

After Modernity: Citizenship Beyond the Nation State?

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Increasing numbers of people live and work abroad as non-nationals, while states filter and categorise residents and their rights in ever more complex ways. What does citizenship mean for the millions of people in Europe who are migrants of some form or another? If democracy stays cast in its national mould, the path ahead in the 21st century may be one of exclusion and disenfranchisement. Unless, that is, citizenship can be reimagined.

It is 2074 in post-apocalyptic Europe, and organised human life as we know it has ceased to exist. What remains of the European population is scattered across the continent, living in various communities or tribes. This is the setting of *Tribes of Europa*, a 2021 Netflix series which relies on a rather common trope in science fiction: humanity regressing to its pre-modern form after a catastrophe. The future is imagined as a return to the past. To the literary theorist [Fredric Jameson](#), the paradox of sci-fi is that it reveals that the future is ultimately unimaginable. Its function is therefore “not to give us ‘images’ of the future [...] but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present”.

Tribes of Europa, preoccupied as it is with questions of identity and belonging, of group loyalty and divided allegiances, is speaking about the present. It is about the search for a (lost) community – something which, as sociologist [Zygmunt Bauman](#) observed, we all sense as lacking in the era of “great disengagement”. Interestingly, this future knows no nations and, more importantly, no nation-states. There are also no other modernist institutions, no modern states, no citizens, no universal rights, and so forth. It is a world after (or prior to) modernity, in which various historical, social, and political forms exist simultaneously, and where there is no trace of modern secular human universalism. In short, the series uncovers our inability to think about the universality of rights beyond the nation-state.

Nationality = citizenship

Scholars [Andreas Wimmer](#) and [Nina Glick Schiller](#) argue that nation-states have come to be understood as the natural social and political forms of the modern world: modernity, as they put it, “was cast in the iron cage of nationalized states”. What they term “methodological nationalism” reveals this naturalisation of the nation-state as a blind spot of modernity. Understanding national states and societies as naturally given objects of study, and the nation-state model as the only thinkable way of organising politics, produced an analytical separation between “nation” and “state”, and subsequently “nation” and “democracy”. The national framing of modern state-building and democratisation therefore became invisible. Consequently, “nation” was understood as a question of identity and belonging, and “state” as a sovereign system of government in a particular territory. For this reason, “nationalism appears as a force foreign to the history of Western state building.

Instead, it is projected to others [...] Western state building was reimagined as a non-national, civil, republican and liberal experience”.

The modern nation is an “imagined community”, conceived in language rather than in blood, which, although projected into history, was a conscious and deliberate political project. There were never obvious national communities to which the nation-state naturally corresponded. Each had to be built, often violently, via a painstaking process. However, with the nation being understood as the container of the modern state and democracy, its permanent role in shaping the policies of inclusion and exclusion was put aside. Today, this conveniently forgotten national framing has returned with a vengeance, perhaps as farce, but nevertheless a deadly one.

Following the prescribed Western model, the task of building a viable national culture became a natural corollary of modernisation. As such, it was copied throughout the world during decolonisation and, later, in the transition processes of post-socialist countries. In his book *Nations and Citizens in Yugoslavia*, Igor Štiks proposes the (ethno-)national framing of citizenship and democracy in its subunits as a key moment in the disintegration of the multinational federation. In line with the Western path to modernity, i.e. the transition to liberal democracy and the market economy, the nation was perceived as the only viable framework for democratisation, and citizenship laws were deployed as one of the important means for its establishment. Štiks finds that in almost all post-Yugoslav states, new legislation offered a privileged status to members of the majority nation regardless of their place of residence, and substantially complicated the process of naturalisation for those outside of it.

De-democratisation of democracy

The citizenship regimes of Western nation-states serve a similar function. The central paradox of today’s liberal democracies, according to philosopher Étienne Balibar, is that they need to simultaneously “understate and affirm” the equation between nationality and citizenship. Squeezed between the ubiquitous transnational movement of capital and people on one hand, and the national roots of their legitimacy on the other, liberal democracies employ complex administrative and coercive apparatuses to differentiate between citizens and non-citizens, desirables and undesirables, those who belong and those who are excluded, those that can be “integrated” and those that will remain aliens. Unsurprisingly, the national aspects of citizenship feature heavily in these processes. To become naturalised, and therefore granted political rights, one needs to prove commitment not only to the state, but to the nation, for example by learning the national language and often by renouncing one’s previous citizenship.

