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Movements of migration within and beyond citizenship

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## *Movements of Migration Within and Beyond Citizenship*

Sandro Mezzadra

**Abstract:** the article takes the lively discussion of citizenship in the 1990s as its point of departure, focusing in particular on the works by Étienne Balibar and Engin Isin. The author shows how the (illegal) migrant emerged as a paradigmatic figure in that discussion in the wake of the struggles of the sans-papiers in France and elsewhere in Europe. What characterizes the discussion of citizenship and migration since the end of the 1990s is an attempt to theoretically grasp the multifarious tensions between processes of deprivation and dispossession on the one hand and migrants' agency and even the autonomy of migration on the other hand. It is working within this field of tensions that many scholars focused their analysis on the blurring of the boundary between inclusion and exclusion, pointing to migrants' capacity to open new spaces of citizenship. Borders – external as well as internal – came therefore to play an increasingly important role in the debates surrounding citizenship and migration. In the last section, the article discusses the ongoing conjuncture of crises, underscoring both the persistent predicament of migration to and in Europe and the crucial role of migrants in the building of coalitions for social justice.

**Keywords:** citizenship; migration; borders; struggles.

### *1. The Decade of Citizenship*

When the first issue of *Citizenship Studies* came out in 1997 the concept of citizenship had been experiencing a kind of revival for the previous few years. One can even say that the 1990s were the decade of citizenship in political theory and in public discourse. This was definitely the case in Italy. Just consider that the second edition of the *Dictionary of Politics* (1983), edited by Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Matteucci, and Gianfranco Pasquino (a standard reference work for students and scholars of politics), did not feature a single entry dedicated to citizenship. Ten years later the term was ubiquitous. The crisis of the political and party system prompted by anti-corruption investigations known as *mani pulite* ('clean hands') raised a set of questions regarding citizens' participation and (lacking) 'virtue,' while the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party in 1991 created the conditions in which the language of citizenship seemed able to provide a viable alternative to orthodox Marxism. Moreover, new migratory movements from the East and from the South posited issues of 'integration' that were also often framed in terms of citizenship.

This was only a provincial inflection of a more general trend. The end of 'actually existing socialism' spurred in many places attempts to rethink the concept of citizenship, beyond or on the edges of Marxism. Suffice it to think of the intense and rigorous reflection on the inextricable connection between equality and liberty that Étienne Balibar started in the early 1990s and that led

him, on the one hand, to forge the notion of ‘equaliberty’ and, on the other hand, to articulate a radical politics of rights and citizenship. But there were also other developments, particularly in Europe, that invited a focus of attention on citizenship. The establishment of a European citizenship in 1992 (with the Maastricht Treaty) seemed to many scholars to open space in which it became possible not only to delink citizenship from the principle of nationality, but also to counteract the ‘neoliberal’ dismantling of welfare states (of ‘social rights of citizenship’ in T.H. Marshall’s terminology) at the national level. The challenge of migration and pronounced forms of border violence were already apparent at the ‘external frontiers’ of the EU, while the Balkan wars were a dramatic warning about resurgent nationalisms, ethnical cleansing, and war. Nonetheless, the 1990s registered a kind of optimism regarding citizenship and the possibility to ‘occupy’ it to foster and articulate a new democratic movement.

There was no naïveté behind such optimism. The opposite is the case, countertendencies were duly registered as well as the possibility of an emptying out of the democratic contents of citizenship and of a unilateral entrenchment of its exclusive dimensions. In many cases, what I called optimism was a political wager embedded in an original and radical theoretical framework that has nurtured research and activism in the following years. To put it shortly, the attempt was made to distinguish the institutional framework of citizenship from its ‘movement,’ which means from the transformations produced within that very framework by the practices and struggles of subjects often constructed as ‘excluded’ or differentially included. Again, Étienne Balibar’s work was crucial in this respect. In an important essay dedicated to the relation between ‘rights of man’ and ‘rights of the citizen’ he famously insisted upon the fact that modern (European) politics is split into ‘two obviously antinomical forms of “politics:” an *insurrectional politics* and a *constitutional politics*’ (Balibar 1994, 51). At least as far as I am concerned, I can say that in my work of those years I have attempted to rethink citizenship from the angle of insurgency, movement, and action, sometimes even putting aside the problem of the ‘mediation’ with the dimensions of constitution and order that was so important for Balibar.

