

Introduction

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In societies struggling to make sense of the post–Cold War geopolitical world, the U.S. War on Terror has provoked a battle of values and ideals as real as the earlier conflict with the Soviet Union. The brave, new post-9/11 world requires that young people should be educated in their duties as citizens; fierce battles have raged over school and university curricula. Citizenship has also been the subject of a steady stream of academic inquiry, most notably by sociologists and political scientists and also historians. They do not necessarily agree with one another on a formal definition of citizenship, but point to many different types of experiences—something underlined by the essays in this volume. However they disagree, scholars from different disciplines concur that “citizenship is not just a matter of formal legal status; it is a matter of belonging and being recognized as belonging . . . by other members of the community.” Members police formal boundaries established by legal statutes, but they also interpret those boundaries in their own, sometimes idiosyncratic, ways.¹

Citizenship has a long and complex history. The classical civilizations of Greece and Rome form the starting point for discussions of civic republican citizenship, a wide-ranging concept that broadly conceives of citizenship as the preserve of a minority of independent, property-owning males. The onus lay with the individual to participate, as a matter of duty, wisely and enthusiastically in governing by cultivating a sense of civic virtue and devotion to the common good. In the early modern period, citizenship gradually, and usually incrementally, moved from civic republicanism toward a liberal conception of the individual’s basic entitlement to justice from his or her government based on the idea of universal rights. This changing view of citizenship began with debates over individual entitlement to legal rights in the Atlantic world, which then shifted

to citizenship as political rights in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, underpinning the rise of liberal democracies in Western societies.²

The liberal notion of citizenship as rights has significant implications for individual and group identity. As Rogers M. Smith writes in the most comprehensive study of American citizenship: “Citizenship laws—laws designating the criteria for membership in a political community and the key prerogatives that constitute membership—are among the most fundamental of political creations. They distribute power, assign status and define political purposes.” But citizenship can become even more than that. Rights and duties accorded to each citizen become an integral part of that individual’s social makeup, potentially intertwining with and shaping identity. To quote Smith again: “Citizenship laws also literally constitute—they create with legal words—a collective civic identity. They proclaim the existence of a political ‘people’ and designate who those persons are as a people, in ways that often become integral to individuals’ senses of personal identity as well.” This suggests that, far from a given or a label assigned to individuals, citizenship is much better understood as an ongoing and ever-evolving process.³

Current scholarly understandings of citizenship, much like those of race, class, and gender, thus seek to interpret citizenship within specific historical contexts.⁴ This position is heavily influenced by the work of T. H. Marshall, the post-World War II British theorist. His historicized interpretation identified three integral strands to the development of citizenship in the modern era: civil, political, and social. Civil rights were drawn up and guaranteed by the legal process. Political rights allowed the citizen inclusion in the process of government by providing the opportunity to hold office as well as by voting. A third strand was broadly defined as social citizenship. In a departure from orthodox views locating citizenship primarily in the legal sphere, Marshall interpreted social citizenship as the state’s provision of welfare and education to all within its jurisdiction, guaranteeing inclusion regardless of individual circumstances. For him, the history of citizenship reflected a fundamental tension between the principles of equality and inclusion and the practice of inequality and exclusion.⁵

Modern scholars remain indebted to Marshall’s insights. They have demonstrated how the process of citizenship—that is, deciding who is entitled to what—became tied to the growth of bureaucracy and to the rapid expansion of local and national government. From the great revolutions

of the eighteenth century to the present, political struggles over the inclusion and exclusion of certain groups to the body politic—excluded on the grounds of race, class, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality—have intimately shaped and helped to define modern Western societies. They were certainly critical to the historical development of the United States precisely because the Constitution failed to provide a definition of citizenship. Indeed, the late George M. Fredrickson suggested that citizenship in the American context is fundamentally distinguished by “the coexistence of a universalistic affirmation of human rights and a seemingly contradictory set of exclusions based on race or color.”⁶ In the century or so after the adoption of the Constitution, citizenship lay at the core of the shifting meanings of the Republic, and its importance extended way beyond the basic legal clarification of resident status.

It was precisely because the founding fathers failed to establish a definition of national citizenship, leaving details to individual states, that there was considerable ambiguity over what it meant to be a citizen in the new republic. Persisting tensions between state and federal government ensured that defining and interpreting citizenship in the American context was a dynamic and contested process. Most states asserted their own version of state citizenship and assumed that primary loyalty lay with them. In a patchwork pattern, citizens were only those who could vote and hold political office. Citizenship also guaranteed rights and status under the law, the ability to sue and be sued, and to own and sell property independently. The states varied considerably in how they defined these rights of citizenship, but they mostly agreed to a notion of limited rights. Citizenship probably meant more in the nineteenth-century United States than in any other era because, as Judith Shklar emphasizes, the founders shaped a “republic that was overly committed to political equality, and whose citizens believed that theirs was a free and fair society.”⁷ Elites continued to wield immense power, but the expectations of ordinary men and women grew in a nation that consciously sought to fashion a political culture distinct from that of European countries. Two revolutions during the first half of the nineteenth century—in communications and in the market—expanded opportunities and possibilities in a way unimaginable to the revolutionary generation. The growing importance of citizenship in the nineteenth century for some, and the exclusion of others, constitutes another integral element of the history of the Republic, even though it is rarely recognized as such in mainstream accounts.⁸