



Citizenship

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What is citizenship? The word itself is now used in a wide range of arenas, from citizenship education in schools to development agencies' programmes of good governance, and public statements from multinationals about their 'corporate citizenship'. It is being used, it seems, to evoke virtues such as equality in rights, respectful engagement between citizen (individual or corporate) and wider national society, participation in and knowledge about institutions of government, the right to vote and be elected, etc. Yet at its most fundamental, citizenship names political belonging, and here I argue that to study citizenship is to study how we live with others in a political community.

Introduction

The sociologist T.H. Marshall gave the following definition of citizenship in 1950:

Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed (Marshall 1983 [1950]: 253).

He equated community with the nation, and viewed membership of that community as primarily an individual ownership of a set of rights and corresponding duties. His version of citizenship has a distinguished pedigree: from Locke onwards, liberal citizenship has been seen as a status of the individual. The rights associated with this status in theory allow individuals to pursue their own conceptions of the good life, as long as they do not hinder other's similar pursuits, and the state protects this status quo. In return, citizens have minimal responsibilities, which revolve primarily around keeping the state running, such as paying [taxes](#), or participating in military service.

However, liberal citizenship is not the only form of citizenship that we can find globally. Indeed, insights from [ethnography](#) complicate this normative picture of liberal citizenship, as anthropologists have insisted on the specificity of citizenship in different contexts. Alternative possibilities might be civic republican or communitarian forms of citizenship. This is because political membership is related in complex ways to day-to-day practices of politics, and citizenship is a mechanism for making claims on different political communities, of which the state is just one. One important consequence of this is that anthropologists denaturalize liberal citizenship and ask questions about the actual constitution of political membership and

subjectivity in a given context. In the move from political philosophy to anthropology, we see an important analytical shift take place from the normative to the descriptive: from what citizenship and citizens should be to a critical analysis of what they are.

The political community

The concept of citizenship has a long trajectory within political philosophy. Like anthropologists, political philosophers ask: how should we live with others in a political community? Here I trace some key moments in this enduring debate within political philosophy, a debate which informs most anthropological discussions of citizenship today. Aristotle (2013) is my starting point, as the most celebrated proponent of a civic republican tradition of citizenship that began in the early Greek city states. In the *Politics*, he discusses three very important issues: first, the question of how precisely to constitute membership - and exclusion; second, the nature of the citizen as person; and third, the nature of politics itself. The first question of membership was a particular problem in early Greek philosophical thought because of the presence of slaves, often in important [bureaucratic](#) positions in the government of the city. Aristotle's assertion in the *Politics* that 'man is a political animal' was not an inclusive one, but referred only to certain men, those who were not slaves (women were quickly dismissed and then ignored, along with children). He described the citizen: a member of the political community (*polis*) who participates in government in the sense that he 'gives judgement and holds office'. Secondly, Aristotle discussed in great depth the development of the citizen as a particular kind of man capable of living in the collectivity, who held and cultivated the associated virtues, such as respect for law and for others and a passion for politics. Finally, politics itself was intimately linked with speech in Aristotle's thought. Discussion and debate were absolutely central to Athenian politics and personhood. So, citizenship was constituted through political practice, and political practice was constituted through speech and deliberation.

The key points here are, first, that citizenship is more than simply a status denoting membership of a polity but is constituted through a set of practices associated with participation in politics. Second, political subjectivity is something that cannot be assumed to exist but that must be created. For Aristotle, political subjects - citizens - are inherently collective and also eminently [moral](#).

The second set of foundational philosophical texts I want to highlight are those of the social contract philosophers and the Liberal tradition. For Rousseau and Locke, social order can only be achieved through the acceptance of all to live via the agreement of the majority for the benefit of all. This is principally in order to protect property rights, as in the state of 'natural freedom' (Rousseau 1971) prior to the establishment of a state, property is always subject to the threat of what Locke called 'the Invasion of others'. To overcome this danger each individual 'puts into the community his person and all his powers under the supreme direction of the general will', thus creating 'civil freedom' (Rousseau 1971). The political community therefore comes into being when individuals voluntarily subject themselves to the

