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Citizenship among the historians

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ABSTRACT

Around the time of the establishment of *Citizenship Studies*, historians had a straightforward picture of what it was, and how it developed. Citizenship had been invented in Ancient Greece, where philosophers like Aristotle had outlined its main features, which remained basically unchanged until the twentieth century. Citizenship was a male prerogative, closely related to political participation and for a long time only available to Europeans. Only in post-colonial regimes could the rest of the world develop its own forms of citizenship. This picture is hard to square with the contents of *Citizenship Studies*, and historians have indeed moved on, as the discussion of three major books demonstrates. Such changes have, however, not come about as a result of the impact of the journal among historians, because that has been very limited so far. The paper speculates about other explanations of this parallel development.

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Citizenship is an important topic for historians. From experts of Ancient Greece to scholars of the French Revolution to those dealing with post-colonial Asia and Africa, they are very likely to encounter citizenship, or issues related to it. Because it is such a big topic, it will be impossible to paint an accurate picture of how historians' ideas have changed over the past 25 years. Instead, I have chosen to discuss a handful of important studies that demonstrate how the historical picture of citizenship has changed during this quarter century. I will also raise the question of why these changes may have come about. But first I want to benchmark those changes by painting the paradigm that used to dominate historical studies of citizenship.

A historical paradigm

In 1990, just a few years before the launch of *Citizenship Studies*, Derek Heater published a textbook on citizenship and its history (Heater 1990). Heater had been a lecturer and Head at the History Department of the Brighton College of Education and was himself trained as a historian. So, although he did not work at a research institution or university, he can nonetheless be called a qualified historian, whose book, moreover, displays a wide reading on the topic. What is the picture of the history of citizenship painted by Heater?

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The first feature that strikes the reader is that citizenship is treated primarily as an idea. Heater does discuss the practices of citizenship, but his attention mainly goes out to the way citizenship has been conceived and conceptualized in the writings of the great political philosophers, starting with Aristotle in Ancient Greece, later by Leonardo Bruni in Renaissance Italy, later still by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in revolutionary France, and then by the founding fathers of the American constitution. Related to this is a second aspect: the history of citizenship is first and foremost a European story. This is the inevitable result of focusing on ideas of citizenship, because only in the European political tradition, all the way back to the Greek city-states, do we find an explicit discourse on citizenship. The rest of the world enters the picture only when they emancipate from European colonialism and must establish their own citizenship regimes. This brings us to a third aspect: citizenship is closely tied to state-formation. Hence post-colonial independence in Asia and Africa forces the governments of the new states to introduce citizenship. Finally, and again related to citizenship as an idea, it is taken for granted that throughout most of these two-and-a-half millennia, citizenship was a male privilege. As the great philosophers showed only a marginal interest in gender issues, so did the historians who put their works centre-stage.

It is slightly unfair to hold up this single work for critical inspection, and I do so not because of its inadequacies or shortcomings. It is an immensely informative book because it digests a lot of material and manages to frame a very long history, usually left to period specialists and hence cut into separate parts, into a coherent story. It tells, however, a story that within thirty years significantly lost its resonance amongst scholars. To demonstrate this, I have selected three historical books that cover aspects of citizenship in three geographic regions (China, colonial America, Europe) and in three historical periods (modern, early modern and ancient).

Citizenship in China

The oldest title in my selection covers the latest historical period: nineteenth-century China. William T. Rowe's 1989 book *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895* is not even about citizenship in the strictest sense and discusses the topic only on three pages (Rowe 1989). It does, however, address issues that have moved centre-stage in debates about citizenship, but also about Chinese developments, in the English-language literature. Rowe's book is the second volume of an urban history; the first volume is dedicated to the 'commerce and society' of Hankow (also spelled as Hankou), a city with a population wavering between 0.6 and 1.5 million at the time.

Hankow did not have citizens in any formal sense; the Chinese language does not even have a word to describe this status. But as Rowe argues in his chapter on the reception of foreigners, 'Hankow people seemed clearly to understand who belonged and who did not' (Rowe 1989, 279). He calls those who belonged 'citizens', in a deliberate move to underline parallels between this Chinese city and their (much smaller) European equivalents from before the French Revolution, when local citizenship was a feature of all European towns and cities (Prak 2018). He goes on to specify that citizenship in Hankow meant subscribing to a range of community values, which boil down to a sense of

responsibility for the welfare of the urban society. In the rest of the book, Rowe describes in loving detail how various civic organizations, such as guilds and charities, translated these values into practice.

His argument that this amounted to the Chinese equivalent of European citizenship has not been met with general acclaim by China experts. In a debate in *Modern China* in 1993, several authors underlined the distinction between the public spheres in China and Europe, while Rowe pointed to the similarities.¹ In what is the most substantive contribution on the issue to date, R. Bin Wong in 1999 also concluded that, because of the way the Chinese state and its elites were organized, ordinary Chinese could not make legitimate claims on the state. They were therefore subjects, not citizens (Wong 1999).

