt 'responsible towards their people'. The restaurant they have opened is based in a self-service principle where people can actually see the food before choosing. Unlike most of the other vegetarian restaurants they also serve traditional

Persian food. This restaurant is very centrally located and is near a popular business district and a few universities.

We are both vegetarians and we wanted to promote vegetarianism but by just talking about it most people do not connect with it. Many think vegetarianism means eating raw vegetables all the time. So we wanted to have a place where people could actually *see* and *try* vegetarian food. Many see the food from the window and enter without knowing that it is vegetarian. After they enter we tell them it is vegetarian. Some say ok we try it. Others become skeptical and want to leave. But then we try to encourage them to stay and tell them about its benefits. We tell them how healthy it is and how through vegetarianism we prevent slaughtering of animals and also protect the environment. In most cases it works really well and people show interest.

Customers of the vegetarian restaurants are usually middle class, young and educated. Some come to these restaurants to have vegetarian food – either because they are vegetarians or would like to try vegetarian food. Among these some are apolitical and are rather health conscious or interested in trying something new (i.e. vegetarian food). Others express political reasons behind their choice. For example one male yoga trainer told me:

I am here for the food and for the environment. Everything has become really horrible, the food we eat is awful, the air is so polluted and we have global warming. The TV and radio³ are also just talking about Palestine⁴ instead of talking about these issues. That is why we need to talk about it ourselves. We need to change our consumption patterns and promote it among others.

Despite the fact that one can occasionally see like-minded customers to this yoga trainer, many choose these restaurants because of the convivial atmosphere they offer. Some prefer to be surrounded by young people while others enjoy the alternative atmosphere of these restaurants which, according to a young female student, are 'safe havens within the madness'. She complained about lack of nice cafes or restaurants in the city to 'hang out with friends' and the fact that as a group of girls there are not many places where they feel comfortable. She was not a vegetarian and none of her friends were either but she mentioned, almost as an aside, that 'we like the vegetarian food.'

A young artist explained that although he is not vegetarian he goes to vegetarian restaurants to work because 'the staff and the people who come to these restaurants have an understanding for art and nobody bothers me'. I asked him if he cares about the food or if he has any environmental interests. He responded:

Obviously I like the fresh food. I am also aware of the personal and environmental benefits of eating no meat. But when I decide to come to a vegetarian restaurant, first, I come to work. Also with my friends if we have to work we meet in vegetarian restaurants. But we are also happy to support a progressive initiative.

These restaurants are similarly full of young couples who are there for a date or to spend time with their partners. With a similar logic, the choice of vegetarian restaurants for many is related to the 'alternative', 'comfortable' and 'tolerant' space these restaurants provide.

Conclusions: Between Environmental Citizenship and Pluralizing the Public Sphere

Samaddar (2012:847) has argued that there are 'as many histories and genealogies, as there are citizenship cultures and citizenship practices.' This article reveals how practicing

different forms of environmental citizenship intersects with politics of pluralizing the public sphere within the environmentally friendly food initiatives in Iran. It also shows how organic food shops and vegetarian restaurants function as sites of practice and contestation with regard to rights and responsibilities. As the empirical data illustrates the main objective of most of the initiators of organic food shops and vegetarian restaurants is to provide a source of information to raise people's consciousness about healthy food and its relation to the environment as well as offering a platform where people can actually have access to such food. They often conceptualize these objectives with regard to the rights discourse and in line with the principles of liberal environmental citizenship. Thus they question rights people have vis-a-vis the state, i.e. the right to have *knowledge* about the food they consume and its effect on their environment as well as the right to *consume* healthy and safe food (Dowler and Caragher 2003). This means they act with regard to the values of liberal environmental citizenship, and try to push the boundaries of rights defined by the state. At the same time, they underline that everybody has a duty to minimize their environmental impacts through consumption of organic or meat-free food. However, these acts are not being done and promoted as duties vis-a-vis the state, as claimed by ethos of civic environmental citizenship. This is due to the fact that the Iranian state has failed to plan any effective project or campaign to support environmentally friendly and healthy food. These initiatives are all bottom up projects driven by ordinary citizens who, on many occasions, are critical of the state's negligence of food safety and increasing environmental problems. Hence, these acts are partly expressions of duties of citizens towards each other on a national scale and partly expressions of ecological citizenship on a global scale. Although this social group does not feel that they have larger ecological footprints than the others they feel responsible as individuals on a national and global scale. This is mostly due to the fact that this

