



Edited by **Andrew Brown** and **John Griffiths**

THE CITIZEN

PAST AND PRESENT

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INTRODUCTION THE CITIZEN: FROM ANCIENT TO POST-MODERN

Andrew Brown

‘Who is the citizen?’ asked Aristotle; ‘Whom should we call one?’¹ These questions are as pertinent today, and as difficult to answer, as they were when Aristotle posed them. We might define citizenship simply as a legal relationship between the individual and the state; as a balance between the duties owed to the state and rights expected from it; as a sense of belonging to the state, and the degree of participation within it. But a concept that relates in some way to rights and duties, as well as to status, identity and values, is a concept that will utterly defy consensus. What Aristotle also said over two millennia ago is just as true now: ‘. . . there is no unanimity, no agreement as to what constitutes a citizen.’

Aristotle’s questions related to the Greek city-state, and are answered very differently within the modern democracy: ‘citizenship’ has constantly evolved within the Western European tradition.² We can identify several key shifts in definition as being particularly significant for the modern world, and roughly date their appearance to the eighteenth century. The most obvious is the shift from small to large scale, from an urban-based notion of citizenship to one focused on the nation-state. The novelty of this change can be overstated. The idea of a citizen as the subject of a state, and as a legal entity, had emerged within the Roman empire; ‘states’ and ‘nations’ arguably existed in the medieval West; and early modern theorists (such as Jean Bodin) had discussed citizens as subjects. But revolutionary Europe and America in the late eighteenth century did usher in a sense of citizenship as a more inclusive and potentially more democratic category.

A consequence of this shift was to turn the citizen, or at least the definition of one, from an active into a more passive being. Aristotle had considered citizenship — meaning membership of a city-state (*polis*) — to be natural,

and that participation in political life would encourage virtue, but that active participation would be impossible in a city-state that was ‘excessively large’.³ Most members of a modern nation-state cannot be full citizens in Aristotle’s sense. Not that urban-based citizenships ever involved the whole population: being a citizen in classical Athens or a medieval city was a privileged status, often restricted to elites. But large nation-states that submerge the individual into a general will, and demand loyalty to the state, weaken the correlation between citizenship and direct political participation.

A third trend has been the shift in emphasis towards citizenship as a matter of ‘rights’ more than of ‘duties’. Benjamin Constant in 1819 was already distinguishing the ‘liberties of the ancients’ from the ‘liberties of the moderns’: whereas the former had drawn their freedoms from collective participation in the common good, the latter were to expect liberties free from excessive state interference.⁴ A ‘liberal’ conception of citizenship, emphasising civil liberties, is said to have superseded an older ‘civic-republican’ tradition. A strong emphasis, inherited from the ancient world, on the obligations required of active citizens, and on the virtue of fulfilling them, was replaced by an emphasis on the civil rights that passive citizens could demand of their nation-state.

Again, the degree of change can be overemphasised: in the ancient or medieval world, rebels against ruling regimes frequently demanded liberties of various kinds; states in the nineteenth century hardly granted democratic freedoms to lower classes, minorities or women. Inequalities also gradually generated ideas that the rights expected from the state should be more than political and civil. T. H. Marshall’s (1949) emphasis on the need to reconcile the inequity between social classes and the equality implied by ‘citizenship’ added the notion of ‘social’ rights to the lexicon of modern citizenship.⁵

These broad shifts in ideas of citizenship, from ‘urban’ to ‘national’, ‘active’ to ‘passive’, and ‘duties’ to ‘rights’, have never gone unchallenged, however. Some of the continuities between modern societies and earlier ones are worth highlighting. Urban-based citizenship, for all its ideals of community, was fundamentally an exclusive category; and during the transition to state-based



citizenship, some of its exclusionary character was smuggled in with the name. The elitist values of medieval patrician classes morphed imperceptibly into the 'bourgeois' standards expected of the early modern citizen.⁶ A tension between duties and rights has been constantly felt. Even the most liberal views of citizenship retain a sense that it entails obligations necessary for the proper functioning of society; that these obligations require an educated citizenry, and therefore an engaged and active one.⁷