collectivity (meaning the state and the rule of law). As with Aristotle, political subjectivity is not to be assumed, but is created, and is intimately linked to moral questions of personal virtue. The American Declaration of Independence¹¹ (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man¹² (1789) were more radical, in their willingness to question the inevitability of the existing regime of state power and sovereignty; and then to claim sovereignty for 'the people'. They did so by claiming the equality of men (sic.) in the name of individual rights, especially those to 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' and 'liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression'. The political context meant that they needed to claim liberty so that they could change sovereign power, but liberty could also be interpreted in the light of Rousseau and Locke's position that true freedom comes through the respect for the rule of law, not through the absence of law (for Locke, see his *Two Treatises of Government*, 2003).

The question of property was also fundamental for the authors of these Declarations, and the role of the state as guarantor of individual property rights became a central question of citizenship in Republican and Liberal regimes from the late eighteenth century on. In the first place, property was a fundamental criterion for membership, as only male property holders were defined as citizens. But also questions of property-holding often created practical difficulties for the implementation of individual, universal ideals of citizenship. For example, [Latin American](#) constitutions and legislation of the nineteenth century often attempted to abolish collective land-holding in favour of individual property rights, but this proved very unpopular, especially for indigenous communities in the region. For example, Andean communities were less keen on equal individual rights as defined by their rules, than they were on retaining customary forms of land-holding that protected their members and shared out access to resources (Platt 1984). Anthropologists have done a great deal to illuminate our understanding of the complexities of these processes in the contemporary world, giving due import to their [historical](#), economic, and political background.

In the dominant Liberal narrative of the nineteenth century, liberty of one's own person would be achieved through citizenship based on individual rights, which superseded institutions perceived as backward, such as slavery or collective property-holding. However, in practice, citizenship was continually negotiated, and collective traditions were not peculiar only to indigenous communities. In fact, the historical development of citizenship is linked to the coalescing of modern nation-states (which often took liberal forms) out of earlier city-state formations built on civic republican traditions. But even the most radical of modern nation-states mixed the two traditions of citizenship together.

One common aspect of both traditions has been the inherent connection of citizenship to exclusion from membership. The exclusion of women from liberal citizenship was denounced from its beginnings by early feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft or Olympe de Gouges. Contemporary feminist political philosophers, historians, and other social theorists also point out that the 'abstract' individual citizen of Liberal ideals

turns out to be in fact a very particular kind of white male property-holding individual citizen.

The debate about the abstract individual of contemporary Liberalism has provoked responses from communitarian political philosophers as well as from feminists. Both emphasize the embedding of subjects within collectivities; they recognize that in real life we are not merely individual subjects or ‘unencumbered selves’ (Sandel 1984). Rather, and now I use more anthropological language, we are part of a whole network of social [relations](#) of [care](#), obligation, rights, kinship, and so on.

However, as anthropologists are only too well aware, a community is not always welcoming and [egalitarian](#). Feminist and queer political theorists, among others, have pointed out how the notion of community often leaves little space for individual variability. More importantly, it hides from view the internal power relations that constrain the ability to define what ‘a community’ is and what ‘it’ thinks best. Who speaks for ‘a’ community? Are any communities so homogeneous as to suppress difference within them, and what does that mean for their members?

For anthropologists, this is a crucial point, which has come out in debates as varied as those centred on individual or collective notions of the self, the interplay between ‘indigenous’ or ‘customary’ legal jurisdictions and national ones, [human rights](#) and property rights, and the practice of ‘development’. While many anthropologists have felt an affinity with subaltern groups and so have defended group rights from a perspective of cultural relativism, it has long been acknowledged that societal and legal recognition of group rights may inhibit individual claims to justice. Anthropological study takes the discussion beyond abstract principles, not least through the recognition that conflicts between group rights and legal regimes that are based upon Liberal notions of individual rights often happen in grey zones imbued with complex power relations. Examples of these grey zones are issues of land rights and the exploitation of natural resources.

In a classically liberal approach, individual rights constitute citizenship of the national political community and group rights undermine that civic belonging; while in political thought more influenced by communitarianism, smaller communities define their members. Contemporary liberals have modified the first position, to argue for liberal versions of community membership that protect both individual and group rights. Yet the tension remains largely unresolved. Anthropology’s distinctive disciplinary history and methodological approach, relying as it does on comparisons between different kinds of cultural, social, and economic practices, means that anthropologists are well placed to explore these contrasting notions of political community in both urban and rural spaces.