social group is highly educated, travels a lot and is exposed to global media. This creates a sense of national as well as global belonging and questions the principle of non-reciprocity in the theory of ecological citizenship where those citizens with larger ecological foot prints are supposed to embrace environmentalism more enthusiastically.

Dynamics of making the public sphere have been recognized by scholars as cornerstones of citizenship (Eliasoph 1996; Dahlgren 2006). The empirical data in this article shows that consumers' acts and motivations vary from the initiators in the sense that for many costumers, making and pluralizing the public sphere prevail over practice of environmental citizenship, although these two in many occasions overlap. It can be observed that many customers see these initiatives as platforms which transform their relationship to nature and the environment but even more as platforms which expand public space and foster the creation of new publics. For organic shoppers it is important to belong to a community and a network they can trust, although it is also important that their network or community is an 'environmental' one. For patrons of the vegetarian restaurants although environment is often a concern, it is the unique and alternative public space that attracts many of these customers.

In *Greening Citizenship* Scerri (2012) refers to what he calls a 'wellness oriented model of citizenship' that prevails in many societies. According to him this form of citizenship demarcates real political action, encourages individualistic politics of the self for privileged groups of citizens and ignores broader fundamental issues such as wealth distribution or economic justice. In a recently published piece Scoville (2016) raises similar concerns with regard to individualism prevailing in ecological citizenship. Although these concerns are legitimate and true in many instances there is a sense of collectivity among the social group studied here in the sense that they are not only seeking an individualistic healthy and green lifestyle with consumer

preferences for organic and vegetarian food, but they are at the same time concerned with shaping networks of trust and creating a more vibrant public sphere. In this sense I believe that the acts of most consumers can be regarded as acts of demonstration (Walters 2008). When it comes to shopping for organic food they protest against negligence of the state in protecting the public with regard to food safety and environmental issues and when they act as participants of – and engender – public space they object to the repressive policies of the state in public sphere. Hence, these acts of citizenship should be understood within the broad sphere of civil society and in relation to dynamics of participation and civic claim making. Hence, in contrast to Isin's theory of acts of citizenship which is mostly focused on 'rights' in an individual sense this case demonstrates the importance of collectivities, and a movement between individual and collective claims. Moreover, most of these citizens feel a sense of responsibility to the planet. Although Iran as a nation state is not a major global player, due to the outward-oriented nature of the middle class a sense of globality is evident among this social group. Hence, a movement between national and international citizenship can be observed. Given the history of citizenship practices and state-society relations in Iran, these acts are important to the degree that they emphasize abilities and responsibilities of citizens to take on their public and private matters as individuals and as collective actors. In this sense they represent an everyday activity that is filled with multiple meanings. They are involved in making broad claims for a more just social and environmental relation. They play an important role in the transformation of public sphere and creation of new publics whose values in many occasions overlap with those of environmental citizenship. Thus, through these acts they multiply sites of practice and contestation with regard to rights/responsibilities and contribute to the creation of a more pluralistic civil society.

Notes

¹ This is a strange thought for many Iranians because the Iranian cuisine is very meat-intensive.

² Referring to the social movement that arose after the 2009 Iranian presidential election, which protesters believed was rigged.

³ The TV and Radio in Iran are public and therefore, heavily influenced by governments' agendas.

⁴ Referring to the support of Iranian government for the Palestinian cause.

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