

From a Civic Point of View

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What is citizenship? Not only a status, it derives above all from acts and practices. The collective volume *Acts of citizenship* advocates for a new approach of civic action, by focusing for instance on case studies about the political struggles of illegal immigrants.

Reviewed: Engin F. Isin & Greg M. Nielsen (eds.), *Acts of Citizenship*, London, Zed Books, 2008, xii + 308 p.

Over the night of 27-28th April 1991, the Soviet Tank in Prague's Kinsky Square which memorialized the Soviet liberation of Prague in May 1945 was painted pink by an art student, David Cerny. He was arrested and the tank was promptly repainted green by soldiers in the Czechoslovak Army, before being repainted pink by a group of parliamentary deputies in support of Cerny's act. To end the dispute, the tank was finally removed – although the site has seen considerable further activity, not the least being the illegal installation in August 2008 of the pink hull of a tank with the white stripe characteristic of the Soviet tanks that invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 on it. In Bermondsey, London, in the summer of 2002, a group of female artists painted a tank pink as a public artwork. In 2006 in Copenhagen, a World War II tank was covered in pink yarn knitted by numerous volunteers as a protest against involvement in the war in Iraq. How are we to think about these acts and their relation to one another? Can we think of them as acts of citizenship?

Against methodological Gaianism

John Pocock once characterised our modern concept of citizenship as, in significant part, an unfinished dialogue between the contrasting *civic* and *civil* conceptions of political membership exemplified, respectively, in the work of Aristotle and that of the Roman jurist, Gaius. The former identifies citizenship as a distinct mode of human activity; the latter as a specific legal status. It is undoubtedly the case that political philosophers and sociologists have largely framed their engagement with citizenship through what might be termed a “methodological Gaianism”, as manifest, primarily, in debates on the form and content of citizenship as a legal status, although more recently it has also informed normative reflection on access to citizenship and on citizenship beyond the state. In the sociology of citizenship, it is evidenced not only in work on the pluralisation of citizenship (ecological citizenship, consumer citizenship, post-national citizenship, etc.) but also in studies focused on the differential access of civil actors to rights, resources and opportunities. Much recent work from this standpoint is of manifest importance: Rainer Bauböck’s studies of transnational citizenship and Lydia Morris’ work on civil stratification offer crucial insights into the nature of citizenship in a world of mass migration. Yet insight is always necessarily doubled by blindness and the Gaian perspective obscures the importance of attending acts of citizenship, exercises of civic freedom, that have no necessary connection to possession of the civil status of citizen. Adopting a stance of methodological anti-Gaianism, sketched by Isin in the opening chapter of this volume, this collection offers a dual-track strategy of offering sustained theoretical reflections on aspects of contemporary political life whose purpose is to show the value of being able to adopt this re-orientation of our relationship to the study of citizenship.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given that this volume represents the early stages of research based on this re-orientation, that the theoretical reflections which comprise the opening section of the volume are somewhat sketchy and not necessarily very perspicuous in their attempts at framing or thinking through the issues raised by this re-orientation. However, it can be discerned that the central tenets of the methodological re-orientation proposed are twofold. The first is a focus on *acts* as prior to, and constitute of, individual or collective political agents, where such acts can be viewed both as singular performances that disrupt or transform the civil habitus and as particular instantiations of commitments to general ideals. We may think of such acts as civic exemplifications of natality, in Arendt’s sense of the introduction of the new and unpredictable, or of freedom in Foucault’s sense of the insertion

of difference into history. The second invokes a distinction between the registers of responsibility and answerability in relation to reflection on such acts which we might gloss in terms of the distinction between viewing acts of citizenship under the aspects of particularity (the act as an example of commitment to a general ideal) and of singularity (the act as a world-disclosing exemplar not for imitation but for following) respectively. To illustrate this orientation, we can return to the pink tanks with which I began, and see that from this perspective, Cerny's act is one of putting into question the propriety of a memorial that is identified with Soviet dominion over Czechoslovakia and a celebration of the civic freedom to poke fun at the kitsch monumentalism of totalitarian art. By contrast, the female artist group in Bermondsey were, at least in part, playfully questioning the masculine norms structuring the relationship of citizen and military. This dimension also informed in a different way the pink tank in Denmark in which the shared activity of knitting expressed solidarity of care against the violence of war. Each of these acts can be seen as a particular intervention in the name of a more general ideal but each can also be seen as a singular act – with the latter two as modes of following but not imitating Cerny's act.