The conjuncture of the 1990s nurtured several ambitious and sophisticated reconstructions of the history and theory of (Western) citizenship. *Being Political* by Engin Isin (2002) definitely stands out as a work that continues to be inspiring today. This is not only true for the challenging definition of citizenship as a ‘difference machine,’ but also for the way in which Isin conceptualizes the tensions inscribed onto the workings of that machine. Citizenship, he writes, ‘is that particular point of view of the dominant, which constitutes itself as a universal point of view. ... Becoming

political is that moment when the naturalness of the dominant virtues is called into question and their arbitrariness revealed' (Isin 2002, 275). It is easy to see that the emphasis is again here on the moment of 'becoming political,' which means – to put it in my language – on the practices and movements that challenge an established order of citizenship and lay the basis for its transformation. In following works, Isin has further developed such emphasis, foreshadowing a general theory of 'acts of citizenship' and insisting on the 'activist' dimension of the latter, on what he calls 'the right to claim rights.'

## *2. Irregular Migrants and 'Illegal Citizens'*

'Strangers, outsiders, aliens' play key roles in Isin's discussion of citizenship as a difference machine, while migration figures prominently in Balibar's work at least since the positions he took on that topic led to his expulsion from the French Communist Party in 1981. One can say that the figure of the migrant (and the refugee, within a nomenclature that would deserve critical discussion) has become an iconic figure of citizenship studies, as a review of articles and special issues devoted to the topic in this journal would easily demonstrate. What took center stage since the 1990s were the new forms of irregularity and even 'illegality' that came to the fore in Europe (but also elsewhere in the world) with the radical change in migratory policies in the wake of the oil crisis of 1973 and the crisis of 'Fordism.' It is important to keep in mind this conjuncture, since it helps locating the discussion of migration within the analysis of wider transformations of citizenship connected with the shift from a Keynesian to a neoliberal hegemony, including the emergence of new class constellations and the crisis of the Welfare state. For many scholars, migration provided even a lens to analyze those transformations from a specific and nevertheless particularly effective viewpoint.

Violence and death at European 'external frontiers,' crisis of asylum and integration, and new forms of racism definitely spurred an interest in the investigation of citizenship and migration that since the inception was characterized by specific forms of political commitment. But maybe more important in this respect was the wave of mobilizations of 'sans-papiers,' that started in 1996 in Paris with the occupation of the Churches of Saint-Ambroise and Saint-Bernard and then took manifold forms in several European countries, from Spain to Sweden, from Switzerland to Italy. The movements of the 'sans-papiers' confronted critical scholars and activists with what appeared to be a new subjective figure, at the same time internal (since they inhabited European cities, performing important roles in a flexible economy and in an increasingly precarized labor market) and external to citizenship (since they were constructed as 'illegal'). As 'immanent outsiders,' to

quote Anne McNevin (2006), they challenged the clear-cut distinction between the citizen and the foreigner, shedding light on the emergence of new stratifications and hierarchies within citizenship itself. The privative aspect epitomized by ‘sans’ (without) seemed to be shared by other subjects, and much research focused on the proliferation of that condition (of homeless and wageless people, for instance) as a defining feature of neoliberal times.