Some of these challenges and problems have become the focus of present-day debates on citizenship in the face of rapid social change, especially since the 1990s. Globalisation has further destabilised simple association between citizenship and the nation-state.⁸ This association was never total, not least because political arrangements, below or above the level of the state, have existed in many forms in the past; and because the idea of the nation as a natural focus for loyalty has often been denounced as specious. The ideal of the 'world citizen' in fact has ancient roots.⁹ But present-day acceleration of contacts and migrations between countries, and environmental concerns that affect the whole planet, have strengthened the need to develop a global kind of citizenship, and weakened a sense of belonging simply to a state.

Even so, effective legislation to deal with global issues seems achievable only if enacted at the level of the state: the nation-state remains a primary locus of citizenship, especially in the legal sense. More challenging to this primacy has been the rise of new forms of cultural politics, loosely labelled 'post-modern'.¹⁰ These give as much attention to questions of identity as to rights and duties. The concept and value of national identity as mono-cultural, especially if assumed to be based on a common ethnic identity, has been seriously tested: multicultural and plural identities within a state, and the agendas resulting from them, may have to be addressed for any sense of common citizenship to be entertained. But addressing them therefore seems to point in contradictory directions: away from community and towards antagonism or confrontation; but also, somewhat idealistically, towards a more meaningful consensus on rights and duties of citizens. These problems have made the question of citizenship arguably more urgent to us than ever before: the exponential

increase in ‘citizenship studies’ that began in the late twentieth century shows no sign of slackening today.

Present-day concerns form the starting point for this volume. Emily Beausoleil (Chapter 1) begins with the ‘rights’ and ‘liberties’ expected by twenty-first-century citizens in liberal democracies, but emphasises the tensions that lie at the heart of the relationship between the individual and the democratic state. How does the citizen, largely excluded from decision-making processes, participate in the political arena? A new, active kind of citizen may be demanded in the modern democratic world, one who confronts and is critical of accepted norms.

If citizenship studies are about taking on the political problems and injustices of the present, what account do we need to take of the past? Emphasising the ‘global’, ‘active’ and ‘critical’ places citizenship in a thoroughly modern context, as does defining citizenship as a ‘social process’ through which individuals or groups might engage in claiming rights.¹¹ The relevance of past forms of citizenship begins to seem tenuous. But there are important ways in which an historical perspective contributes to modern debates.

One approach is to trace the evolution of theories of citizenship: exploring how past ideas turned into present ones, how they evolved and why, generates a critical attitude to current norms and assumptions. This volume, however, does not deal with citizenship as an evolving set of ideas. Its contributors offer collectively a more comparative approach. Each discusses aspects of citizenship as they have appeared in past societies, and in particular ideas of citizenship as they have appeared in practice, as part of social processes. The historical sources examined are not limited to the political theorisings on citizenship in any one period: values and ideologies connected with citizenship must be accessed from a wider range of evidence, from the literary to the legal. Citizenship in practice is often a fluid and messy affair, and is not easily categorised as part of liberal or civic-republican ‘traditions’. This becomes even more evident if we move away from ‘Western European’ concepts to other related ideas found elsewhere, for instance within the Islamic world or the



Pacific. A comparative approach to citizenship disrupts the grand narratives that move us smoothly from past to present.

Even so, the similarities between different societies are also worth attention. The past may be a ‘foreign country’, but were things always done differently there? While ‘global’, ‘active’ and ‘critical’ citizens are current ideal types, they have manifested themselves in various guises before. Several contributors to this volume discuss issues and patterns of past citizenships that are familiar today, despite emerging in other, very different, societies and polities. The ‘global’ citizen is fundamentally about relating ‘local loyalties to wider communities’; how individuals or groups become part of communities, and relate to them as they change, are central themes of this volume.