Anthropological approaches: (i) citizenship as subject formation

When we study how citizenship operates in different contexts, we see that political subject formation is a key element. [Ethnographic](#) work shows that political subject formation happens through both top-down and

bottom-up processes. Aihwa Ong summed up this insight in an important early article, when she suggested that citizenship is a 'process of self-making and being-made' (1996: 737).

One prominent thread in the anthropology of citizenship uses a Foucauldian analysis to examine how states and other entities make citizens under various citizenship regimes. To research this, we can examine encounters between people and state officials or policy, and one area where a considerable amount of work of this type has been done is in immigration. Immigration is perhaps where boundaries between citizen and non-citizen are most contested, but immigration encounters are not solely punitive and exclusionary: governments also put in a lot of work to 'assimilate' different groups of migrants and refugees.

The interaction between assimilation and respect for difference was investigated early on through the concept of 'cultural citizenship', first brought to an anthropological audience by Renato Rosaldo. For Rosaldo, cultural citizenship 'refers to the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state's democratic processes' (1994: 57). In a series of research and activist projects with Latino immigrants to the US, he and his collaborators discussed immigrants' experiences of second-class citizenship, and their struggles for better citizenship quality, which they often defined in terms of respect and dignity. He firmly located the struggle for cultural citizenship within a political struggle for rights in the face of exclusionary definitions of national identity.

State policies towards immigrants are not the only form of cultural citizenship regime in operation today. By citizenship regime, I refer to legal, [bureaucratic](#), ideological, and material frameworks that condition practices of, and ideas about, government and participation in politics. States and NGOs all attempt to construct particular kinds of citizen, in policy areas such as development intervention globally and welfare policy at home.

One of the most important ways that states create citizens is education – or, better, schooling. National schooling systems have long been recognised as central to the development of national identity and civic commitment. Although so closely associated with nation-building projects, today education is transnational, and a key area for development intervention: from provision of universal primary education to human rights education programmes, for example. Still, the virtues promoted through schooling vary from country to country, valuing different languages, bodily and emotional dispositions. Schooling may create specific kinds of citizens explicitly through civics classes but also in the ways that pupil-teacher relationships are constructed and students' bodies disciplined. They may promote certain gender roles, a hierarchical relationship with authority or a commitment to [democracy](#) as a value in itself. Schooling is always a moral project, even when that moral quality is hidden behind seemingly technocratic language as with the example of 'human capital'. However, schools may not always succeed in producing the kinds of citizens envisaged by dominant ideologies, and anthropological analysis is very good at exposing the unintended

consequences of educational policies.

Education continues to be inherent to citizenship, whether implemented through schooling or political participation, participation in local voluntary projects, or citizenship classes for immigrants. Other cultural and moral projects of citizenship construction include those that produce the citizen as consumer – of public services, goods, lifestyles; as knowledge worker in the information economy; as auditor of transparent government; as soldier or ex-soldier. These projects work in the interface between people, policy, markets, and the state.

Importantly, though, the processes of subject construction are not only top-down. Ordinary people frame and make claims of the state – for example, for [disability](#) benefits for those affected by the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor (Petryna 2002), or for regularization of land titles in the peripheral neighbourhoods of São Paulo (Holston 2008). These studies bring out the complex relationships between people and state bureaucracy, and between people and law. The room for manoeuvre that citizens enjoy is not completely free, but constrained by legal and political regimes.

Citizen action is also shaped by the languages of political action available to actors. In some spaces, the processes of claims-making are articulated through a local language of citizenship, as in South Africa, where HIV/AIDS activists have successfully mobilized using the language of citizenship to demand antiretroviral treatment from the state. The language of citizenship as a means of articulating claims usually names a claim to rights: rights to medical treatment, to legalization of property, to self-government, etc. As a result, for many theorists of citizenship, including anthropologists, the link between citizenship claims-making and rights is irrefutable and exclusive.

