

Aristotelian Citizenship and Corporate Citizenship: Who is a Citizen of the Corporate Polis?

Alejo JoséG. Sison

ABSTRACT. After defining the essential elements of Aristotelian citizenship, the article proposes to apply these criteria in its search for the equivalent of a citizen within the corporate polis. It argues that shareholding managers are the best positioned among a firm's constituents or stakeholders in fulfilling the role of corporate citizens. Greater participation by management not only in the control but also in the ownership of firms brings about benefits for the firm as a whole and for the managers themselves, as organizational citizenship behavior literature, among others, suggests.

KEY WORDS: Aristotle, corporate citizenship, stakeholder management, managerial capitalism, organizational citizenship behavior

Beyond the metaphor of corporate citizenship

Although we normally treat business organizations as independent legal entities carrying out activities in pursuit of particular goals, they only exist thanks to the objectives and the resources of their human incorporators. Corporations are collective instruments created by individual citizens to achieve ends which they, otherwise, would be unable to reach as effectively. Those ends are most likely to have a sociopolitical dimension and reflect the values of the community to which the individuals, as primary citizens, belong. Business theory has borrowed the notion of citizenship from politics mainly to highlight the social dimension of business organizations. Citizenship lends firms a sense of identity, membership in the community and a justification for their rights and responsibilities as artificial, legal persons or "secondary citizens"(Wood et al., 2006, pp. 35–36).

The concept of citizenship, however, has a long history. In the *Politics*, Aristotle (1990) delves into the question of citizenship upon observing that the "state is composite, [and] like any other whole [is] made up of many parts – these are the citizens"(Pltcs 1274b). He then proceeds to identify who the citizen is and the meaning of the term, by determining what the citizen does. Next, Aristotle differentiates citizens from other people residing in the state. Finally, he distinguishes the various kinds of citizens depending on the form of government or regimes.

For Aristotle, "a citizen in the strictest sense, against whom no such exception can be taken" is he who "shares in the administration of justice, and in offices"(Pltcs 1275a). The essential task of the citizen is to participate in deciding what is good and just in the state and in putting this into effect. He specifies that a citizen is a "juryman and member of the assembly", to whom "is reserved the right of deliberating or judging about some things or about all things"(Pltcs 1275b). Although many people participate in deliberating and deciding on the public good, only citizens have the right to do so. What characterizes a citizen is "the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state"(Pltcs 1275b). This does not mean that a citizen has to hold office. It is enough that he

be eligible, for citizenship requires “sharing in governing and being governed”(Pltcs 1283b). One does not lose citizenship when governed or out of office, as long as he can govern or hold office some other time.

Aristotle was aware that the state needed other kinds of people aside from citizens (Pltcs 1278a). Hence, necessity for the state’s survival does not automatically qualify one for citizenship. Children who still cannot exercise sufficient deliberation and judgment may only be called citizens with certain limitations. Neither are artisans citizens, for the artisan class was composed mostly by slaves and foreigners: “The necessary people are either slaves who minister to the wants of individuals, or mechanics and laborers who are servants of the community”(Pltcs 1278a). Citizens do not refer to free men as such – otherwise, foreign workers would be citizens – but to those freed from menial services. Citizenship requires freedom from worrying about daily needs, as participating in the discussion about the public good demands leisure. Because of this, citizenship implies relative affluence, material wealth, and comfort.

Having so defined citizenship, Aristotle clarifies that there are as many kinds as forms of government, such that “he who is a citizen in democracy will often not be a citizen in an oligarchy”(Pltcs 1275a). He indicates that his definition is best suited to a democracy. It does not apply to states where people do not have rights, hold regular assemblies or decide on law-suits (Pltcs 1275b). Neither does it apply to aristocracies, where citizenship is based on excellence and merit, nor in oligarchies, where it is based on wealth (Pltcs 1278a).

In summary, “citizen”preeminently applies to an adult, able-bodied male, himself the son of citizenparents, who enjoys sufficient economic means to actively engage in the governance of his home citystate, by voting or being voted into office. Although a state may require other classes of people to be viable, citizens form the most important group. The definition of a citizen may vary according to the regime and Aristotle’s description best fits citizens in a democracy.