In none of the societies discussed here was citizenship ever static. As James Richardson argues, on the evolution of the early Roman republic (Chapter 3), the coalescence of individual companions, into a *gens* (people), then into tribes and a city-state, was long drawn out. Andrew Brown shows (Chapter 4) that the meaning of citizenship in medieval Bruges changed: integrating individuals into the city, and gradually into a wider state, was a troubled process. Chris van der Krogt points to the problematic integration of Jews and Christians into the new Islamic polity of medieval Egypt (Chapter 5). Rachael Bell explores the shifts in ideas of citizenship in New Zealand between the two world wars (Chapter 9): critical engagement with contemporary and global issues emerged then as a key component of the ideal citizen. Yet as Michael Belgrave shows (Chapter 10), modern New Zealand has inherited a long history of fraught negotiation over Māori rights and participation in the processes of citizenship, which continues to raise sharp constitutional questions about loyalty to the state.

Identifying with a community has often meant identifying with the land it occupies: being or becoming a citizen involves a sense of belonging to a particular space.¹² In past societies, active steps could be taken to promote this feeling of common identity. In medieval Bruges, the city council’s investment in city walls and gates, and in processions that followed the city’s perimeter, marked out the profile of the city and encouraged identification with it. As

Karen Jillings shows for early modern Aberdeen (Chapter 6), the patrolling of city walls was a means to preserve the integrity of the citizen body within. In classical Athens, as Daniel Ogden argues (Chapter 2), identification with territory was strongly made by connecting citizens with the soil itself, especially through the symbolic association of both citizen and soil with serpents — which were perceived as creatures quintessentially of the land. In modern New Zealand, the unique and indigenous kiwi was quickly adopted as a symbol of patriotism: as Geoff Watson demonstrates (Chapter 8), it became associated with sports teams.

Myths associated with a territory have often generated a feeling of attachment to place. Within modern states, promoting a sense of nationhood has often meant connecting nation and citizens with the land in semi-mythical ways — or as Ernest Renan suggested, by getting one's history wrong.¹³ No wonder that 'citizenship' itself has been described as a myth.¹⁴ On the other hand, the debunking of myth, as well as righting the perceived wrongs of the past, has also been viewed (in modern New Zealand) as clearing a path to a more genuine and inclusive identification with nationhood (Chapter 9). But as the history of New Zealand also reveals, the process of identifying with the land can be problematic in other ways. Preconceptions underlying the relationship between citizenship and the land proved divisive in the nineteenth century. Settler assumptions that full citizen rights were related to individual land ownership flew in the face of indigenous customs of tenure and status, and contributed seriously to the disenfranchisement of Māori (Chapter 10).

Identifying with place and community has invariably meant identifying with the values associated with them: this theme also appears in several chapters. Cities and modern nation-states have often expected a new citizen to make a formal declaration of commitment: in ancient Rome or medieval towns, this took the form of swearing sacred oaths to uphold the ideals of the community. But words have never seemed quite enough to bind citizens to the state (especially if the meaning of those words, as in the Treaty of Waitangi, is disputed). In ancient Greece, legislators were troubled by people who were 'citizens in word but not in fact'.



Building the walls of Troy. In the medieval period, the legend of ancient Troy became a powerful source of myth. For some citizens and cities, Troy was an idealised model of urbanity, but as a pagan city its destruction also served as a Christian parable.

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Thus, conformity to the public good has often had to be proved by a degree of active commitment from the citizen, even one not directly involved in political life. In Catholic Bruges or Protestant Aberdeen, the spiritual values encouraged in these cities were intended to apply to all inhabitants, even if they were not fully enfranchised. A citizen's proof of commitment was demonstrated bodily through honest work, associated with virtue, particularly within a craft guild. The requirement to give somatic demonstrations of civic virtue persisted into the era of the nation-state. The muscular virtues of sport were encouraged in nineteenth-century New Zealand, and integration of new arrivals was helped by participation in sporting activity. The masculine virtues of fighting for one's country were keenly emphasised in the First World War, as David Littlewood shows from conscription trials (Chapter 7): proof of one's 'worth' as a citizen — and a man — could be demonstrated by enlisting in the army.

