

## CITIZENSHIP IDENTITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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Citizenship identity depends not only on a legal status, but essentially on access to social and economic resources. Thus, citizenship identity, the sense of belonging and solidarity, is necessarily connected with the problem of unequal distribution of resources in society. Modern conception of universal citizenship, specially when it is combined with extreme inequality and poverty, tends to exclude some groups and individuals. Civic education, as an empowerment device, not only can counteract this effect of exclusion, but it also can contribute to citizenship construction toward a more comprehensive and effective citizenship concept.

### Citizenship

A “citizen” is a member of a political community, which is defined by a set of rights and obligations. “Citizenship therefore represents a relationship between the individual and the state, in which the two are bound together by reciprocal rights and obligations” (Heywood 1994:155).

Citizenship is a legal status and an identity. Thus, there is an objective dimension of citizenship: specific rights and obligations which a state invests in its members, and a subjective dimension: a sense of loyalty and belonging. However, objective citizenship does not in itself ensure the existence of subjective citizenship, because “members of groups that feel alienated from their state, perhaps because of social disadvantage or racial discrimination, cannot properly be thought of as ‘full citizens’, even though they may enjoy a range of formal entitlements” (Heywood 1994:156). But before I intend to explain this potential discrepancy, it is important to continue with a general conceptual revision of citizenship.

T. H. Marshall (1950) defined citizenship as ‘full membership of a community’. According to him, citizenship is constituted by three elements: civil, political and social (which are resumed in the following scheme).

<b>Citizenship Elements</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Institutions more closely associated</b>
<i>Civil rights</i>	Rights necessary for individual freedom – liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice.	Courts of justice
<i>Political rights</i>	Right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body.	Parliament and councils of local government.
<i>Social rights</i>	The right to a modicum of economic welfare and security.	Educational system and social services.

Bryan Turner explains that:

at the heart of Marshall's account of citizenship lies the contradiction between the formal political equality of the franchise and the persistence of extensive social and economic inequality, ultimately rooted in the character of the capitalist market place and the existence of private property. Marshall proposed the extension of citizenship as the principal political means for resolving, or at least containing, those contradictions. (Turner 1990:201)

However, it is well known that Marshall's scheme focussed on a specific period in British history (from the middle of the seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth century). This explains the main limitations of Marshall's approach, which has been criticised for being evolutionary, unitary and ethnocentric. Certainly, Marshall's theory of citizenship failed to emphasize "the notion of social struggles as the central motor of the drive for citizenship" (Turner 1990:203), and therefore it does not distinguish "between active and passive forms of citizenship, which arise from variations in the relationship between the subject and the state" (Turner 2000:21). The former expands citizenship rights through a process of political conflict; the latter is the effect of the political strategies of the dominant political elite.

Brian Turner (1993), among the first to revisit Marshall's theory, defines citizenship as a set of legal, economic, and cultural practices which define an individual as a competent member of society. Such practices shape the flow of resources to individuals and social groups. Turner's definition allows us to analyse how individuals and groups have differentiated opportunities of becoming competent members of society. From this point of view, citizenship identity, the sense of belonging and solidarity, is necessarily connected with the problem of unequal distribution of resources in society.

According to Zamudio (2004), there are three dimensions of citizenship: status, exercise and conscience. Citizenship *status* is the set of rights and obligations between individuals and the state. Only those individuals and groups which fulfil all the requirements that define citizenship in a country will have the formal recognition of the state. Citizenship *exercise* refers to the conditions necessary for the realization of citizenship rights and the incorporation of new rights (the transformation of needs into legitimate rights), redefining and expanding the previous notion of citizenship. Last, but not least, citizenship *conscience* makes reference to the conviction of being a citizen, with the recognition of the state expressed in concrete practices that assure citizenship exercise.

Citizenship conscience is, in turn, formed by three elements: i) the knowledge of citizenship rights and duties; ii) the identification of the state as responsible of granting those rights and duties by means of laws and policies that guarantee their fulfilment; and iii) the recognition of legitimate means to make demands. The state plays a fundamental role in the creation of citizenship conscience, because it arises from a reflexive process: if the state, its authorities and institutions, do not treat individuals as citizens, but as subjects, then those individuals will not be able to develop a citizenship conscience and,

consequently, will not be capable of identifying the legitimate procedures for making demands.

### **Democracy without citizens?**

For a regime to be classified as democratic, or as a polyarchy, the presence of seven institutions must exist: elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information and associational autonomy (Dahl 1989:221). It is important to stress that a polyarchy presupposes a civil society<sup>1</sup> capable of articulating a variety of groups of interest through intermediate bodies; ultimately, the existence of a polyarchy depends on competition among organised interest groups. These institutions and associations function as intermediate bodies which represent the interests of citizens in front of the state.

