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Reconstructing citizenship (again)

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ABSTRACT

In a collaborative project, we argued that citizenship was always both ‘unfinished’ (*imparfaite*) and ‘under construction’ (*en travaux*). This contribution examines some of the ways in which citizenship continues to be unfinished and is in the process of being reconstructed. It highlights three particular tendencies that have dominated the processes – and the politics – of citizenship’s reconstruction: a deepening nationalisation of citizenship; an ensuing intensification of practices of ‘bordering’, even as borders become more mobile; and the subcontracting of the management of citizenship to agents and agencies ‘beyond’ the state.

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In 2007, four of us came together in Paris to engage in a transdisciplinary and cross-national exploration of questions of citizenship, a project organised by Catherine Neveu that took place at *La Maison des Sciences de l’Homme*. The project delivered two substantial outcomes: a special issue of *Citizenship Studies* (vol. 15, no. 8 ‘Questioning Citizenships/ Questions de citoyennetés’) and a later book, *Disputing Citizenship* (Clarke et al. 2014). In the book we argued that citizenship was always both ‘unfinished’ (*imparfaite*) and ‘under construction’ (*en travaux*). In this contribution I will explore some of the ways in which citizenship remains both unfinished and in process of being reconstructed. I will suggest that, at least in the contexts I have explored in the Global North, three particular tendencies have dominated the processes – and the politics – of citizenship’s remaking: a deepening nationalisation of citizenship; an ensuing intensification of practices of ‘bordering’, even as borders become more mobile; and, finally, the subcontracting of the management of citizenship to agents and agencies ‘beyond’ the state. All three involve the ‘reconstruction’ of the conditions and consequences of citizenship.

In our work, we were concerned to resist essentialising conceptions of citizenship, such as those which sought to define its basic characteristics, against which empirical deviations could be assessed. Nor, on the other hand, did we wish to merely catalogue the varieties of citizenship. Rather we thought it most productive to see it as an object of dispute:

Citizenship, then, is constructed and contested, enacted and experienced, through multiple processes at different levels of social formations. It is always in process and is brought to life by being enacted in many different practices. It remains an ‘object of desire’ for many political projects as they attempt to mobilise popular support in the name of imagined and improved social orders. It remains a potent element in everyday understandings of social and political life – desired and defended in different ways. (2014: 177)

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Certainly, that understanding enabled us to connect the spaces where we lived and worked, including Brazil, France, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the United States, and to cross the disciplinary borders in which we had been formed (anthropology, cultural studies, political science and social policy). It has continued to provide me with a way of thinking about citizenship's reconstruction in different settings, most particularly in the more or less United Kingdom where my current work is focused.

Nationalising citizenship

One recurrent theme of our collaboration was the shifting articulations between conceptions of citizenship and changing understandings and institutionalisations of nation, nationality and nationalism. Since we wrote the book, there has been a striking intensification of nationalist politics, often in painful combinations with forms of authoritarianism and populism (e.g. Valluvan 2019). In the UK, as elsewhere, dominant political projects have laid claim to the nation – and have promised to restore it in all its (imagined) glory. ‘Taking back control’ by leaving the European Union was presented as the UK’s route to restoration, and a specific conception of the nation and its people was embedded in, and articulated through, this project. This nationalist revivalism has driven changes in the articulations between citizenship and nationality, albeit in different ways in different places. This revivalist nationalism is complexly interwoven with wider global and transnational dynamics (and their contradictions), such that the nation has re-emerged as a focus of political and cultural mobilisations.