The promotion of values thought appropriate for the citizen meant defining those that were not. As several contributors point out, citizenship was both an inclusive and an exclusive process. In medieval Muslim Egypt, Christians and Jews were classified by their religion as *dhimmis*, in effect as second-class citizens. In other places citizens were categorised according to standards of morality. The idea of the 'worthless' citizen appears in ancient Athens; and also in medieval Bruges and early modern Aberdeen where beggars were the unvirtuous opposites of hard-working craft-guild members. The somatic proof required of the ideal citizen created its own group of outsiders: in societies that associated illness with sin, the unhealthy could also be excluded for being among the worthless and immoral. The diseased had to be removed from the citizen body of Aberdeen; the sickly could be regarded as a burden on the nineteenth-century New Zealand state; the non-conformist during the First World War, according to some, had to be combed out of the social body like 'lice'.

In modern democratic states, such draconian conformity would seem intolerable and hard to enforce. Yet it has been difficult to escape a sense that citizenship involves some form of commitment to shared values, and also a suspicion that some values, however apparently benign, conceal elements



of social control. The emphasis on communal and equal participation in New Zealand's sports may obscure social disparities or inequities in Māori representation at a political level. And as John Griffiths comments (Chapter 11), in relation to the Workers' Educational Association in Britain since 1945, the encouragement of 'active' citizens by the government may well be considered a form of soft-policing.

What also emerges in this volume, however, is that even in strongly conformist societies, communal values associated with citizenship are complex, malleable, and often beyond the control of governing agencies. The emphasis on the need to uphold the 'common good' has not always served the agenda of ruling groups, and instead has proved (as in ancient Rome and medieval Bruges) a useful tool to justify rebellion against them. The championing of masculine virtues for male citizens did not necessarily work to enforce conscription in the First World War. Masculinity was multi-layered, and to avoid military duty objectors found it possible to emphasise their commitment to other civic-spirited and equally masculine virtues, such as maintaining the integrity of the family household.

Communal values associated with citizenship have therefore also been used strategically and actively to promote social justice in past societies. The building of consensus even in the early Roman republic involved conflict and opposition between 'plebeians' and 'patricians'. In medieval cities, artisan and guild opposition to merchant elites and princes, based on the public good, encouraged a more demotic notion of citizenship. 'Active' and 'critical' forms of citizenship have not been the preserve of modern democratic societies, nor have they been a constant feature within them. The history of the Workers' Educational Association suggests a frequent ebb and flow in the desire for active citizenship in modern Britain, rather than a linear progression towards it.

Situating the ideas and practices of citizenship firmly within historical contexts, as this volume does, also demonstrates how fluid and fragmented they can be, even within relatively mono-cultural societies. Several contributors explore the effects on ideals of citizenship when societies are under stress, in times of political upheaval, sickness or war. Communal values prove to be

shot through with division; crises have led to the enforcement of norms and conformist ideologies, as well as reaction against them; immigration and the need to accommodate other people have frequently raised questions as to what it meant to be a citizen.

It was apparently the ‘multitude of citizens’ that prompted new codifications in classical Athens, as well as the view that new arrivals would not fit in — as being ‘worthless peg[s] in a plank’. Deciding on who to include in early Rome as it grew was part of the fraught process of forming a political community. Medieval cities had to deal with the constant arrival of newcomers in search of work. Periods of stress in Egypt produced resentment among growing Muslim majorities of protections granted to religious minorities. Movements of people were troubling to the city authorities of Aberdeen in times of plague, and sharpened demarcation between those who were permitted access to the city and citizen body and those who were not. Immigration may have accelerated with modern globalisation, but it has often been a divisive issue that has driven re-evaluations of citizenship.

