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Propositions on Citizenship*

Etienne Balibar

Much has recently been said about “new citizenship,” although often in an unclear way. The turn of phrase may be only a gimmick, as was, recently, the “new philosophy” or that kind of *auberge espagnole* where you have to bring your own food, also known as “*la nouvelle cuisine*.” Most of all, it risks soon passing out of fashion with the ups and downs of French socialism. Yet whatever the future redistribution of political power may be, several of the problems raised by discussions of the “new citizenship” will still have to be faced. These include racism and the status of immigration (or rather of “the communities that have issued from immigration”) in France. Nevertheless, the form in which these problems will be faced and the chances of finding a solution to them may be singularly transformed depending on whether dominant parties confront or fail to confront certain fundamental alternatives.

“Citizenship” (in Greek *politeia*) is a concept as old as politics itself and which has always marked two distinctions: it is bound to the existence of a state and therefore to a principle of public sovereignty, and it is bound to the acknowledged exercise of an individual “capacity” to participate in political decisions. This is why the dimension of *equality*—with all the problems of definition which it poses and the mystifications which it may conceal—is always present in the constitution of a concept of citizenship, even when the latter is paradoxically combined with a hierarchical principle and with caste distinctions (as seen in the difference between “active citizens” and “passive citizens” in the nineteenth century). Beyond the conflict between citizenship and allegiance to an actual or transcendently legitimate state, history still shows that this concept has no definition that is fixed for all time. It has always been at stake in struggles and the object of transformations. Not only because, as Aristotle has already shown, each political regime builds the distribution of powers into a specific definition of citizenship but also because, in juridically (or quasi-juridically) delimiting a certain type of “human being” and a certain model of rights and duties, this definition crystalizes the constitutive social relations of a society at the level of the individual.

* Translated from the French by Simon James Critchley, research student at the University of Essex, England.

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So it is not surprising—and this has been particularly obvious in France for two centuries—if the conflicts between social groups and the new statuses which are accorded them sooner or later get built into the redefinition of citizenship; although there is nothing automatic, linear, or, as we shall see, irreversible about this process. Citizenship, understood in its strict sense as the full exercise of political rights and in its broad sense as cultural initiative or effective presence in the public space (the capacity to be “listened to” there), has therefore been codified only in order to mark a temporary equilibrium, a relation of forces and interests. Here, of course, there exists a double tendency to elevate a given definition (e.g., the equation of citizenship and nationality) or conversely to consider citizenship a mere “legal fiction” which expresses nothing but the mask of domination. In both cases one loses sight of the differential change and the essential mobility of the “citizen” (or of his relation to the state).

Let us see this more concretely by recalling some large-scale examples. First, that of the status of women. The French Revolution greeted them as “citizens” (*citoyennes*), but they had to wait until 1945 (in France) before their complete political rights were recognized. Previously, the very idea of women voting seemed ridiculous to some and monstrous to others. It has since appeared that this recognition was very far from corresponding immediately to real equality. However, this recognition marks a period of transition and instability marked by a certain dialectic. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, not only were women negatively excluded from the “public” space but also the social roles that were assigned to them, along with the ideologies, the educational practices, and the corresponding symbolic complexes, were an effective condition of the political capacity of men, taken collectively. This is why women’s access to citizenship cannot simply present itself as an enlargement in the field of application of a given concept or as the granting of a “right” which is in itself immutable. The “private” relations which have been developed in the framework of the noncitizenship of women must also be at once modified, deconstructed, and, in a certain way, transported into the public space and incorporated into the political domain (e.g., with birth control and child rearing, but also the collusion between the division of labor and the sexual distribution of power). Even in countries such as our own (not to speak of Algeria, Japan, and Iran), the citizenship of women is thus more of a challenge, a source and an object of change, than it is a fait accompli.