In the UK, it has intensified the long running anxiety about controlling immigration as a way of protecting the nation (and its *true* people). This concern has a long history, dating back at least to the Aliens Act of 1905 which aimed to deny entry to ‘undesirable immigrants’, with Jewish and Eastern European migrants foremost among those deemed ‘undesirable’. Since the 1950s, however, the pace of attempted controls has quickened, as has their racialised focus, a dynamic intimately associated with subjects of Empire seeking to move to the ‘mother country’. Since then, immigration and questions of race and ethnicity have been inextricably entangled across the Global North, recurrently revived in ‘migrant crises’ and the proclaimed need to close countries with walls or fences, or the British state’s desire to ‘turn back’ boats containing migrants seeking to cross the English Channel. In her examination of uncertainty as an organising principle of citizenship, Anne-Marie Fortier has argued that citizenship in the UK has been increasingly recast through the frame of nationality and, more recently, as a question of immigration status. Her work demonstrates the value of re-thinking statuses (citizen, migrant, national, etc) as processes, specifically those of *citizenisation* and *migratisation*, typically entangled with processes of *naturalisation*. Examining the Windrush scandal, in which the so-called ‘hostile environment’ directed at ‘illegal immigrants’ by the UK’s Home Office assaulted settled black British citizens, Fortier traces the distinctive chain of political reasoning about migrants, nationals, and citizens. The Home Office promised to sort out the situation by clarifying people’s *immigration* status:

By stating that the aim is to redress their immigration status rather than their citizenship status, this language is telling of how racially minoritised subjects – for the assumption is that those affected are predominantly black – are perpetually migratised as noncitizens, which in turn racialises British citizenship as white. (2021:8)

Fortier suggests that this way of subsuming citizenship into migration unsettles and reworks apparently stable categories and statuses – citizenship, migration and naturalisation. This forms part of the dynamic of *nationalisation* in which citizenship has been folded more tightly into national framings in multiple ways which include the recasting of citizenship in national terms and the national structuring of access to the rights and benefits and citizenship (in relation to welfare, political rights such as voting, or access to law). In this sense, the revitalisation of nationalism has been mirrored in the increasing significance – both material and symbolic – of borders, exemplified in the enthusiasm for walls and fences.

Shifting borders

Borders have come to dramatise the perimeter of the nation and the protection of its people against external threats – among which other people on the move have become the organising concern. The promise of ‘taking back control’ in the UK’s move to leave the EU had the control of borders as one its main themes, explicitly expressed against the EU’s commitment to ‘freedom of movement’. Borders – and their associated practices of *bordering* – are central features of contemporary politics and governing. For example, the manufacture and dramatisation of Hungary’s ‘migrant crisis’ was fundamental to the development of the Fidesz governments’ ‘illiberal’ political strategy, and was mirrored in the centrality of Donald Trump’s promise the ‘build the wall’ for his project to “Make America Great Again’.

As Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy have argued, it is imperative to shift our understanding of borders and the associated practices of bordering ‘from seeing them as operating on the margins of state and society to considering them major constitutive features of contemporary social, economic and political dynamics’ (2019: 161). The ‘methodological nationalism’ that has dominated – and distorted – so much of social science offered a simplifying story about borders. Borders were understood to mark the point of separation between nation-states, which then exercised sovereignty over what took place within those borders. Among other problems, this account of the coherent and container-like nation-state conveniently left colonialism out of account, occluding the ways in which European nation-states were never closed entities in economic, political, cultural or social terms (see, *inter alia*, Isin, 2015). Bhambra (2022) has demonstrated how an understanding of the British state as a *composite* form, profoundly structured by colonial relations, opens out new views of the relations between colonies, state forms, systems of citizenship and, not least, the economic and social relations of welfare. She argues that ‘the territorial boundaries of the British state, as well as its organizational structure, have never been congruent with what many see as the imagined nation and, at times, the imaginary of the state has also extended to include territories beyond the island or islands. In a similar way, the populations that inhabit the variety of territories encompassed within the British state have been differentially included in understandings of national identity’ (2022:4). Bhambra’s work, along with a growing number of others, demands the rethinking of nation, nationality and nationalism in colonial and postcolonial frames.