However, although the connection between citizenship and rights is often assumed, citizenship is in fact linked to languages of rights in quite specific political contexts. Indeed, political claims and talk of membership (i.e. citizenship) can also be articulated through different languages, such as obligations, or the naturalized membership of a collectivity. This may reflect a non-liberal vision of citizenship. The recognition of languages of citizenship other than that of rights opens up analytical space for research into non-normative citizenship formations themselves.

Anthropological approaches: (ii) where are our political communities?

People are members of varying political communities, not just those governed by national or even local states, and they are subject to forms of government that originate from different entities. Therefore, although citizenship is classically considered as related to the state, anthropological study reveals that this applies under particular political conditions of belonging, but is not always the case. This is especially evident when we take globalization into account. Given the contemporary importance of transnational and sometimes global political entities such as corporations or religious networks in the government of citizens

of different nation-states, can we argue that citizenship is merely the relationship between the individual and the state? If we wish to argue that citizenship is participation in government, in the taking of decisions that affect our lives, then the citizen's position regarding a range of governing entities becomes crucial in an assessment of the quality of his or her citizenship under a given political regime.

For most citizens, the dominant political community is the nation-state. In practice, though, there is no reason to yoke citizenship solely to the nation-state, and indeed we should question the scale at which we perceive a given political community.

In early modern Europe, the dominant political community was the city, and today some of the most relevant political communities of advanced capitalism operate on a supra-national scale. This may be global, as in the ideas of cosmopolitanism, world citizenship and human rights, but also transnational as for activist groups, citizen-migrants, diasporic groups and religious networks. Work on transnational migrants links many of the questions of citizenship discussed here, including membership, nationality, identity, cultural citizenship, and political practice.

As with the transnational dimension, local citizenship of the city is of equal theoretical importance to citizenship of the nation. David Harvey (2012) has argued that claiming the right to define the city is a crucial contemporary site for [resistance](#) to capital. Such action may not simply be urban protest or social movements, but may also be citizens making a life for themselves in the city. Urban public spheres include the streets, where people demonstrate and work, but also the many forms of association where citizens negotiate the building and defining of society, even act violently towards one another. Thus, the location for the practices of citizenship is a key question for the analysis of citizenship. The logical realm for political action for most citizens has always been their local area, and people are often suspicious of those who choose to extend their political action beyond that, and become professional politicians rather than citizens. Through ethnography we can examine which political collectivities are important in citizens' lives at any given time and place.

Anthropological approaches: (iii) membership and exclusion

However we define the political community, though, it is clear that citizenship as a language names membership. It is also a means of claiming membership, and commenting on the quality (or content, extent) of membership, as we can see when people make distinctions between full- and second-class citizenship or formal and substantive citizenship.ⁱⁱⁱ Liberal citizenship has held out the promise of universal equality achieved through universal formal citizenship, at least for particular categories of persons; but despite this promise, citizenship regimes have developed differently in different historical contexts.

Holston (2008) shows how Brazilian citizenship developed historically as differentiated, but suggests that

occupants of peripheral settlements of São Paulo have challenged their differential treatment from the mid-twentieth century onwards by claiming citizenship rights to property. They do so by struggling to legalize their [homes](#), which have been built on land that was first occupied illegally. Holston calls this an 'insurgent citizenship', and their demand to legalize property ownership is a claim to hold rights just like elite citizens do. There is an irony here, since land-holding has been one of the most important aspects of citizen inequality in Brazil throughout its history.

Rights claims have been a feature of campaigns by other, more organized, social movements in Brazil and Latin America, especially since the 1990s. Specifically, the concept of citizenship has been used in campaigns by indigenous, feminist, urban, and LGBTQ+ ⁴¹ social movement activists, who demand that they be recognized as active social subjects with the right to have rights and – crucially – the right to define what those rights are. This is a claim to participate in government and decision-making; to participate in political processes too often closed to these groups.

As non-citizens claim citizenship, or second-class citizens claim full citizenship, the nature of citizenship itself changes. Indeed, often the struggle for inclusion (or against exclusion) is what changes the nature of the political system. This could be by creating new laws or constitutions, new categories of people and political subjects, or by changing public opinion. Social and political practices of membership are a crucial part of this dynamic.