It is the same, in a different sense, with the question of the relation between citizenship and labor rights, which was recently (and fugitively) brought to the fore by the slogan “citizenship in enterprise.” No doubt the categories of “private” and “public” do not operate in exactly the same way here and yet they are equally crucial. For a long time, under the aegis of *property* and its absolute and unconditional character (one of the “gains” of 1789), the business world had been considered purely private; a veritable “Eden from the rights of man and the citizen,” as

Marx noted ironically. This situation went hand in hand, let us not forget, with the fact that only the proprietor, the actual or potential boss (and, by association, his entourage of “executives” and “professionals”) enjoyed effective political rights and the title of “active citizen.” However, this situation was based on a structural equivocation within capitalism which was, strictly speaking, practically untenable. The fact of the matter is that the “free” worker, the partner in a contractual relation with the proprietor, was all the while treated like a “thing,” an honorary “commodity,” whether individually in the work process or en masse in the management of his habitat, his reproduction, his migrations, or his “flexible working conditions,” as we would say today. From this an acute double contradiction is manifest throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the contradiction between the nonegalitarian constitutional system and the “principles of ’89”; the contradiction between the formal autonomy and the actual subjection of the worker-proletarian. We realize that it is the conjunction of these two aspects which gave rise to class struggles, nourished the history of the labor movement, and spread out into reforms or revolutions. A specific result of this has been the constitution of a sociopolitical legal sphere, which is less and less compatible with the classical dichotomy between “private” and “public.”

Two things are quite striking here. First, in this matter, the enlargement and transformation of individual rights necessarily passed through a collective action into the constitution of collective power relations and also necessarily through the emergence of more or less “representative” organizations (parties, unions, cooperatives) and more or less administrative institutions (social security, public arbitration, collective conventions). In this way, the growth of individual power and all the progress of equality are “paid” for by development of the state itself, with very ambivalent results. As a result, the very concept of “citizenship” here remains in the balance. De facto, when the objectives of full employment or social insurance are institutionalized and incorporated into the definition of the “common good,” which the state guarantees or undertakes to guarantee, it is citizenship which changes and, crucially, it is the collective representation of class or group interests which becomes a constitutive element of “politics”—although in a sense which is fundamentally antithetical to “corporatism.” However, “liberal” systems offer formidable resistance (even in countries with long experience of social democracy) to giving legal (and constitutional) expression to this questioning of bourgeois individualism (or rather this questioning of the bourgeois equation of individualism and property). So much so that it is necessary to construct an entire metalegal edifice in order to link social rights to a fictitious “property” of the worker and “economic policy” to national interests, which are construed as transcending individuals. We are therefore led toward a situation of unstable displacement. In practice, citizenship tentatively embodies the rights (and therefore the values) of man-at-work, which have concrete existence only if the relation of individual to collectivity

is redefined. But in theory citizenship is still nothing but equality between individuals independent of their social condition—which clearly allows theory to be used to contain or thwart the tendencies of practice.

However, what has been said is not entirely accurate, and, moreover, in tying the notion of a collective interest or a common good to a national entity, I have already included an element of correction. But how ambiguously! In fact, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, citizenship did not remain defined in terms of a pure individuality, the correlate to the *Rechtsstaat*. It was construed in terms of nationality, to the point where, in the present-day world (including, one recognizes, the socialist countries, after an ephemeral phase of at least theoretical reference to a “proletarian” cosmopolitanism), the exercise of citizenship appears inseparable from belonging to a nation, whether through inheritance or naturalization (by descent or by “choice”). Hannah Arendt has clearly shown that in the present-day world the stateless person is not a citizen and consequently, in situations of crisis, not even a human being.¹ Current affairs show her, tragically, to be correct.

If there is not a symmetry between the class problem and that of nationhood (in the sense that one is not rigorously incompatible with the other), then at least nationalism is entirely constituted in its modern form in the context of the class struggle and the “social question” which it has tended to control and, if possible, to supplant. The denial of class identity and the affirmation of national identity go hand in hand, at least as principles of political legitimation. The more that the individuality of the citizen has been replaced by an abstraction in economic relations, the more narrowly it has simply been confused with what is “concrete” and “vital” in national identity, with the help of adequate fictions peddled by literature, civic education, and state symbolism. In this way in the principal European countries (France, Germany, England), the recognition of “universal suffrage” is closely coupled with imperialism, whether colonial or Continental. The “dangerous classes” have been allowed access to citizenship—let alone begun to have their workers’ rights acknowledged as one of its necessary components—only on condition that they transform themselves into constituent parts of the “body” of the nation, and therefore into (real or imaginary) masters (*maîtres*) or, more exactly, foremen (*contremaîtres*) of imperialist domination.