Colonial formations were vital to the development of European nation-states and their systems of citizenship and even after the formal processes of decolonisation, their traces persist in policies, practices and an array of cultural formations. They form part of the layered histories of states and their self-understandings that have *accreted* in both institutional forms and in popular memory. Green (2019) has argued that the unitary conception of nation-states and their borders has typically concealed a much more complex – and dynamic – configuration of ‘entangled borders’ in which multiple, overlapping and sometimes competing authorities lay claim to spaces. Drawing on an understanding of space as ‘fundamentally relational’, she suggests that:

contemporary political borders are crosscut by other kinds of border regime, which affects how people experience the relations and separations between here and somewhere else. The overlaps, the entanglement and the traces of past border regimes that have been papered over with new ones implies that no border system can entirely classify or define the places, peoples or things that it attempts to organize. (2019: 35)

The contemporary obsession with the strengthening of ‘national’ borders obscures other ways in which borders are being remade. As Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2019, chapter 3) and others have argued, borders have been both *externalised* and *internalised*. A variety of arrangements (from passport control to visa acquisition) routinely take place beyond the territory of the nation, while the management of migrants has also been systematically externalised through a range of mechanisms, such as Australia’s ‘Pacific Solution’ in which migrants are held in detention in Papua New Guinea and Nauru to be ‘processed’. Perhaps less obvious, but no less significant, has been the EU’s capacity to manipulate, move and stretch its borders, increasingly outsourcing border controls and the management of migration to countries in the ‘European Neighbourhood’, enrolling non-EU countries around the Mediterranean region into such processes. Post-Brexit, the UK government has also hunted around for places willing to provide sites for the conduct of its offshored people processing, most recently in a deal with Rwanda..

At the same time, the policing of national borders has been internalised through a variety of practices in which proof of belonging can be demanded. Police checks are a long established (and long discriminatory) mechanism for doing such border-work, typically resting on assumptions about which people look ‘out of place’. Increasingly, though, other agencies have been drawn into this work: in the UK, public agencies from health services to schools and private entities such as landlords and employers have been required to perform nationality checks on those who come their way. Such developments form part of what Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy call ‘everyday bordering’ practices which are ‘multi-layered and overlapping and are experienced at work, at home, and in educational institutions, so that at different times an individual may be a border guard or may be the subject of border work of employers, landlords, educators and others’ (2019: 127). As borders are reconstructed, so is the work of policing them, combining new sites, practices and agents in the business of managing the nation and the distinctions between its citizens and their others.

Dispersing the state

Such processes of ‘outsourcing’ of the nation-state’s concerns form part of a wider dynamic as states mutate – and this is the focus of my third theme. In both theory and practice, the state is not what it used to be. A variety of authors have taken up Abrams’ critique of state theory (1988) to develop less unitary and solid understandings of the state idea and the state form: for example, Mitchell’s work on the ‘state effect’ (1999), Painter’s exploration of the ‘prosaic geographies of stateness’ (2006) or Gupta and Sharma’s conception of the state-system as a ‘a congeries of functions, bureaus, and levels spread across different sites’ (2006: 278). In practice, the state idea has been subject to a confluence of varieties of anti-statism, from neoliberal anti-collectivism through forms of abolitionism to post-communist valorisations of civil society. The tendency to conceptualise the state through a series of binaries (state/economy, state/civil society) has tended to distract from the complex reworkings of the relationships that flow through and across such distinctions in which the state-system (in Abrams’ terms) has been extensively remade, not least in the outsourcing of many functions to other organisations. This outsourcing is perhaps better understood as a dynamic of *dispersal* (of objectives, capacities, resources and powers) to a multiplicity of agents and agencies. These relationships are typically governed by combinations of contract, performance evaluation and legal obligations, constituting the organisations and actors as extensions of the state, imagined as a series of principal-agent relationships. The textures and practices of this ‘dispersed’ state have been explored in Humphris’s (2019) of interactions between ‘Romanian Roma’ mothers and state workers around the fraught issues of welfare and citizenship. Her study examines how the thinned-out state has devolved responsibility for managing such marginal groups to voluntary organisations, such that the ‘front line’ of the state was composed of volunteers, mostly women, who were often migrants themselves. In the encounters between these agents and the Romanian mothers, judgments were made about worth and value, establishing who gets to be a ‘good mother’, a ‘deserving case’, or ‘worthy of supporting to citizenship’.

