



CIFAR Exchanges in International Development

THEORIZING THE POWER OF CITIZENSHIP AS CLAIMS-MAKING

Focus of Study

This study proposes a new understanding of citizenship and its power in Western countries. Through rigorous literature review, case-study analysis, and ethnographic research, the paper proposes citizenship as a mediator between rights claimants and their societies, and further proposes that citizenship likely carries a premium for immigrants seeking inclusion. This approach to the study of citizenship provides a new set of tools for analyzing how immigration policy and activism, particularly within the United States, may unfold in the near future.

Background

The study of citizenship matters for contemporary societies as citizenship is tied to notions of deservingness in Western countries. In theory, we allocate rights to groups of people based on whether we feel that group deserves them – the success of civil rights and social justice movements depends on this dynamic. Since citizens theoretically are seen as more deserving than non-citizens, we'd expect them to have prioritized access to certain rights such as housing or health care, two important determinants in human wellbeing. There is disagreement, however, from both sides on this very theory of citizenship. For some scholars, citizenship is a "hollow promise" since it offers little to citizens who don't meet conventional ideas of how a citizen looks or behaves. To some other scholars, citizenship is made irrelevant by human rights since the rights extend entitlements to all human beings. Both sides argue that citizenship ultimately doesn't matter.

If the citizenship critics are correct, this distinction leaves an interesting phenomenon to be explained. Compared to permanent residency, attainment of citizenship correlates with higher levels of civic engagement, socio-economic inclusion, national identification and social integration. Bloemraad was unconvinced that this increase was due to the basic legal

rights granted by formal citizenship such as the right to vote. This study went further to identify sociological processes beneath the surface that better the effects formal citizenship carry on immigrants.

Findings

Bloemraad theorized that when immigrants make citizenship claims, a two-part process unfolds. First, the public of existing citizens and those with institutional power debate over what it means to be a citizen in their country. Second, the public decides whether a specific group of claimants meet the agreed-upon definition. If the group successfully passes this obstacle, their rights-based claims become legitimized for two important reasons. First, rights-based claims appeal to the western “normative ideal” of equality, and policymakers typically cannot ignore claims of inequality, such as second-class citizenship. Second, by making rights claims on the basis of citizenship, immigrants can tap into the power of “bounded solidarity”. This means that when citizens defend the rights of someone who is part of their own group, they’re also defending the same rights they share with that person.

There are limits to the power of claims-making, however, and Bloemraad calls the constrained ability of immigrants to make rights-based claims “structured mobilization.” The scope of rights-based claims immigrants successfully make is limited by the legal institutions and government controls that separate citizen from non-citizen. For example, while activists may be able to protest and advocate for the rights of immigrants, the government has the power to withdraw funding from their cause, jail activists or even deport them. Bloemraad further indicates that there is no guarantee that the message of activists will result in “claim resonance” with the public. Notions of citizenship in a country may be biased towards certain ethnic characteristics, religious values, and behaviours that may be quite different from those exhibited by certain groups of immigrants, and this may weaken the power of rights-based claims. Bloemraad argues that this is why boundary approaches to citizenship studies may be more effective.

Methodology

Bloemraad developed the concept of “citizenship as claims-making” through a **mixed-methods methodology** that included review of prominent literature on theories of citizenship, ethnographic studies, interviews, and case studies of the features and workings of citizenship. From this, Bloemraad derived a theory of citizenship that captures both its “doing” and “being” aspects and their effect on perceived legitimacy of rights-based claims.

Implications

Bloemraad’s finding that formal citizenship matters has important implications for how citizenship may be further understood by sociologists and other experts. First, there is likely much to be learned about citizenship through the use of mixed-method studies.

Quantitative surveys are likely to shed light on how native-born-citizens define and value citizenship in a given country; qualitative research, by contrast, can test how rights-based claims resonate with native-born citizens. Second, a new approach is needed for researchers use to explain sociological distinctions such as citizenship. This will capture a wide criteria of citizenship, such as in the American context where citizenship has been defined over time through legal, cultural and behavioural terms. Examining citizenship as a claims-making dynamic will give researchers and policymakers an understanding of citizenship that extends beyond status-based and performative theories.

Reference

Theorising the power of citizenship as claims-making. I. Bloemraad, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 4-26 (2018).