The idea that effective democracy depends on social development and economic well being has been present since Aristotle. In contemporary democratic theory, since Lipset (1960) highlighted the positive correlation between the level of wealth and democracy, a large number of studies have emphasised economic development.<sup>2</sup> This correlation, however, is far from being simple and linear. The relationship between economic development and democratisation is mediated by diverse important factors. It seems that one of the most influential is the pattern of income distribution.

There is an inevitable tension between democracy and social inequality. "However we define democracy in detail, it means nothing if it does not entail rule or participation in rule by the many. Yet in a class-divided society, the many have less income and wealth, less education, and less honor than the few. Above all, they have – individually – less power" (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992:41). Democracy has been accurately defined as 'the extent to which the political power of the elite is minimized and that of the non-elite is maximized' (Bollen 1980:372). Thus it is evident that "democracy is difficult in a situation of concentrated inequalities in which a large, impoverished majority confronts a small wealthy oligarchy" (Huntington 1991:66).

In societies characterised by extreme inequality it is very difficult to assure the presence of the indispensable institutions of a polyarchy. Even when free and fair elections could exist, the uneven distribution of resources would restrict the capacity of the subordinate population for seeking and processing information and organizing. It would also limit their capacity to articulate their interests within civil society and to exercise their rights and duties of citizenship. "The poor, totally preoccupied with the task of survival, neither become members of a civil society nor citizens, though formally they enjoy membership of both spheres" (Gill 2000:67).

As some scholars have warned:

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<sup>1</sup> *Civil society* can be defined as 'the totality of social institutions and associations, both formal and informal, that are not strictly production-related nor governmental or familial in character' (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992:49).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bollen (1979) and Helliwell (1994).

The material security and education as well as access to information necessary to exercise citizenship are not guaranteed to every-one by the mere existence of democratic institutions. Hence (...) some groups remain incapable of exercising their rights and obligations. We face a new monster: democracies without an effective citizenship for large sections of the political community (Przeworski 1995:35).

### **“Second class citizens”**

In this section I intend to explain why the coexistence of a liberal democratic regime<sup>3</sup> with extreme social inequality and poverty produces an exclusive political structure, in which only a minority can articulate its demands systematically and effectively through the legitimate channels (like elections, political parties and interest groups). It is a situation in which "groups like women, ethnic minorities, the poor and the unemployed, commonly regard themselves as 'second class citizens' because social disadvantage prevents their full participation in the life of the community." (Heywood 1994:159)

Political participation of people is indispensable for the effective functioning of liberal democratic institutions; not any type of participation, but *enlightened political engagement*, that is the capability of identifying and acting on political interests, and the recognition of democratic principles and the rights of all citizens to hold and express interests (Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Liberal democracies are based on a rational logic. Thus, in these regimes, political participation, to be effective participation, depends to a great extent on the capability of individuals for rational instrumental analysis and self-organization skills. Such capability is probable only under certain cultural, economic and social conditions.

As a legal status citizenship is universal within the state, which means that every-one that fulfil the requirements established by the constitution has a set of civil, political, and social rights and duties that determines their access to social and economics resources. However, universality of citizenship assumes that laws and rules say the same for all and apply to all in the same way, ignoring inequalities of wealth, status and power among citizens. Universal citizenship represses differences and inequalities amongst individuals and groups, but it does not suppress those differences and inequalities. Therefore, "the attempt to realize an ideal of universal citizenship (...) will tend to exclude or to put at a disadvantage some groups, even when they have formally equal citizenship status". That is because "in a society where some groups are privileged while others are oppressed, insisting that as citizens persons should leave behind their particular affiliations and experiences to adopt a general point of view serves only to reinforce that privilege; for the perspectives and interests of the

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<sup>3</sup> By *liberal democracy* I refer to "a system of representative government by majority rule in which some individuals rights are nonetheless protected from interference by the state and cannot be restricted even by an electoral majority" (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987:5-6). This general definition includes, of course, the seven institutions of Polyarchy (see p. 3)

privileged will tend to dominate this unified public marginalizing or silencing those of other groups" (Young 1989:391).

In societies that are characterised by extreme inequalities, the idea that laws and rules are blind to individual and group differences actually produces different levels of citizenship quality . As I said before, in liberal democracies effective participation requires that individuals and groups possess some minimum conditions related to politically relevant knowledge and skills. Those who possess such knowledge and skills will be 'competent members of society', and they will have access to social and economic resources by exercising civil, political and social rights. But those who lack the minimum of politically relevant knowledge and skills will be marginalized.