Because of this, citizenship has been affected in its very core by a conceptual tension which I have elsewhere attempted to analyze as that between subjects and citizens.² Every nationality has had to define itself as the sacred heritage of the ancestors, a power of assimilation and “civilization”—and therefore of domination; a “property” in the double

1. See Hannah Arendt, “Imperialism,” in *The Burden of Our Time* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1951), pp. 121–298.

2. See E. Balibar, “Sujets ou citoyens? Pour l’égalité,” *Les temps modernes*, special edition on North African immigration in France (March/April/May 1984), pp. 1725 ff.

sense of an intimate characteristic of persons (*we are* French) and of the legitimate disposition of things, that guarantees their permanence (*we possess* the soil, the national culture). But at the same time every nationality has had to include in its own space (Commonwealth, *Lebensraum*, French Empire, or American way of life) a mass of individuals from minorities who are at once protected and feared, simultaneously deemed unassimilable and obliged to be educated on the national model. Today in France, after the vicissitudes of a more or less complete decolonization and whatever the contradictions of the civil status may be, the mass of immigrants and of “communities” or “generations” which have issued from immigration perpetuate this central duality (which is not at all as marginal or residual as many, and even well meant, discourses of immigration would like to believe or to make us believe). The mass of immigrants perpetuate this duality much more than the distinction between the French “of good stock” and “immigrants” (which includes many who are no longer immigrants); or again the distinction between legitimate national-citizens and precarious resident subjects (in short, the modern-day “metics”).³ These distinctions largely support those between manual and intellectual labor, urban “centers” and the “problem,” “peripheral,” or “ghetto” areas, the relatively protected working or employed class and those who are destabilized, if not eliminated, by crisis, and so forth.

By schematically laying out and gathering together all these elements, we see that the legal and paralegal concept of citizenship is inseparable not only from a relatively confined constitutional space (territory, sovereignty) but also from its internal frontiers whose changing position is constantly overdetermined. The limits of the “public” and the “private” as they are fixed by the distribution of masculine and feminine roles, the sensitive area of “social rights” which is at stake in the class struggle, and the use of the distinction between “national” and “foreigner” as a criterion for political citizenship have, theoretically speaking, nothing in common, and it is, in the abstract, possible to conceive that they evolve in complete independence. But in actuality they belong to the same combination of circumstances, or rather they become the stakes of collective becoming in the same combination of circumstances. In reality they cannot be separated and must even be combined.

Therefore, it is impossible to determine a priori whether the economic pressure which would once again wish to “fluidify” the labor force will lead to a new wave in the feminization of “masculine” jobs, where women, of whatever status, would become salaried; or whether, on the contrary, it will be exploited by the tendencies to “return to the home” and to “preserve the family” (for which certain political and religious groups are pushing today). It is impossible to believe that economic pressure will have no effect in this area. Conversely, whatever may be said about the “ebbing of feminism,” the level and penetration which it has achieved

3. Translator’s note.—“Metic” (*métèques*) is a pejorative term for a foreigner or alien.

will not permit a purely cyclical evolution of the crisis in the system of qualifications and employment, that is, a return to the past order.

Still more clear, at least in France, is the connection between the problem of the citizenship of the worker and that of multinational (or transnational) citizenship. What is there in common, we may ask, between the return to the "free" labor market, the dismantling of trade union "pressure groups" (a fashionable pundit has just baptized these groups, with a straight face, the "syndicracy"), even the privatization of social security, and the citizenship of immigrants?⁴ Although formally they have nothing in common, in practice there is much to connect them. For what is at stake is, on the one hand, the clearly understood use of the crisis in the profitability of capital in order to reduce citizenship from that "social" conception of the political domain, which is, by now, partially encoded in law or at least in administrative regulations. On the other hand, there is the pressure not to allow politics to expand officially beyond its "national" definition. A pressure whose force one can gauge from one or another official rhapsody to "French supremacy" and which finds plain expression—although perhaps we should avoid combining these mottos—in the demand for "national preference," that is in the idea that individual rights in France (including cultural, professional, and social rights) must be proportional to the purity, ancestry, and sincerity of "French character." Let us not forget that a political party on the right now has an official program for the (retrospective?) limitation of the possibilities of access to French nationality as well as the exclusion of nonnationals from the benefits of social security and from the right to vote in professional elections, and so forth. Once more there is a strict factual complementarity, beneath the apparent antithesis, between the themes of liberalism and those of nationalism.