Modern debates on citizenship — the roles, values and identities that citizens are to play, hold or perform — are often old debates recast. Taking a historical and comparative approach to the subject illuminates issues that have commonly been key to defining the citizen’s relationship with the state. This book places these issues within their historical contexts to highlight the need to see them as part of broader social processes and problems. For instance, ‘citizenship’ has never quite been the all-inclusive category that the name seems to imply; defining the values and identities of citizens in the present, as it has in the past, may well be implicated in processes of power that include some and exclude others.

This book also shows, however, that the differences between past and present are just as significant as the similarities, and that these too are informative: sensitivity to the past’s otherness, to citizenship in other societies, develops awareness of the contingency of modern debates on present and changing contexts. ‘Critical’ citizens, who engage actively with



contemporary issues, will also need to engage with the past: understanding their sense of place in society, being able to question present norms, values and identities, demands a critical perspective on the histories of their own political communities and those of others.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair, rev. Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 168 [1275a2].
- 2 For the following, see Peter Reisenberg, *Citizenship in the Western Tradition: Plato to Rousseau* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), esp. xvi–xxiv, 267–70; J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The Ideal of Citizenship Since Classical Times,’ in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. R. Beiner (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 29–52; Derek Heater, *A Brief History of Citizenship* (New York: NYU Press, 2004); Richard Bellamy, *Citizenship: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 3 Aristotle, *The Politics*, 404 [1326b2]. A population of 100,000 would ‘no longer be a city’: Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, rev. Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976/1986), 307.
- 4 Benjamin Constant, ‘The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns (1819),’ in *The Political Writings of Benjamin Constant*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 309–28. See also Emily Beausoleil, *infra*.
- 5 T. H. Marshall and T. Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London: Pluto Press, 1992); and see Derek Heater, *What is Citizenship?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 17–24.
- 6 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991), 14–5, 23–4, 30; Heater, *What is Citizenship?*, 84–5.
- 7 See, for instance, discussion of modern ‘communitarian’ views of citizenship that retains a stronger sense of ‘duties’: Gerard Delanty, ‘Communitarianism and Citizenship,’ in *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, ed. Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), 159–74; Nigel Clark, ‘Cultural Studies for Shaky Islands,’ in *Cultural Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, Space and Place*, eds. Claudia Bell and Steve Matthewman (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3–18; S. Grey, ‘Citizen Engagement,’ in *New Zealand Government and Politics*, ed. Janine Hayward, 6th ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2015), 496–8. For the changing notion of citizenship between 1870 and the outbreak of the Second World War see Brad Beaven and John Griffiths, ‘Creating the Exemplary Citizen: The Changing Notion of Citizenship 1870–1939,’ *Contemporary British History* 22, no. 2 (2008): 203–25.
- 8 See, for instance, Maurice Roche, ‘Social Citizenship: Grounds of Social Change,’ in *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, eds. Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), 69–86.
- 9 Derek Heater, *World Citizenship: Cosmopolitan Thinking and its Opponents* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).
- 10 Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner, ‘Citizenship Studies: An Introduction,’ in *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, eds. Isin and Turner, 1–10; S. Hall, ‘The Question of Cultural Identity,’



in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, eds. S. Hall, D. Held, D. Hubert, and K. Thompson (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 611–8; Chantal Mouffe, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (London: Verso, 1992); Will Kymlicka, ‘Multicultural Citizenship,’ in *The Citizenship Debates: A Reader*, ed. Gershon Shafir (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 167–88 (among other contributions in this volume).

- 11 Isin and Turner, ‘Citizenship Studies,’ 3.
- 12 See, for instance, contributions in *Cultural Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, Space and Place*, eds. Bell and Matthewman.
- 13 ‘Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation’: Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation?* (1882).
- 14 Michael Ignatieff, ‘The Myth of Citizenship,’ in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Beiner, 53–77.