There is empirical evidence indicating that the extent of citizenship practice, the range of application of civil, political and social rights, is determined by socio-economic factors such as ethnic group, gender, education and economic position (López 1997:386). I will focus on education, because I believe it is the most influential variable affecting citizenship quality.

It seems clear that access to information influences organisation and other political resources. If there is unequal distribution of the ideas and the knowledge that are privileged within the political system, then automatically there is an unequal distribution of political power. Informational equality<sup>4</sup> depends to a great extent on individual capacity to understand complex material; therefore education is the major equaliser. High levels of illiteracy mean large sectors of the population lacking a basic resource for giving voice to their demands and effectively exercising their citizenship. Besides, education is associated with political attitudes conducive to democracy, like tolerance of opposition, interpersonal trust and reflectivity (Simpson 1997).

It is reasonable to suppose that there is a minimum level of education which is necessary for accessing and processing information that allows the possibility of the development of citizenship conscience, and consequently, citizenship exercise. Those who are below the minimal education (mainly illiterates and functionally illiterates) lack the knowledge and skills necessary for an effective exercise of their rights and obligations. They will form a group of second class citizens, excluded from the liberal democratic institutions through which flow the demands and policies that determine the distribution of resources.

### **"The right to have rights"**

Second class citizens who find it hard to express their interests and demands through the traditional institutions of liberal democracy may resort to forms of political participation outside the institutional channels, and sometimes this kind of participation is adverse to democratic principles and practices. However these *heterodox* --from a traditional liberal democratic point of view-- forms of participation are not necessarily incompatible with democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> *Informational equality* is defined as the equal distribution of ideas and knowledge among the members of a society (Simpson 1997:159).

New conceptions of citizenship, representation and political participation that can strengthen political equality and popular control over authorities, without threatening traditional civil liberties, could be part of the solution to the shortcomings of the liberal democracy model of citizenship, caused by poverty, inequality and the effects of globalisation on sovereignty of national states. After all, "citizenship is, as it were, pushed along by the development of social conflicts and social struggles (...) as social groups compete with each other over access to resources" (Turner 1990:204).<sup>5</sup> As Isin and Turner have pointed out:

The modern conception of citizenship as merely a status held under the authority of the state has been contested and broadened to include various political and social struggles of recognition and redistribution as instances of claim-making, and hence, by extension, of citizenship. As a result, various struggles based upon identity and difference (whether sexual, racial, ethnic, diasporic, ecological, technological and cosmopolitan) have found new ways of articulating their claims as claims to citizenship understood not simple as a legal status, but as political and social recognition and economic redistribution (Isin and Turner 2003:2).

Some scholars argue that, in order to eliminate or reduce social exclusion, it is necessary to provide institutionalised means for the explicit recognition and representation of oppressed groups (Young 1989:393). If a *differentiated citizenship* means special rights for disadvantaged groups, but invariably subordinated to universal human rights (specially civil rights), then it can be consistent with democracy, and can strengthen it. Even when for orthodox liberals the idea of differentiated citizenship and collective rights is unacceptable, from a historic perspective, civil, political, and social rights have been changing, and many times expanding what in certain times was considered as consistent with the conventional idea of citizenship --universal suffrage, for example, which now is considered as an elemental citizen right, was seen by most liberal thinkers as a threat to social order and rule during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

Probably some of the so called *new social movements* in Latin America could give rise to new conceptions of citizenship and democracy, more inclusive and useful to reinforce political equality and popular control in the context of extreme social inequality and poverty. According to Harvey (1998), the Zapatist rebellion in Chiapas not only was a break with the corporatist citizenship of the authoritarian Mexican state, but it also made evident the gaps between liberal ideals and daily reality for most Mexicans. The author affirms that the *Zapatistas* have opened up the possibility for a more radical understanding of citizenship and democracy:

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<sup>5</sup> As an example of this process, Irurozqui explains how in Bolivia, during the early twentieth century, citizenship developed in a context of conflict and negotiation, in which even illegal actions committed by social actors favoured the expansion of citizenship (Irurozqui 2000:415).

In rural Mexico, the creation of new spaces for voice has been essential in establishing the most fundamental human rights, which is quite simply the “right to have rights”, that is, to be recognized as a legitimate member of the political community. It might be argued, therefore, that the struggles of popular movements for dignity, voice, and autonomy are precisely attempts to constitute the “people” as a political actor, that is, as a people with the right to participate freely in public debate and uphold their right to have rights (Harvey 1998:35).

