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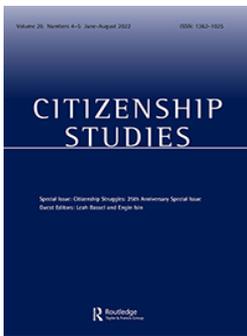
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Citizenship studies: on the need for tradition *and* critique

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from arguments within sexuality/gender studies, I argue that we need to move away from the rigid binary thinking and ideological blindness that pervades much contemporary politics, and be more 'queer', if you will. To this end, we need to move beyond a focus predominantly on critique and recognise the need for both tradition and critique within citizenship studies itself and societal politics more generally. I argue that we need to move beyond narratives that are (deliberately, or not) founded on an exclusionary logic that divides and instead better recognize the need for – and power of – tradition in a dialectical relationship with critique. This is a serious challenge but one that may be best achieved through a transformative politics of justice, generosity, and forgiveness, where we work through painful histories such that we can engage the Other in a spirit of hospitality.

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I want to argue that a key element in ensuring a productive future for citizenship studies is to avoid the re-production of a polarized *either-or* politics, which is in the ascendancy culturally at least within the West. What is needed instead is an embrace of *both* tradition and critique. There is an urgent need to move away from the rigid binary thinking that pervades much contemporary politics, conservative, and progressive alike. Of most significance for me herein, speaking as someone who has produced critical progressive scholarship myself, is the need to move away from a growing hegemony of critique within progressive scholarship (and activism) if we are to avoid further fuelling a divisive politics of either-or division. My primary concern is not with a hard right conservatism or populist authoritarianism; they continue to be rightly subject to appropriate challenge by many others, but rather with my own community of scholarship and activism in sexuality and gender studies. This is fuelled by a sense of disappointment that – for a variety of historical and cultural reasons beyond the scope of this article – we have lost our way, fallen foul of our own form of *ideological blindness*, and are in genuine need of critical evaluation and potentially also a radical reset.

To this end, inspired by the inherently generous philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, I will argue that we need to move beyond a focus only on critique and recognise the value of tradition within citizenship studies theory, activism, and politics more generally. We need to move beyond narratives that are (deliberately, or not) founded on an exclusionary logic that divides and instead better recognize the need for – and power of –

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tradition in a dialectical relationship with critique. This is a serious challenge but is one that I believe may be best achieved through a transformative politics of justice, generosity, and forgiveness, where we work through our shared (often painful) histories together, such that we engage the Other in a spirit of hospitality.

A politics of *either-or* division

I will (necessarily, briefly) evidence my assertion about the risks of a divisive politics of progressive critique in the context of sexuality and gender studies, where my own work is located, but tentatively suggest this applies equally to other contexts (see e.g. McWhorter 2021). Contemporary academic writing – from within citizenship studies and beyond – on sexuality and gender is becoming increasingly divisive, in large part due to a particular critical sensibility underpinning much – if not, most – work in this field. The politics of sexual/intimate citizenship today appears in danger of losing sight of the still unrealised promises of the past – espoused through a language of tradition – in an all too ready embrace of critique.

To be clear, I am not arguing against difference, or even division herein. Quite the contrary, I want to encourage us to prize difference, engage with division, and resist any notion of totalizing ideology. One would expect this to be uncontroversial but the call to resist an either-or politics must apply equally to those engaged in progressive critique, as much as those seeking to hold on to tradition. After all, ‘The most effective way of protecting oneself from criticism is to monopolize the critical function’ (Taguieff 2001, 14). A truly progressive politics should want to invite criticism, not least to illuminate deficiencies and sharpen praxis. Unfettered critique results in two things: (1) the loss of a (still necessary) politics of tradition that seeks to realise possibilities for those too often now forgotten and (2) a failure to recognise the need for productive dialogue between past and present, tradition and critique, such that the longed-for utopia does not become a dystopia for others. In more concrete terms:

(1) There remains much still to do regarding fundamental aspects of equality for all sexual and gender minorities. This is what we might call *tradition* in the context of the language of contemporary academic and activist citizenship studies. Sexual and gender minorities are still beaten or otherwise abused on the streets of even the most progressive of cities, have poorer health outcomes, and much higher levels of mental health difficulties, to name just a few continuing challenges. And yet, in much contemporary scholarship, these matters belong only to the past, as authors instead take up newer (more fashionable) battles in which sexual and gender minorities serve only as pawns in an intellectual game of critique. Sexual and gender minorities (and lesbians and gay men, in particular) appear increasingly only in the service of an argument regarding wider cultural critique – from corporate ‘pinkwashing’ to ‘homonationalism’ – as if their own lives were no longer inflected by prejudice or inequality. The promise of a substantive material equality remains unfulfilled and at risk of being lost in the focus on critique that merely uses queer bodies as artillery in some other battle. These critical arguments may have merit, of course, but the focus *only on critique* within an either-or logic draws (invariably limited) resource and attention away from people suffering present-day material struggles and/or sets people against each other. This need not be a zero-sum game but so often appears to play out in that manner.