In more recent times, the discussion of citizenship has revolved around two distinct models. Liberalminimalist citizenship stresses the “negative freedoms”– such as freedom from oppression or arbitrary rule, especially by the state – and its discourse is based on the language of rights (Crane et al., 2003, pp. 7–9). The primary duty of the state or government is to secure these rights. Civic republican or communitarian citizenship, on the other hand, focuses on active participation in the common good by fostering community ties and promoting civic virtues (Crane et al., 2003, pp. 7–9; Wood et al. 2006, pp. 42–43). The emphasis lies in the fulfillment of duties and obligations towards the group. Government and the state are expected, above all, to act in a subsidiary manner and strengthen already existing institutions such as families, schools, churches, and so forth. Aristotelian doctrine undoubtedly comes closer to civic republican or communitarian citizenship than to the liberal-minimalist model.

As of late, both civic republican and communitarian theorists have distanced themselves from an either/or perspective between liberalism and the respective positions they hold (Laborde and Maynor, 2008, pp. 1–2). Pettit (1997, p. vii), for instance, advocates a republican ideal of political liberty that is inherently social in character while providing the individual with a sense of psychological security and status. He calls this ideal “freedom as non-domination”and distinguishes it equally from the more traditional negative or “non-interference”and positive or “self-mastery”concepts of freedom. “Freedom as non-domination”surpasses these more traditional concepts to the extent that it minimizes uncertainty, strategic deference to the powerful and social subordination (Pettit, 1997, pp. 273–274). Similarly, Dagger (1997, pp. 3–6) proposes a conciliatory view, on the one hand, of individual rights and civic duties, and on the other, of political deliberation and a sense of community. Through a basic right to autonomy, founded on the moral equality among individuals, Dagger endeavors to show how

civic virtues can be cultivated by means of the recognition of interdependence, reciprocity and fair play.

It is, however, beyond the scope of this article to delve into the nuances of the liberal-republican continuum that these authors conceive, because its purpose is primarily to develop Aristotelian sources. Furthermore, certain ideas expressed in Dagger (1997, pp. 5–6) such as the confusion between the “embeddedness in social relations” and “social constitution” of human beings or the equivalence between the “general will” in Rousseau and the “common good” in Aristotle seem to warrant this stance. Something akin may be said of Pettit (1997, pp. 273, 275), with his borrowing of the notions of “primary goods” and “reflective equilibrium” from Rawls, for example, since these are extremely difficult to square with the original Aristotelian position. As for the “communitarian” label, my intention is to use it in a broad sense, such as the equally social or relational and individual constitution of a human being’s identity, rather than in its more controversial interpretations (Etzioni, 2000).

Citizens of the corporate polity

There are at least two possible readings of the expression “corporate citizenship”. The more widely spread one consists in imagining the corporation as a citizen of the state where it operates. This is the meaning attached to “corporate social responsibility” (CSR): “The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of an organization at a given point in time” (Carroll, 1979, p. 500). The second understanding of “corporate citizenship” consists in taking the different stakeholder groups as citizens of the corporation, held to be an analogue of the state. This second approach is similar to the one followed by Manville and Ober (2003) in their attempt to draw management lessons from classical Athenian democracy, and it is what we shall examine more closely.

The liberal-minimalist persuasion in citizenship then conceives the corporation as a “civic association” formed by the “nexus of contracts” among different agents exercising their rights. Each of these agents has its own individual goal with respect to which the corporation is just a means. The civic republican or communitarian model of citizenship, for its part, perceives the corporation as a “corporate polity” whose flourishing is reciprocally dependent on the flourishing of its various stakeholder-constituents. In this regard, every stakeholder-constituent is admonished to actively take part in the deliberation and execution of the corporate common good.

Although in recent years, the dominant discourse on citizenship has advanced according to the liberal-minimalist model with a heavy emphasis on rights (Crane and Matten, 2004), we shall only use this as a starting point and endeavor to draw a picture that comes closer to the civic republican ideal, more in keeping with Aristotle’s legacy. Let us now proceed to examine the different stakeholder groups and see which best fits into the Aristotelian definition of citizenship.