The discussion about differentiated citizenship and collective rights continues, and there is no consensus about a new model of democracy and citizenship that could be a viable alternative to the traditional liberal conception. What seems to be evident is that the modern concept of universal citizenship is not enough to understand the phenomena of political identity nowadays. On the one hand, pressures toward regional autonomy and localism, and on the other hand social, political and economic globalisation, are pushing for a redefinition of citizenship.<sup>6</sup>

Besides, societies that have inherited extreme inequality and poverty, like Mexico and most Latin American countries, must accomplish fundamental socioeconomic reforms in order to increase the quality of citizenship, that is, to expand citizenship conscience and to guarantee the exercise of effective citizenship by the majority of the population. Meanwhile, it is urgent to take political action to attempt to reduce the gap between citizenship status and citizenship exercise.

### **Civic education as empowerment**

In a liberal democracy, being a citizen, that is, a competent member of society, seems to be closely related to education. The reason for this is because by means of education the individuals acquire knowledge and skills that favour the development of citizenship conscience, and exercise, which is, in turn, indispensable for the construction of citizenship.

However, in Mexico there is a serious lack of education, and a marked informational inequality among individuals and groups. These are, I believe, the main reasons why effective citizenship is limited: social, political, and even civil rights are not fully guaranteed for some groups of Mexican society.

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<sup>6</sup> Turner explains that "modern citizenship dates from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which launched the modern system of nation-states as the principal actors within the world system. National identity and citizenship identity became focused in the late nineteenth century around the growth of nation-states characterised by the dominant ideology of nationalism" (Turner 2000:23). But globalisation has increased the importance of the international dimension of citizenship. "One of the features of the Maastricht Treaty, concluded between European Union states in 1991, was that it established a common citizenship for people in all twelve member states. It established the right to freedom of movement within the EU and with it the right to vote and hold public office wherever the citizen lives. In the same way, attempts to enshrine the doctrine of human rights in international law, as in the UN Declaration, have started to make the notion of global citizenship a meaningful idea" (Heywood 1994:157).

From my point of view, civic education is necessary for reducing informational inequality, which means to reduce political inequality. Civic education can be considered as an instrument for empowerment; a method for distributing among powerless groups and individuals the knowledge and skills indispensable for exercising effective citizenship.

In this process of civic education the state plays a key role. Transparency and accountability of government, and in general the rule of law, are conditions for the generation of social trust, cooperation and organized participation of citizens, that is, the increase of social capital. As I have said before, the state has to recognize the citizen status of the population expressing this recognition in concrete practices that assure citizenship exercise. But democratic states also have the obligation of promoting political equality and popular control of collective decision-making, implementing specific policies designed to increase citizenship quality.

In Mexico the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) is legally responsible for the promotion of democracy. In a context of social and political inequality that determines the uneven character of citizenship conscience and exercise, the IFE is working on a strategic programme of civic education for promoting democratic participation, focussing on three essential aspects: citizenship exercise, public deliberation and social capital.

The general goal of this strategic programme is to contribute to increasing the quality of Mexican democracy, by means of an educational process aimed at developing a set of civic and ethical competences, which favour the creation of an effective citizenship. Such civic and ethic competences are basic knowledge, skills and attitudes that constitute a minimum condition for the formation of citizenship conscience, the exercise of civic, political and social rights, the opening of new spaces for public deliberation, and the expansion of social trusts and civic networks.

### **A final thought on civic education and citizenship identity**

But how is this approach to civic education related to citizenship identity? By developing a set of basic competences we expect to obtain at least three important outcomes directly affecting citizenship identity.

Firstly, by providing basic knowledge, skills and attitudes, civic education contributes to the effective articulation of demands, that is, the knowledge of rights and duties; the identification of state authorities and institutions responsible for the application of laws and rules that guarantee the exercise of those rights and duties; the skills necessary to make demands through legitimate and effective means.

Secondly, the promotion of citizenship conscience and exercise will widen and multiply the spaces for public debate about citizenship construction, that is, the discussion about the incorporation of new rights, and new meanings of citizenship status and democracy.

And thirdly, civic education, by developing civic competences among subordinated groups, empowers citizens to make efficient use of what Amartya Sen (2000) defines as the instrumental function of democracy, that is, the institutional possibility that individuals have in liberal democracies for expressing and defending their demands, and, therefore, for articulating their economic interests in collective decision-making, and promoting wealth redistribution.

These are three closely related and complementary forms, in which civic education contributes not only to making effective for the majority of the population the civic, political and social rights that constitute the modern conception of citizenship, but also to the construction of new citizenship identities, more reasonable and satisfactory for people who live in a context of extreme social inequality, and in a world where citizenship identity as national identity is transforming as the nation-state itself is modifying its traditional role.

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