The evaluations by Rowe and Wong hinge on two distinctions. Firstly, whereas Wong focuses on rules, Rowe is primarily looking at practices. Secondly, Rowe examines local society, Wong China as a country. Factoring in these two elements, they are both correct, depending on how one wants to define what a citizen is. This is not a simple matter of definition, however, because it all leads back to a much broader comparison between Europe and China and how these two ends of the Eurasian landmass developed over the course of the centuries. That comparison has been framed most compellingly around one hundred years ago by Max Weber, who argued that citizenship, rooted in urban autonomy dating back to the Middle Ages, was one of the distinctive features of European societies, and helps explain why Europe leaped forward during the past five hundred years, while China stagnated.

The issue is far from settled, but historians have at least questioned the straightforward distinction that was once made between European citizens and Asian subjects (see also De Weerd 2019). By implication, they have opened the possibility that citizenship did not spring from a single source, that it was necessarily rooted in ideas about citizenship, and that it was necessarily a feature of state structures. Rowe's book suggests that in China citizenship existed as a set of practices, and emerged in local contexts, without an explicit philosophical foundation.

Citizenship in European colonies

One of the riddles of European citizenship is how it mutated from a local into a national institution during the French Revolution. Because most histories either end with 1789, or start there, the problem is usually ignored (but see Prak 1999). However, once we start thinking about colonial contexts, this is impossible, because Europeans overseas identified as members of a national, not a local community. This issue is at the heart of Tamar Herzog's 2003 book, *Defining Nations*, about citizenship and nationhood in Spain and the Spanish-American colonies (Herzog 2003). In both areas, citizenship and nationhood, Spain had a peculiar history due to its origin as a region of conquest. Its multiple crusader kingdoms were only merged with the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon in 1469, but even after that they were always referred to in the plural, as the Kingdoms of Spain. To consolidate the territories won from the Muslim states that had dominated the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages, local communities in Spain had received legal powers that in the rest of Europe were only present in some towns and cities. Citizenship in those local communities, known as *vecindad*, was also available to almost every head of household. Spain, in other words, had the most

inclusive citizenship regime in all of Europe, but it remained, as elsewhere, a local institution. Spain also had a national form of citizenship, but it applied mostly to foreigners seeking access to the privileges normally available to Spaniards, mostly in the realms of taxation and office-holding. In those cases, they could launch a *naturaliza* procedure in which the king would make them a Spanish citizen.

Now shift to the Americas. Formal local communities with citizenship rights were established from the very beginning in the regions conquered by the Spaniards (in contrast with the English colonies, where the development of local citizenship was more convoluted). But while it was very open in the early stages, by the start of the seventeenth century, natives, mestizos, Africans, as well as non-Spanish Europeans found it increasingly difficult to obtain citizenship status in places where they had to compete with those who identified as Spaniards. In these localities citizenship evolved from a legal institution into an institution of identification, and in the process, it also transformed from an instrument of inclusion into one of exclusion. However, with a very interesting twist, in the many places without a substantial group claiming Spanish origins, the excluded groups could still exercise citizenship rights under the original establishment of their town or village as a privileged community. In those places, the citizenship regime in Spanish America was still far more inclusive than what emerged in English, later British America.

Herzog's book demonstrates a few important things about the history of citizenship, usually overlooked in the standard narrative. Firstly, it shows how different citizenship regimes can exist as overlapping yet parallel practices within the same polity. Secondly, it describes the shifting balances between citizenship as a legal category and as a social identity marker. And thirdly, we can see how the colonial experience did much of the groundwork for the emergence of the national identities and practices that became the hallmark of European citizenship in the nineteenth century.

Gender, religion and citizenship in Ancient Athens

Aristotle's *Politics*, written in the fourth century BCE, is the text on which all subsequent discussions of citizenship ultimately rest at least in Europe. Aristotle stated that 'a citizen without further qualification is defined by nothing more than sharing actively in judicial office and political office' (Arist. Pol. 1275a22–24). Because it is obvious from the sources that judicial and political offices in Ancient Athens were only occupied by males, therefore citizens were exclusively male. This idea has dominated scholarship on ancient citizenship and spilled over into the general literature on citizenship, such as Heater's book discussed above. In *Citizenship in Classical Athens* from 2017, Josine Blok paints a very different picture of Athenian citizenship (Blok 2017). She demonstrates that, even if they did not participate in such offices, women were also citizens.