(2) Unfettered critique leads increasingly to tensions between groups who might otherwise be allies, with tension invariably the result of perceptions that there is an erasure of some important aspect of tradition in play. The cultural tension between gender critical feminists and trans activists is a particularly clear example. In an effort to assert the primacy of gender identification over sexed bodies, trans activists and their allies have run-up against a feminist ('gender critical') opposition that refuses to accept this radical change. Arguments within the public sphere are multiple but often revolve around definitions of the category 'woman' (e.g. should it be grounded in biological sex or gender identity) and subsequent access (or not) to female space (e.g. refuges, prisons, toilets, and changing rooms) and involvement in female activities, such as women's sport. But these topics by no means exhaust current – or likely future – arguments on this topic. There is an urgent need for dialogue and greater understanding of the hopes of those located within the language of tradition and critique alike, if we are to reduce the anger in this encounter and engage more productively beyond current either/or discourse. Of course, this is going to be difficult and complex, since even the terms of the dispute are not agreed upon. There is also considerable hurt and genuine vulnerability. Social media fuels this either/or politics, with moderate voices increasingly drowned out while online disinhibition effects increase the affective tension. The tragedy here is that there is so much shared history and common political cause being lost in this increasingly toxic encounter, so many opportunities for understanding, nuance and coming together missed or ignored: the need for generosity and forgiveness has never been more apparent.

The need for tradition and critique

The fuel for battles within the 'culture wars', often comes about as a result of an either/or narrative, a narrative founded on an exclusionary logic that divides. Dividing narratives will inevitably fuel a fight, with little chance of dialogue and recognition. This is not (necessarily) a deliberate strategic choice for division on the part of the actors involved, many involved – myself included – are likely convinced they are simply fighting a just battle against oppression or attempting to preserve something precious. That said, some are clearly in this for the fight.

The certainty of the (ostensibly) progressive political actor is as dangerous as that of the conservative ideologue in such circumstances. Righteous anger is of course needed to provide the fuel to motivate a political fight for change, but we must guard against the progressive becoming a new binary ideology in which that which is different is demonised. A queer resistance to such either/or logic is required, which is of course somewhat ironic when queer theory itself is being deployed within progressive ideology in a manner that is inherently divisive. But we must remember that a properly queer citizenship was historically founded upon a fractured and disruptive politics, where we recognize the partiality of knowledge and resist all totalizing tendencies (Hall 2003). The danger of totalizing ideologies is very real indeed with a culture of progressive politics that seeks to 'cancel'. Contemporary sexual politics is so often about 'either/or' when we need 'and': there has been a profound and consistent failure of cultural logic within much contemporary discourse on sex and sexuality. To ameliorate this excess of the 'certainty of the just', we need to foster a sense of humility. A key element in enabling such uncertainty is to question ourselves, as much as to question the Other. We need to turn our critical gaze upon ourselves and our own ideology, not just toward the other.

Here, we may find Ricoeur's (1970) arguments about the need to employ a critique of the illusions of the subject helpful. In any attempt to appropriate meaning, most particularly when doing so within a stance of critical suspicion, there is a risk of the projection of one's (existential) subjectivity upon the object of our critical gaze. We carry our culture, history, and tradition through our embodied sense of selfhood, and this inevitably colours our worldview: there can never be a view from nowhere. If we are to employ our critique with due humility it is therefore crucial to turn this upon ourselves first and foremost. We must subject our own world view to the same level of critique as that of the Other. This strategy, while inevitably flawed and necessarily partial, should at least remind us of the need to acknowledge the situated nature of our world view, and thereby demand some degree of humility in the face of difference, even direct opposition. Our convictions need not – arguably, should not – be undermined through this process but we may just find our encounters with different world views benefit immensely from a little less of the 'certainty of the just'.

Progressive politics also too readily fails to acknowledge the need for – and power of – tradition. There is an understandable but all too quick rush for what is perceived to be 'progressive', for what is new, and for what appears to move us beyond the status quo towards some glorious utopia. Sadly, this often means a rather casual abandonment of what went before, with only very limited scrutiny of any possible unintended consequences of such political change. That is, with every progressive advance there will likely be an attendant loss, material, and symbolic. One person's utopia will also inevitably be another's dystopia. The loss may be necessary, desirable even as part of necessary political change toward greater equality, but that loss needs to be taken seriously both for the fact it means someone – some community – will feel they are losing an important aspect of their tradition, and because there may be value in that tradition that we rush to wish away at our peril.