The critical analysis of processes of deprivation and dispossession prompting the legal and political production of irregular migration continues to be up to today an important task of scholarship about citizenship and migration. But the mobilizations of the ‘sans-papiers’ also opened a different theoretical and political angle on (irregular) migration. I need to quote again Étienne Balibar, who in 1997, at a meeting to honor the ‘sans-papiers of Saint-Bernard,’ provocatively unsettled the usual language of ‘solidarity’ and emphasized ‘what we owe the sans-papiers.’ Far from simply denouncing the condition of irregular migrants, he stated that the ‘sans-papiers,’ ‘excluded among the excluded,’ had become ‘actors of democratic politics, powerfully helping us, through their resistance and imagination, to give it new life’ (Balibar 1998, 25). This was a radical critique of processes of victimization of migrants that continue to haunt public discourse and research on the topic (and that are often at work also behind the use of such concepts as ‘bare life’ and ‘state of exception’). The boundary between inclusion and exclusion appeared once again blurred here, but from a point of view that stressed the agency and activism of irregular migrants, their capacity to open new spaces of democracy, new spaces of citizenship. For many scholars in the following years (in particular for those, like myself, working along the lines of the so-called ‘autonomy of migration approach’) the point was to shed light on the fact that migrants were *acting like citizens* even if they were legally and politically excluded from citizenship. The paradoxical concept of ‘illegal citizen,’ proposed by Enrica Rigo in her *Europa di confine* (2007), nicely captures the stakes of this strand of research, at the same time shedding light on the violent tensions surrounding the condition and movements of migrants in a global age.

### 3. *Bordering Citizenship*

Processes of dispossession and autonomy of migration build the two poles of a field of tension within which the citizenship and migration nexus has been critically investigated over the last two decades. One can discern the movement between those poles behind studies of the diverse issues that compose the field of citizenship and migration studies, from the question of securitization (that has become prominent in the wake of 9/11) to the biopolitical dimensions of the government of

mobility, from the crises and mutations of multiculturalism to migrant protest and political participation, to list just a few of them. While there is no shortage of studies that unilaterally emphasize one of the poles I just mentioned, providing pictures of total control or ‘romanticizing’ migration as such, what I find more thrilling and relevant also for a general theory of citizenship is the attempt to hold them analytically and theoretically together. Far from forgetting the hardship and pain surrounding migration (as well as the structures of domination and exploitation that frame it in all its stages), what really matters is taking the mundane movements and struggles of migrants as a methodic viewpoint that allows shedding light on those structures from the angle of the possibility to radically transform them. This implies reading migration as a movement and an experience crisscrossed by processes of subjectivation, which have political implications even beyond the moments in which migrants explicitly constitute themselves as political subjects.

To forge such a reading the work of Michel Foucault has been an important source of inspiration. I am thinking here in particular of his relational notion of power, of its constitutive relationship with resistance and processes of subjectivation. Elaborating on that notion, several scholars have taken migrants’ resistance as a viewpoint also for the analysis of detention and camps, two issues that figure prominently in the agenda of critical migration studies. At stake here is an attempt to go beyond an emphasis on ‘exclusion,’ to stress the moment of containment in the working of detention facilities, and to take their spread as a symptom of deep transformations of the very code of ‘inclusion.’ This is certainly not the mainstream in critical studies of camps and detention. But it seems interesting to me since it calls attention once again to the question of the blurring of the boundary between inclusion and exclusion. This is of course not limited to the issue of detention and has important implications for citizenship studies. Traditional ways to frame the relationship between migration and citizenship, through a process of inclusion articulated in different stages up to nationalization, seem displaced and challenged (at least as a norm) by the proliferation of different positions and statuses within citizenship. Tensions and struggles at the multifarious ‘margins’ of citizenship acquire completely new meanings in such a situation, while its ‘center’ becomes unstable.

If one keeps in mind that in modern European political thought citizenship is a bordered notion, which means that it is territorially delimited and predicated upon a clear-cut distinction between the inside (the space of the citizen) and the outside (the space of foreigners), it is easy to grasp the relevance of studies that over the last decades have investigated the mutations and the proliferation of borders with respect to migration. Again, many of these studies have emphasized the