If citizenship consists in participating in government, who is best equipped to do so in the firm as a corporate polity? Shareholders are the first who come to mind. Having provided financial capital, they are often referred to as the “owners” of the company, the “principals” whose interests laws and contracts are supposed to protect from possible abuse by “manager-agents”, in a particular case of “agency relationships” (Jensen and Meckling, 1976).

Yet the shareholders’ only property is the stock certificate that entitles them to the firm’s residual equity. If management runs the company well and produces a profit, they may receive dividends or sell their shares at a higher price. But none of these is guaranteed. Other shareholder rights include choosing board members, participating in general meetings and

voting on changes in capital structure, mergers and acquisitions. Nothing more. It would be misleading, therefore, to consider shareholders as “owners” of a company, when all they own are share certificates (Clarkson and Deck, 1998, p. 608). Legally, a corporation owns itself.

Shareholders do not “own” the company. They cannot just walk into company premises and occupy a room or sell its furniture, for example. They simply hold shares that give them some rights. The value of these shares rests mostly on their selling price and dividends and hardly on the other attached rights which are seldom exercised. This is so for various motives.

In publicly traded companies, shareholders form such a huge and diverse group with interminably splintered interests. That’s why a shareholder with an infinitesimal holding does not bother to attend meetings: his vote would not make a difference. Only institutional shareholders (who in turn keep those large packets of shares for their own shareholders), major shareholders (who reserve for themselves special voting rights beyond those strictly corresponding to their number of shares), and above all, management (who have their jobs and stock options on the block) have incentives to negotiate and maneuver. Understandably, ordinary shareholders do not hold on to shares very long and sell them as soon as they think they’ll make a reasonable profit. They feel no further commitment to the firm, nothing deserving of the name of ownership.

Civic republican citizenship requires, apart from the possession of rights, their exercise with a view to the corporate common good. Shareholder status is not enough, for civic republican corporate citizenship implies involvement in management and governance.

We should then broaden the field to other stakeholders in our quest for citizens of the corporate polity. “Stakeholders” allude to all those who have “legitimate interests” (Donaldson and Preston, 1995, p. 67) in the firm. This does not mean, however, that those interests always warrant formal legal protection. Legitimacy of stakeholder interests could come, not only from laws and courts, but also from custom and social recognition. For civic republican corporate citizenship to be effective, it is not necessary that all stakeholders participate in all corporate decisions. Clearly, that was not the intention of Aristotle, or of other civic republican authors, when they expounded on the demands of citizenship. It would suffice that those with legitimate interests intervene in the issues that directly concern them.

The next stakeholder group we shall consider is that of clients or consumers.

Aside from the basic right to make free market choices, consumers also enjoy – in varying degrees – the right to fair market prices, to safe and efficacious products, to truthful advertising and honest communications, to privacy and so forth (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 270). Once more, the mere possession and even exercise of these rights is insufficient, however.

Consumers could behave as civic republican corporate citizens in the measure that they participate in the governance of the corporation. For instance, when they decide to patronize and recommend – or on the contrary, to boycott and urge others to do the same – a company and its products, because of ethical, social, and environmental reasons. Consumers also flex their “governance” muscle by participating in product design and promotion; take for granted, when passengers share their travel preferences with the airlines in whose frequent flier mileage programs they have enrolled. Only consumers who have walked this extra mile of engagement would perhaps be worthy of being called civic republican corporate citizens. But the issue would then be: Just how effective, really, are their initiatives in influencing corporate policy and

strategy? Should the exercise of their rights go that far? That would be the ultimate test of corporate citizenship for consumers and clients.

How about the stakeholder group comprising of competitors and suppliers? How do they fare as citizens of the corporate polity? Firstly, in properly functioning market economies, the rights of competitors and suppliers with regard to each other – often called the “right to fair play” – are sufficiently laid down in competition law. These would include, to name a few, the freedom to enter and to leave the market, the right to set prices without coercion, the right to offer products to potential customers, and so forth (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 305). Simply upholding these rights may suffice for competitors and suppliers to display liberal-minimalist corporate citizenship. But corporate citizenship of a civic republican kind would again demand a stronger commitment and a higher level of engagement.