So we must ask ourselves—without prejudging the answer—to what extent a defense of social and workers' rights is today connected with progress toward a multinational and multicultural definition of the state, and so toward a regulated extension of the notion of citizenship which breaks with the sacrosanct equation of citizenship and nationality. We must also ask to what extent the latter can, in its turn, remove obstructions and put us back on the road to workers' self-management and allow the participation of workers in economic and social management—citizenship in enterprise.

Seen from this perspective, the movements of the last three years, grouped under the heading of antiracism or of minorities' cultural autonomy and rights to expression, or of the immigrant vote, contain a certain ambiguity. They betray the dynamism of the young generation who, even when reduced to unemployment or designated a "risk population," give shape to a new language and street culture, finding an

4. Translator's note.—"Syndicracy" (*syndicratie*) literally means "trade union power" and alludes to the belief that trade unions run the state.

echo in a section of French society. They constitute a pole of resistance and attraction in the face of the rise of nationalistic, "Western," passé ideologies. Yet let us not forget that their emergence, within pretty narrow limits, coincided with the real oppression and isolation of immigrant worker movements (the auto industry, etc.), which, in 1981–82, courageously attempted to insert a proper workers' initiative into the experience of socialism. In other words, antiracism, however intrinsically necessary it may be (which goes without saying), can be labeled a humanistic opposition to the state's decision to practice a selective "modernization" of the productive apparatus and the labor force, and as a very slight compensation for the inability of the labor movement to overcome its national corporatism and to oppose the crisis by better means than through defensive reactions.

Still a further remark must be made here: it is that the financial and even legal internationalization of economies and centers of political decision making is not only a question of structures but also a question of human beings; it is almost a new mode of life and thought. As a matter of fact, the "ruling class" of modern society, with its internal hierarchies, is multilingual, multicultural, and migratory. It studies at Harvard, works in the airplane or with transnational data banks, and spends its vacations between Morocco and the Seychelles. The national passport has changed its meaning (at least for the dominant nationalities); it no longer expresses (except no doubt in the United States) allegiance to an autonomous power but, rather, a conditional right of access to the "cosmopolis" of communications and modern financial transactions. This is why there is such strong resistance to the enlargement of citizenship and to the very exploration of its modalities. For the perpetuation of the traditional cleavages between the dominated represents a keystone in the system of new inequalities. That is why the struggle for citizenship as a struggle for equality must begin again on new ground and with new objectives. It will come about not only through the internationalization of basic culture (in practice, through the education system) but also through the flexibility of the national and "racial" barriers which were set up within the spheres of communication and within the groups (of workers, of residents), who are more or less "metics," whom history has implanted in the soil of old Europe.

There is always a risk in presenting extreme evolutions as unavoidable alternatives. Therefore, while even taking account of the progress of the *Front National* and the increase in racist crimes, let us not hasten to claim that French society has a choice only between giving voting rights to immigrants or the violence and revolt in the ghettos on the English or American model. And yet, the risk is too great to sustain the belief that, in time, the question of the transformations of citizenship could be avoided and that the tensions that it conceals could be "managed" by a mixture of repression and "associated" gimmicks. At the very least, we would be heading toward a truly blocked-up society, split between the corporatism

of its diverse economic, cultural, and ethnic minorities and the abstraction of its political language. This is not very modern in the eyes of the surrounding world. It is true that in order to open up other perspectives, we must give a concrete meaning to certain ethical values (and, in the first place, we must at long last accept the consequences of colonization and decolonization, of industrialization and deindustrialization); we must reconstitute a mass political will (which is not a matter of practicing voluntarism) in place of following the trend of the "end of ideology." A vast program indeed.