Nation-building, although obscured by bureaucratic and civic language, remains one of the central criteria shaping the naturalisation process. After all, in the majority of European states *jus sanguinis*, the transmission of citizenship status “through blood” from parents to children, is the central practice.

However, the intense globalisation of the last 30 years has called into question the stability of the supposedly autarchic nation-state which conflated citizens, sovereign peoples, and nationals, whereas the advent of neoliberal rationality has weakened the ties of solidarity between members of the national group. During the last decade, the share of non-citizens

has risen significantly across Europe, with cases such as Malta (5.3 per cent to 20.1 per cent), Austria (11.8 per cent to 16.6 per cent), Iceland (6.7 per cent to 13.6 per cent), Germany (9.4 per cent to 12.5 per cent), and Ireland (11.8 per cent to 13.0 per cent). In cosmopolitan cities the ratio is even more striking: every fifth resident of Berlin and Barcelona, and almost every third of Vienna, is a non-citizen.

Along with global economic integration and the emergence of powerful supranational financial institutions, it has been said that these tectonic changes would lead to the decline of the nation-state. However, our contemporary world is more than ever a world of nation-states. They have proved to be not only compatible with globalisation, but indispensable to it, especially in moments of crisis. The differentiation of social conditions among national economies and the preservation of the exploitable low-cost labour regimes they help maintain are exactly the forces that drive globalisation forward. It is therefore more accurate to speak about the reconfiguration of nation-states rather than their demise.

To Balibar, the concepts of citizenship and democracy are inextricably linked, yet at its heart, the institution of citizenship carries a contradiction with regard to democracy. As a universal category implying equal rights for all, the modern idea of citizenship contradicts its “really existing” national form. Citizenship as an “eternal idea” suggests a constant move towards the universalisation and conquest of rights. While democracy, inscribed as it is in the nation-state, functions to preserve a certain definition of citizenship and therefore becomes incapable of resisting its “de-democratization”.

This contingent character of citizenship has until recently remained largely invisible because modernity has equated citizenship with nationality, making them practically identical in “the founding equation of the modern republican state”. Demographic changes brought about by globalisation reveal that this equation is historically determined, essentially unstable, and susceptible to destruction and reformulation. They also show that national identity does not necessarily contribute to the unity of the community of citizens.

Classes of citizens

The development of modern citizenship was closely connected to the progressive expansion of rights, both in terms of their quality – from civic to political and social rights – and who were considered their legitimate holders. The neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state model through simultaneous deregulation, privatisation, and individualisation has reversed the developmental direction of citizenship, narrowing the range of social rights and recasting the citizen as the citizen-entrepreneur.

The penetration of neoliberal rationality into the political realm, in the words of political theorist Wendy Brown, “produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a new organization of the social”. What she terms the “de-democratization of democracy” implies the extension of market values into formerly non-economic domains, so that all human and institutional action becomes “rational entrepreneurial action”. In doing so, neoliberalism erases the distinction between moral and economic behaviour and designates morality as a matter of rational deliberation. The state itself transforms, not only responding to the needs of the market but behaving itself like a market actor, pointing to the health and growth of the economy as the basis for its legitimacy. Brown concludes that, taken together, these processes lead to the death of liberal democracy, as they diminish the separation between

economy and polity so that political principles of equality and freedom no longer figure as alternative social and moral referents to those of the market.

One of the consequences of this reconfiguration is the commodification of citizenship and transformation of the state into a company-like service provider. In many European countries (Malta, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Latvia, Bulgaria, UK, Montenegro), residency, and even citizenship itself, can be purchased either directly or via an investment through the so-called “golden visa” programmes. Portugal became the first EU country to introduce this service in 2012, offering several routes to residency (such as a capital transfer of at least 1 million euros or the purchase of property valued at 500,000 euros or more) and citizenship after five years of renewed residence (though physical residence is not required). The sector has already been dubbed the “investment immigration industry”, and manifold consultancies offer expert support in gaining golden visas.

The naturalisation process is the most densely regulated aspect of citizenship law. To accommodate the increased influx of foreigners in their territories, states have developed a myriad of statuses “below” that of citizen (temporary and permanent residents, refugees, asylum seekers, etc.), each with a different set of rights and obligations. In doing so, they effectively construct classes of citizens, a practice which can only be expected to grow. Much discussed “community cloud” concepts, such as “digital citizenship” and “nation-as-a-service”, which redefine the state as a platform of digital services, social and cultural values, and/or economic rules, are already being tried out. Estonia is one of the pioneers of this trend with its e-residency, which allows a person to operate economically within the national legal system but without standard benefits such as the right to actually reside in the country. Other states, like Croatia and Serbia, are introducing legislation to facilitate residency access to “digital nomads”: third-country citizens who work digitally or have a company registered elsewhere.