For example, suppliers could organize themselves around an ethical supply chain management initiative, such that unfair labor practices (child labor), unhealthy working conditions (sweatshops), and environmental degradation are all eradicated within their sector or industry. They could do this even before Third World governments – seriously hampered by limited resources and corruption – are able to introduce their own regulations. Also, suppliers and erstwhile competitors could engage in “fair trade” agreements as in in some coffee, tea and cocoa markets, or they could guarantee minimum prices and better conditions to small commodity growers in developing countries (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 333). These are some of the activities that would push suppliers and competitors to civic republican grade corporate citizenship. Yet these practices are still uncommon and their effects on corporate governance quite unknown.

The role of governments or states as stakeholders of the corporation is ambivalent (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 391). On the one hand, it seems more proper to think of the corporation as a stakeholder of the state, according to the common meaning of corporate citizenship, than the other way around. In modern liberal democracies, governments are understood to be formed by the elected representatives of the citizenry, and indirectly, of the different intermediate associations and civil society organizations that citizens support. On the other hand, the state and government could also constitute a stakeholder group within the corporation, not only by owning significant shares, but also in other ways as well.

With their monopoly on force, governments and states could either restrict or enable corporate activity. States restrict business activity by collecting taxes, but they also enable business through tax breaks or subsidies. At the same time, we could also see states and governments as either depending on or competing with corporations. Governments and states sometimes compete with multinational companies in the provision of welfare and even of security, for example. Yet were it not for business organizations, borne from the freedom of enterprise and association of citizens, states, and governments would become paralyzed or terribly inefficient as in the former communist countries.

States and governments undoubtedly hold important rights which qualify them as liberal-minimalist corporate citizens. In fact, corporations only exist thanks to a legal charter or recognition by the state. But when we apply the civic republican standard of corporate citizenship to government or the state, what level of involvement is desirable?

The most we could venture to say is that it lies on a golden mean. We would not like to succumb to statism, where private initiative, freedom of association and freedom of enterprise have been annihilated and government or the state fully controls the economy. But neither is absolute laissez faire appealing, where markets assume functions such security or the administration of justice. Apart from the degree of involvement of government or the state in corporations, there are also certain competencies that should not be outsourced. Government should not be developing and peddling software, for example, any more than corporations

setting up tribunals of justice or armies. The state or government could behave as a civic republican corporate citizen if it proceeds in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity in relation with corporations, promoting privatization and self-regulation without renouncing to areas of its exclusive competence.

Shareholder-managers as corporate citizens

This leaves us with one remaining stakeholder group, composed of workers or employees, including management. Among the different stakeholders, employees are the ones most closely integrated and identified with the corporation: “employees, in many cases even physically ‘constitute’ the corporation. They are perhaps the most important production factor or ‘resource’ of the corporation, they

represent the company towards most other stakeholders, and act in the name of the corporation towards them”(Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 224).

A liberal-minimalist analysis of employees as corporate citizens limits itself to their contractual rights and duties: a right to fair wages, a right to healthy and safe working conditions, freedom from unjust discrimination, a duty to provide an acceptable level of work performance and quality, a duty to respect company property, and so forth (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 228).

The civic republican standard would look into other areas besides, such as the economic externalities and the socioethical opportunities that escape those contracts. No employment contract could fully capture the demands of employee loyalty, and to that extent, most of them would hardly be actionable in the tribunals of law. In fact, employee loyalty or organizational loyalty, which consists in defending and promoting the organization one works for, is commonly typified as an example of “organizational citizenship behavior”(OCB), together with helping behavior (preventing work-related problems or assisting when they occur), sportsmanship (maintaining a positive attitude even in the face of adversity), organizational compliance (adhering to rules outside the scope of compliance measures), individual initiative (going beyond the call of duty), civic virtue (commitment to one’s responsibilities as a member of the organization) and self-development (improving one’s skills at his own initiative) (Podsakoff et al., 2000). OCBs caught the attention of scholars when they realized that with the strict compliance of tasks alone they were unable to account for the superior performance of organizations. They then had to consider a wider range of work contributions that included “acts of cooperation, helpfulness, suggestions, gestures of goodwill, [and] altruism”(Smith et al., 1983, p. 653). These modes of conduct persist across time, as individual habits or elements of organizational culture, and more importantly, they generally lie outside the normal expectations and reward systems of organizations (Borman, 2004; Finkelstein 2006; Organ, 1988).