Blok shows that Athenian citizenship was acquired by descent from a couple made up of two citizens – hence, man and wife, both citizens. Citizenship entailed, as Aristotle wrote, the participation in public offices, only open to men, but also in the many public rituals by which Athenians worshipped their gods and tried to continue the gods' beneficence. Priests in charge of those rituals had to be citizens and they could be both male and female. In other words: legally as well as practically, women were citizens in Classical Athens, and they participated in the public sphere.

Reading the book makes one wonder why this was overlooked for so long and how Aristotle managed to obscure these facts. As Blok explains, Aristotle himself is hardly to blame; he was reflecting the patriarchal attitudes of his time – and of many centuries to come. He did not write comprehensively about citizenship because his interest was in politics. His description of who were entitled to hold office was misconstrued during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a definition of citizenship because that looked like a good match with the new, national citizenship model of the French Revolution. This interpretation gradually became deeply ingrained in the scholarship of the period, to the point that scholars were collectively overlooking other evidence that clearly pointed in another direction – the classic example of a paradigm shift. It's too early to say that this paradigm is now overturned among classical scholars, but for citizenship studies the book holds three important messages. The first is that women were citizens from the very beginning of the legal construction of citizen status. The second is that we can learn a lot about citizenship by looking beyond legal and philosophical texts and study its practices. And thirdly, religion is an important, and possibly under-studied, domain of citizenship practices, with particular relevance for female citizenship.

Historians and *Citizenship Studies*

What these studies demonstrate is that at least some historians have sought to come to terms with issues and approaches that are also central concerns in the content of *Citizenship Studies*. It would have been impressive if I could report that these changes have come about as a result of the impact of the journal and the interdisciplinary approach to the study of citizenship that it has advocated from its launch in 1997. Sadly, this is not true. In the three books discussed in this article, we find not a single reference to *Citizenship Studies*. We cannot fault William Rowe for this because his book predates the launch of the journal. Herzog published her book six years after that launch, and she did publish about her research in a special issue of *Citizenship Studies* in 2007 (Herzog 2007). Josine Blok might have turned to the journal for inspiration, and she cites Engin Isin, but no reference to articles from *Citizenship Studies*.

This impression is reinforced by an admittedly superficial scan of three prominent historical journals: they display close to zero references to *Citizenship Studies*.¹ The *American Historical Review* is a general journal, with a bias towards American authors and topics. It contains not a single reference to *Citizenship Studies*. The same applies to *Past & Present*, a British journal with a very international readership, and a non-exclusive interest in social and economic topics going back to its creation by a group of Marxist historians in the 1950s. The *International Review of Social History*, published by Cambridge University Press for the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, has the most cosmopolitan authorship of the three but is also the most specialized, with its interest in the history of labour and the labour movement. Historical sociologist Charles Tilly, who was much involved with the Institute, edited a special issue on citizenship for the journal in 1995. In 2019, the *International Review of Social History* scored two mentions of *Citizenship Studies*, one of which was by the

¹This methodology has been inspired by the 2021 MA thesis of Joël van Eerde, Utrecht University.

present author. It seems therefore fair to say that, although historians have published in *Citizenship Studies*, the journal is yet to win a broader audience among the historical community.

Despite this very limited reception of the contents of *Citizenship Studies* among historians, at least some of them have been moving in broadly the same direction as the journal. This might be explained in three different ways. First, the journal and our authors were not referencing each other but still using the same third party for inspiration. There is one obvious connection here: Charles Tilly. All three books list one or more works by Tilly, and the two authors who reference *Citizenship Studies* in the *International Review of Social History*, Bin Wong and the present author, had strong personal connections with Tilly. He has also been referenced with some regularity in the journal. His presence in *Citizenship Studies* is not such, however, that this can be the complete explanation. A second possibility is that the journal's impact among historians was achieved through an indirect channel, not immediately visible. Although this is perfectly conceivable, I see no obvious candidate. This leaves the third possibility: the mood of the era. This stop-gap explanation sounds dismally imprecise, and it probably is, but at the same time it is well-known that academics and their disciplines respond to what happens in the world around them. The postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism, critical responses to emerging nationalisms, a greater interest in other social and political actors than heterosexual white males, to mention just a few – these seem to have had an impact on everyone studying citizenship, in the present and in the past.

Conclusion

Largely along separate tracks historians have been moving in the same direction as the editors and contributors of *Citizenship Studies*. This is good news, because it means that there is an opportunity for a rewarding conversation between historians and the interdisciplinary scholars working in the field of citizenship studies. It is also bad news, because apparently that conversation is not yet taking place.

Note

1. Special issue 'The public sphere in China', with contributions by Frederic Wakeman Jr., William T. Rowe, Mary Backus Rankin, Richard Madsen, Heath B. Chamberlain, and Philip C.C. Huang, in *Modern China* 19 (1993): 107–240.

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Maarten Prak is emeritus professor of Economic and Social History at Utrecht University and the author of *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c. 1000-1789* (2018).

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