Humphris draws attention to the changing state structures and welfare policies that have made home visiting central to the governance of some marginalised groups and suggests that this dynamic forms part of what she intriguingly calls ‘governance through uncertainty’ (2019: 4). Uncertainty is embedded in the small-scale practices and relationships through which outcomes are produced (as opposed to The State acting monolithically). This conception has interesting parallels with the way Fortier (2021) locates ‘uncertainty’ as a governing principle of citizenship and citizenisation. It also creates productive echoes of our concern with citizenship as *imparfaite* and *en travaux* while extending them to new sites and practices. For both Humphris and Fortier, the complex and shifting rules that govern nationality and citizenship make encounters between state workers (or quasi-state workers) and migrants highly charged. Humphris’s front-line workers are ambiguously located in organisational terms, and a growing range of responsibilities have been devolved to them at precisely the point when the organisational resources to support them have diminished during the decade of ‘austerity’ politics and policies. Austerity has driven down the resources embodied in forms of social citizenship, both in terms of benefits and institutional provision. Austerity also had the effect of intensifying the perceived competition over

such ‘scarce resources’ which in turn fuelled anti-migrant sentiments in much of Europe and North America. As the public realm shrank, so ‘citizens’ became persuaded that ‘outsiders’ would undermine their claims on its resources, generating the mixture of anxiety and rage that has formed a central plank of the platforms of the rising radical right in the global North (Worth 2019). Its distinctive cocktail of racism, nationalism, misogyny and authoritarianism sustains an exclusionary redrawing of the nation and entitlements to membership alongside a restorationist vision of the ‘way of life’ that is to be cherished.

Humphris’s work has other affinities with Fortier’s, in particular an emphasis on thinking about welfare and citizenship relationally and as constructed in practice. She highlights the unsettling mingling of established categories: these citizenship decisions emerged in intersections of the public and private, the formal and informal, and the political and personal realms, whereas citizenship has conventionally been treated as belonging on the formal, public and political side of those distinctions. She argues that analyses of the state and citizenship would be well served by shifting from an emphasis on ‘state acts’ to ‘state encounters’ as a way of highlighting the processual and relational quality of how states are made in practice. She suggests that ‘the perspective of encounters makes the situated positions of all social actors visible without privileging one side. In essence, encounters bring relational struggles into focus’ (2019: 193). This view is also central to Fortier’s analysis, underpinning an approach that has situated relational practices at its core:

More than ‘just’ exploring how citizenship and citizens are made and unmade in citizenisation, this book also touches on how the state, as well as state-citizen relations, are ‘made up’ (Cooper 2015), not only in the sense of how they are imagined, but also in the sense of how they are variously actualised in the enactment of the policy requirements around documenting, speaking, becoming, and naturalising citizens. The state, then, is not a monolithic entity; it is enacted and imagined differently by different actors as they navigate the complex legal, policy and social landscape of citizenisation. In that sense, the authority of the state relies on relational dynamics that reassert both the subject (‘migrant’ or ‘citizen’) *and* the state as social subjects, as ‘actors’ and agents in people’s everyday lives ... (2021: 207-8)

This insistence on things being ‘made up’ reinforces my own sense of the importance of treating these objects and subjects as fundamentally contingent and constructed. Our concepts of states, citizens, migrants, borders and the rest denote the *temporary* outcomes of relational processes and practices. They may appear solid, timeless and universal (and certainly are often claimed to be such) but their particular forms and formations are only ever temporary, shaped by both the conjunctural conditions in which they are being made up and the dynamics of the encounters in which they are given life. However, it is important to stress that to use the phrase ‘made up’ is not to render them weightless or insubstantial. On the contrary, they are invested with varieties of significance and consequence: for example, the stateliness of states is both claimed and performed and often weighs heavily on those who encounter such performances. Citizenship, as Fortier remarks is the focus of varieties of desire and anxiety – forming what she calls a ‘desire-anxiety nexus’ (2019: 49) with profound effects on states, their intermediaries and would-be citizens. In a compelling framing, she argues that the processes of citizenisation operate across three axes: ‘temporality – how citizenship *takes time*; spatiality – how citizenship *takes place*; and affect – how

citizenship *takes hold*' (2019: 12; italics in original). As such, it rightly remains a key focus of academic and political concern.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

John Clarke is an Emeritus Professor at the Open University, UK and currently a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow. He has written on a wide range of subjects and is currently writing a book on the current conjuncture in the UK, provisionally titled 'The Battle For Britain' to be published in 2023 by Bristol University Press.

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