OCBs such as employee loyalty have a tremendous impact as positive externalities both for the company and for the workers themselves. They foster the effective functioning of the organization, making it efficient, able to secure needed resources, innovative and adaptable (Organ 1988). The positive contribution of OCBs on organizational performance is empirically validated (Ehrhart et al., 2006; Podsakoff et al., 1997) even in cross cultural contexts (Lievens and Anseel, 2004; Yen and Niehoff, 2004). Apart from providing employees precious opportunities to grow internally in virtue, OCBs also reward them externally with superior task performance evaluations.

Of course, employee loyalty towards the company also makes demands on the part of the company itself: to begin with, it should never consider the employee merely as an expendable resource, the first one to jettison when the sailing gets rough. Instead, the corporation should try to reciprocate by apportioning resources and allowing for the continuous professional development and personal growth of the individuals in the workplace. Loyalty is not so much the economic result of locking-in assets as a mutual ethical concern for each other’s flourishing and well-being.

Among employees, those who, at the same time, own shares in the company, and in particular, shareholding-managers merit special consideration from the viewpoint of civic republican corporate citizenship. Let us recall for an instant Aristotle’s teaching that citizens carry out the task of government for no one else but themselves: they govern their own affairs, they practice self-governance. This means that no matter how involved one may be in government, if he did so for the benefit of any other excluding himself – think of someone called upon to rule in a foreign land, for instance – that does not turn him into a citizen of that land, since citizenship requires self-rule. At most, he could be something like a “professional

governor”. In some measure, the demand for self-rule could also resolve agency problems, since the shareholding employee – and especially the shareholding manager – now becomes both agent and principal at once. By owning shares through stock option plans, managers begin to exercise power and authority over the firm in their own name, as principals, albeit collectively.

That manager or employee and shareholder, agent and principal, governor and governed coincide in the same person is precisely the biggest advantage of workers over other stakeholder groups for civic republican corporate citizenship. Only here can the condition of taking part in self-government be adequately fulfilled. Only here, too, can we find the objective dimension of work – that is, the external goods and services produced – united to its subjective dimension – that is, the improvements in knowledge, skills, habits, and virtues that work causes in the worker – (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, nn. 270–271). Alienation from the worker of the products of his labor is avoided. In this sense, cooperatives, or business organizations that are run and controlled by their owners, would fit the definition of a self-governing corporate polity to perfection. Its shareholding workers and managers would represent civic republican corporate citizenship in the highest form.

Other non-shareholding employees have to be set apart. Surely the corporation cannot exist without them, yet they should not be considered corporate citizens because their tasks are carried out for others – purportedly, the shareholders – and not for themselves. To a large degree, the situation of nonshareholding employees is very similar to that of the artisan class composed of slaves and foreigners in the Greek city-states (Pltcs 1278a). Without them, the city-state would not stand; yet their integration in the city-state was very limited and their participation in government practically nill. In like manner, all the other stakeholder groups we have examined – shareholders, clients, consumers, competitors, suppliers, governments, states, and non-shareholding workers – through contracts and agreements hold a status comparable to those who enjoyed certain rights in the Greek city-states where they resided, due to trade treaties or military alliances, without being citizens (Pltcs 1274b). Possessing some rights, including the right to participate in government that a liberalminimalist model of citizenship guarantees, is not enough. Rights also have to be effectively exercised, as civic republican citizenship requires, with a view to the common good.

Within the framework of the corporation as a polity, we have examined the extent to which each stakeholder group fulfills the requirements of “corporate citizenship” from both a liberal-minimalist and a civic-republican or communitarian perspective. As long as they possess certain rights, practically all the different stakeholder groups would qualify for liberalminimalist corporate citizenship. On the other hand, the demands of civic-republican or communitarian corporate citizenship are more stringent, and only shareholding managers are able to meet the standard of active participation in self-governance.

From the viewpoint of corporate citizenship, therefore, shareholding managers represent the stakeholder group best equipped to govern the corporation. Only in their case are we able to avoid all the different forms of alienation or separation between ownership and control, capital and labor, principals and agents, the objective dimension and the subjective dimension of work, rulers and ruled.

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University of Navarre, Pamplona, Spain

[E-mail: ajsison@unav.es](mailto:ajsison@unav.es)