Exemplary migrants

Within the collection itself, the salience and value of this reorientation is particularly well drawn out in the chapters by Peter Nyers “No One is Illegal Between City and Nation” and by William Walters “Acts of Demonstration: Mapping the Territory of (Non)Citizenship” which both concern aspects of the politics of migration. Nyers focuses on the self-organized political struggles of non-status (or irregular) migrants in Canada who, in claiming rights, assert their inclusion within the civic domain of those to whom the right to have rights is due. What the approach of this volume allows Nyers to elicit with empirical subtlety and theoretical depth is the many ways in which “non-status migrants are enacting themselves as citizens even when the law does not recognize them as such” (p. 179).

Walters' attention is similarly directed to the position of irregular migrants – now exemplified by the events around Sangatte between 1999-2002. In a brilliantly thoughtful essay, Walters uses Sangatte to interrogate the relation of the acts of citizenship orientation to the contrasting theoretical positions expressed by Agamben on *homo sacer* and “the camp” and by Hardt and Negri on autonomous migration. Walters argues powerfully both that Agamben's generalization of the figure of the camp is analytically uninformative and should be replaced by a focus on a diverse plurality of “object spaces” (e.g., frontiers, export zones,

ghettos, etc.) that embody different organising principles to “the camp” and that Agamben’s position inadequately registers the agency of, for example, irregular migrants in Sangatte (these problems in Agamben’s position are, I think, related to its formalism). Walters, then, acknowledges the force of the claims concerning the autonomy of migration while, sensibly, divorcing these claims from the overblown theoreticism of Hardt and Negri. Drawing together these critical discussions, Walters shows how the “acts of citizenship” focus taken by Nyers on irregular migrants can incorporate the significant insights of Agamben and of Hardt and Negri without sacrificing the value of such insights through theoretical inflation before raising an important query about this orientation to acts of citizenship, namely that political acts need not always be acts of citizenship. Walters’ point is that when we consider citizenship as a status, we should bear in mind the argument advanced by Barry Hindess, that citizenship is not always sought and that judgments concerning its value are circumstantial.

It might be objected here that the purpose of reflecting on acts of citizenship is to separate out the idea of citizenship from this status, to focus on citizenship as the exercise of civic freedom and precisely not the possession of a status. So one might ask: what grounds the description of these acts that are not acts of citizenship as *political* acts? This query qualifies but does not undermine Walter’s main point since we may now take it to register the claim that not all acts within the political field need be political acts, that is, acts that arise from a political, as opposed to moral, religious or other, identity. It is worth registering a final point about Walter’s essay that contrasts with many of the other contributions to this collection, namely that he recognizes that acts of citizenship entail that we go on differently, but this does not require the creative dimension of acts of citizenship to be construed in terms of heroic transgression or radical disruption of civic norms. On the contrary, acts of citizenship can be minor everyday acts in and through which we re-articulate aspects of our civic relationship.

Acts and the political field

The issue of political acts and non-political acts that have effects within the political field is addressed by Bryan S. Turner in his essay “Acts of Piety: The Political and the Religious, or a Tale of Two Cities” in which he borrows Augustine’s image of the City of Man and the City of God in order to argue that we can contrast the worlds and communities constructed by acts of piety and acts of citizenship. Turner’s concern is that, in a context of globalisation and multiculturalism, acts of piety becomes increasingly necessary to sustaining a religious community, say, the global *Umma* – membership in the inspirational city –, at the

same time as they generate, through the exclusiveness of rituals of intimacy, tensions with the political community – membership in the secular city. There is much to welcome in this account but one has to wonder if adopting the terms of Augustine’s distinction fails to register adequately the differential articulation of the relationship between the religious and the political in Islam.

Other chapters in this volume offer reflections on the relation of acts of citizenship to civil society, new projects in political participation, urban citizenship, artistic and cinematic acts. The series of shorter contributions offer provocative reflections on an eclectic range of topics from the death of Socrates to the place of the Romani’s self-declaration as a nation to flash mobs; these contributions are rather uneven in terms of insight or value. However, what is to be welcomed is the beginning of a perspective on citizenship in which it is the exercise of civic freedom rather than possession of civil liberties that comes to the fore. In this regard, Isin, Nielsen and their collaborators have done us all a service.

Translated by Alexandre Brunet.

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