Democracy without citizens?

In the 2012 blockbuster *Total Recall*, set at the end of the 21st century, citizens of the Colony (formerly Australia) commute daily via a gravity elevator through the Earth’s core to the only other inhabitable place on the planet in Western Europe. This scenario closely resembles our contemporary predicament: numerous are those that, either physically or virtually, regularly traverse national borders to find employment.

This phenomenon was made especially visible at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. Despite closed borders, special air and rail corridors were organised to allow seasonal and care workers to travel from Romania to Germany and Austria. These new types of mobile migrant workers comprise a growing share of the European labour force, especially in the agriculture and care sectors. Legal seasonal workers, illegal immigrants, and Schengen-area citizens who work illegally make up as much as half of Italy’s agricultural workers, while Germany relies almost entirely on intra-EU migration to meet its demand for seasonal agricultural workers. In Austria, care workers from Romania and Slovakia hold up to 80 per cent of jobs in the sector.

With the transition to working from home accelerated by the pandemic, capital’s ability to employ workers from outside the national labour market will expand into other sectors. The globalisation of the labour market and its spread to white-collar office work will be felt most

sharply among the middle classes of rich countries. Economist Branko Milanović suggests that this will in turn make cheaper-to-live places more attractive, a phenomenon already observed in the case of digital nomads. Like the blue-collar workers before them, these workers may start doubting the benefits of globalisation, becoming similarly attracted to “they-took-our-jobs” narratives, further giving rise to right-wing sentiments and more restrictive migration policies.

When extrapolated, these tendencies – the ubiquity of non-citizens and mobile migrant workers, the neoliberal transformation of state and citizenship, and the growing usage of tiers of citizenship – all grafted onto the national democracy framework, paint a pretty dystopian picture. The attempt of “material” democracies to preserve the national definition of citizenship may imply that a significant portion of their population (those that seasonally, temporarily, or permanently inhabit them and/or work under their legal frameworks) will be non-citizens or even non-residents. At the same time, others may enjoy advantages purchased on the “citizenship market”. With a growing number of stateless people, or those with only limited citizenship rights, citizenship may no longer be understood as a universal category. In the context of a climate crisis which may well mean the dissolution of political structures in affected areas and mass migration, these prospects are especially worrying.

Tribes of Europa presents a fictional scenario about a possible future. What we are witnessing today might sound like fiction but is becoming reality at a galloping pace: the advent of a new sort of democracy, a “democracy without citizens” wherein full citizenship is a luxury not available to all (a development already anticipated in the idea of “illiberal democracy”). Would these still be called democracies, or rather systems institutionalising new forms of apartheid? Let us not forget, until they were delegitimised, old apartheid regimes were considered properly democratic.

Can we dream of a different future, even if, as Jameson says, we cannot really imagine it? We can certainly try. As the modernist idea of universal rights seems to no longer find its expression under the national framework, should we not think up alternatives? The supranational structure of the European Union is often seen to be one. However, this seems misguided: like the Federation in *Star Trek*, to cite another famous utopian future, it is essentially an extension of the national model, characterised by hard borders, exclusive (and excluding) identities, and a demand for loyalty to the nation (or the Federation). Still, that is not to say that the European Union cannot play a role, especially if it is made an ally in the struggles over the meaning of democracy and citizenship that lay ahead: it could help facilitate the processes of transformation, particularly if the EU itself transforms.

Other imaginaries appear more promising, such as the growing significance of cities that employ municipalist approaches to broaden democratic participation (including non-citizens) and re-establish public ownership and control over critical infrastructure and services. Kindred to these are attempts to organise economic activity around the ideas of commons and economic democracy. These stand for democratic stewardship of natural, cultural, and built resources and infrastructures that span borders and national interests, implying the creation of new forms of polity beyond that of nation and national citizen. In the context of ecological crisis, democratic ownership and resource governance seem especially pertinent to an attempt to challenge the capitalist paradigm of endless growth. In

the end, if we are witnessing the end of modernity, it is up to us to struggle for what comes after, which of its ideas and institutions we should keep, and which we should abandon.



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