But if citizenship is a means of claiming membership or better quality membership, it is also a means of excluding others from that membership or shaping them in contrast to the normative citizen. Citizenship is constituted by both the virtue of the individual citizen as political actor and the nature of political practice. Recognising that non-citizens are excluded from the political community can lead to a positive politics of dissent and resistance and to the broadening of citizenship, but the 'othering' can also be highly restrictive, not to say violent.

The archetypal non-citizen is the foreign migrant, but 'migrant' is in practice not a simple identity category, not least because migration is often constituted within the force field of colonial and neo-colonial relations. The transformation from colonial subject to imperial citizen and then immigrant other is the outcome of a set of political choices that have a history. Most migrants have travelled to their host country for reasons of [labour](#), and restrictions on their citizenship status that keep them as resident aliens often enable exploitation in the form of low wages and poor working conditions. They are especially vulnerable to abuse by state officials and, where migrants are kept wholly illegal, they are subject to the insecurity of constant risk of deportation. Culturally, the presence of 'outsiders' within an imagined 'national body' is often not constituted as a problem for the dominant group of citizens, but for the non-citizens themselves. They become ciphers, representing threat, hypersexuality, cultural backwardness, or diversity and multiculturalism (e.g., Partridge 2008). They are marked out, subject to discrimination and [racism](#), which

persists even when they have become fully legal citizens, over generations.

Such operations of sovereignty are the other side of the coin to the operations of top-down subject creation discussed earlier. They may become violent, as when groups use languages of native belonging to justify attacks on others, who are seen as migrant interlopers regardless of long-standing histories of mobility and transnationalism. Thus, as boundaries are drawn between citizens and non-citizens, and legal frameworks mobilized to emphasize one group's otherness, the status of citizen and non-citizen can become hardened, and citizenship restricted not amplified.

Taking a fresh look at citizenship

One of the results of recent developments in the anthropology of citizenship has been a proliferation of new concepts which work by adding a qualifying adjective to the term citizenship. Scholars have studied biological citizenship, flexible citizenship, agrarian citizenship, insurgent citizenship, therapeutic citizenship, urban citizenship, pharmaceutical citizenship, formal and substantive citizenship, etc. The qualifying adjective is important, because it recognises the diversity of citizenship today and acknowledges that liberal citizenship is one form among many. However, in the proliferation of adjectives we still risk assuming that we know what citizenship itself is, that the key is the 'biological', 'urban', 'differentiated' aspect, and that citizenship does not require explanation as a concept in its own right. Indeed, we should be wary of all essentialisms and acknowledge that 'liberal citizenship' must itself be plural, as attested by the varieties of liberalism both in historical reality and political thought.

At its most elemental, a focus on citizenship is a way of approaching the political, and one of the most exciting anthropological contributions to the debate is the way that we come to put into question the normative formulations of citizenship and explore the languages and practices of political membership, agency, and constitution of varied political communities, without assuming Liberal parameters for either. However, we must be careful, for two reasons. First, although it is important to take a critical position to normative understandings of citizenship, we do risk ending up in an enclave of cultural relativism where the only argument we can make is that citizenship *there* is different from citizenship *here*. While this is undoubtedly an important argument, anthropology has significantly more to contribute to our understanding of citizenship. Second, we should not lose sight of the political implications of such a strategy. Studying citizenship as political practice often obliges us to take a political stand, whether that be alongside those advocating for rights at individual or group level, or critical of mainstream (or even counter-hegemonic) notions of citizenship.

Nonetheless, if we recognize that from time to time our view of what citizenship *is* can be heavily coloured by a normative assumption about what it *should be*, we are then better placed to see how citizenship is configured in practice, and to explore the historical, material, and cultural reasons for that configuration.

Further reading

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[1] <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>

[2] http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp

[3] Substantive citizenship is the ability that citizens have in reality to claim rights that they possess through their formal status as citizen: 'formal membership, based on principles of incorporation in to the nation-state' contrasts with 'the substantive distribution of the rights, meanings, institutions, and practices that membership entails to those deemed citizens' (Holston 2008: 7).

[4] LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of gender identities, sexual orientations and romantic orientations that experience discrimination.