A successful politics – following Ricoeur (1986), – requires that we account for tradition and critique within a dialectic, with genuine respect for both, albeit attentive to power imbalance between the different positions. Tradition and critique will not be evenly balanced within a dialectic, nor should they be, of course, change will only occur if there is movement between the positions, with power transferring and adhering accordingly. But, if one position comes to dominate – becomes hegemonic – then the opportunity for dialogue and practical wisdom, so essential to the progressive spiral of ideology and utopia, may end prematurely (Langdridge 2013; Langdridge and Parchev 2018). As such, a progressive politics that seeks to singularly advance its cause without proper account of the value of tradition, as well as the potential loss that may occur with change, will never carry people with it, and risks the creation of unnecessary conflict. We need to learn from Ricoeur, and his lifelong pursuit of a pathway through ostensibly opposed positions that is focused on recognition of the other, learning from the good in ostensibly opposed positions, and thereby adopting an approach that brings ideas and people together rather than driving them yet further apart.

Translation and linguistic hospitality

So how might we best meet difference, such that we bridge the gap between self and Other, so the encounter can be a more productive one? Ricoeur's work on translation provides a model for how we might seek to productively engage with Otherness, with him

putting (*linguistic*) *hospitality* at the core of the process, alert to the imperialistic danger of any desire to achieve ‘a perfect *logos* of the future’ as Richard Kearney (2007) refers to it. In other words, his work recognises the tension between hostility that may result from an attempt to reduce guest and host to the same versus the hospitable acknowledgement of difference inherent in the labour of translation. As Kearney (2007) highlights, there is always the possibility of ‘betrayal as well as rebirth’ in any encounter with otherness. Translation is not merely intellectual work for Ricoeur but also an ethical problem, such that the linguistic hospitality required of translation may serve as a model for other forms of hospitality. And this is the claim I want to make here, that we can follow the model of linguistic hospitality from Ricoeur within contemporary sexual politics as a means to work productively between positions of difference – between tradition and critique – and thereby minimise further cultural alienation.

The encounter with the Other cannot be avoided as it is within us, as well as between us, in any act of speaking: there is an original plurality to humanity. Perfect translation is not possible, it is never final or complete. There is a delicate balance to be struck between hospitality towards that which is foreign and recognition that something will always be lost in translation, some difference will always remain. Translation is – for Ricoeur – a Freudian process of *working-through*, an arduous task and trial of patience. We not only share words but also worlds. These worlds contain our hopes and aspirations as individuals and communities and it is here within our worlds that we must recognise the fragile and fallible nature of translation, a never-ending process that carries risk but also possibility. We must mourn the loss of the fantasy of shared truth – of the fusion of self and Other – and instead work through the continuing challenge of plurality. This is a *conditional* hospitality in which there remains an interpretive process of judgment about what we seek to welcome, a mode of translation that is itself translatable into a *realpolitik* and not simply some idealized abstraction or mystical dream. Being hospitable to the Other, whether that Other advocates the narrative of ideology or utopia, tradition or critique, is undoubtedly a ‘difficult’ task but not an ‘impossible’ one.

Ricoeur suggests that we should first approach the other with generosity, starting from a position of a sympathetic desire to understand their concerns. This should involve an awareness that every story can be told from different perspectives, an awareness that should also alert us to the dangers of seeking to reify events into dogma. Second, we need to remember that the past is not simply history – what is bygone and now of no concern to the present – but also a memory that represents the ‘unfulfilled future of the past’. If we seek to bridge the gap between tradition and critique, then we must be sensitive to the promises of the past that remain unfulfilled within tradition. And finally, we need to engage in the painful process of forgiveness for the suffering of the past. This involves a necessary sharing of narratives of pain and suffering such that there is understanding of the hurt that has been caused but also much more than this. There must also be a ‘shattering of the debt’ if we are to move forward. This is not about forgetting or the denial of justice but about a surplus of charity.

There also needs to be a psychological *working-through* of the pain caused, which results in mourning and letting-go. The emotional quality of our engagements with other people or organisations is too easily forgotten or ignored but is crucial in understanding the mode in which we encounter difference. Awareness of our emotions – their history in our sense of selfhood and wider communities – is an important element in how we

moderate the affective nature of the political process. This is not about a refusal to allow anger or other ‘negative’ emotions, not at all, as they provide much of the motive power for effecting political change. This is instead about our working through these emotional drivers of our actions such that we gain better control of them, as and when we encounter opposing world views, such that these encounters become – as much as we can ever determine such things – productive rather than destructive.

This is a process we must undertake with sexual/intimate citizenship, and arguably also politics more broadly, a task becoming increasingly urgent and ever more difficult but arguably never more important. We can – and must – continue to fight against oppression wherever it is found while also remaining generous in spirit – hospitable – to the Other. If we do not, then we risk ever more polarisation and pointless echo chamber politics. At times of great social stress come risks and opportunities, we have an opportunity now to engage a more hopeful politics, a politics of forgiveness, hospitality, and justice: in other words, a progressive politics of tradition and critique.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributor

Darren Langdridge is Professor of Psychology at the Open University, UK. For many years Darren has researched and written on sexualities and critical theory, publishing numerous books, articles and book chapters.

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