‘necropolitics’ of borders, the proliferation of fences, barbed wires, and walls (literal and metaphorical, as in the case of ‘Fortress Europe’), processes of militarization and the refinement of technologies of control. There are good reasons for that. Just think of the impossible task to keep track of the tens of thousands of people on the move (men, women, children) who lost their life while attempting to cross European maritime borders in the Mediterranean. And other global borderscapes could be mentioned here, at sea as well as on land. Indignation and action are the only possible responses to this dreadful scandal. Nevertheless, there is a need to stress that also in such extreme cases we are confronted with a challenge and with a stubbornness that assign a political meaning to the movement of migrants. Even here the border is a field of tension, whose analysis cannot be limited to the side of control. Moreover, the mutations of borders are complex and, in a way, ambivalent. While they may appear rigid and stable like the walls of a fortress at one site, they can become mobile and even elusive elsewhere, stretching outwards and at the same time proliferating inwards. A complex geography emerges, which troubles the clarity of the international world (of a world divided into discrete territorial units marked by different colors and circumscribed by firm boundaries on the map). Inclusion and exclusion appear again as intertwined, a circumstance that is registered and signaled by the spread in border and migration studies of the notion of ‘differential inclusion’ (and of course exclusion).

#### *4. The Labor of Migration*

What I called above the ‘optimism’ prevailing in the critical debate on citizenship in the 1990s had to go through several tests in the following two decades. Among financial crises and nationalist backlashes, economic uncertainty and impoverishment of entire societies, terrorist threats and Islamophobia, the situation has become particularly in Europe less inclined to support a political wager on the democratic expansion of citizenship. Regarding migration, while migrants have been continuing to challenge borders and to deploy their own practices of citizenship, the institutional framework of the latter has largely proved unable to register and to give binding form to their claims. People continue to drown in the Mediterranean – and continue to die on the ‘Balkan route’ and even along ‘Schengen borders’ for that matter. The Covid-19 pandemic has made things even worse, with a further strengthening of borders through hygienic-sanitary measures that ended up making crossing more difficult and dangerous. At the same time, to tackle the crisis of mobility engendered by the pandemic, governments took measures that led to an unprecedented proliferation of internal boundaries, surrounding administrative units like municipalities and regions but also workplaces and even homes during lockdowns (with complex implications for gender relations). At



the same time, migrants figured prominently among the ‘essential workers’ who were compelled to risk contagion to keep economy and society going. In logistics and agriculture, in particular, exploitation was often intensified to the point of unbearableness. In general, the shared experience of vulnerability over the last two years lays the basis for a reinvention of citizenship, for a break with neoliberal policies, and for a new politics of care and solidarity. However, social mobilization and struggles are needed to that aim, while societies currently seem to be characterized by weariness and fear in Europe as well as elsewhere in the world.

This situation is doomed to change and there is a need to ask which role migrants can play within movements capable of making again citizenship a field of struggle, where the invention of new ways of living together, of cooperating among free and equal people, is at stake. The relevant and often prevailing presence of migrants among ‘essential workers’ during the pandemic can offer a thread in this respect, as well as the fact that in many countries there is a growing consensus among the ruling classes on the need to recruit new migrant workers in front of labor shortages and demographic unbalances. Migration appears once again as a constitutive force in Europe, and labor is the primary factor in its ‘management.’ There is therefore a need to focus research on migrant labor, not because all migrants are workers, which is definitely not the case, but because the management of migrant labor has implications that go far beyond the condition of migrant workers. While the dismantling of the Welfare state led to the explosion of the dyad ‘citizen-worker,’ recent trends in the recruitment of migrant labor seem to further widen the gap between the bearer of (citizenship) rights and the working subject. What looms behind the multiplication of schemes, the fractured temporality of short-term contracts, circular and seasonal migration is what critical scholars increasingly describe as a ‘logistical’ rationality of ‘migration management,’ instantiated by the fantasy of a ‘just-in-time and to-the-point’ mobility.

While such trends can easily prompt processes of fragmentation and a sense of temporariness among migrants, there is a need to stress that we are confronted here with experiences that, although with a variable geometry, are reshaping the world of labor as such, with obvious implications for citizenship. In such conditions, critical attention should definitely focus on the policies that subordinate migrants’ mobility to the dynamics of the labor market, the ensuing forms of exploitation and discrimination, and violence along external as well as internal borders. By doing so, however, what needs to be highlighted is the moment of intertwining that binds together the experiences of migrant workers with those of a wide array of figures that may well be formally citizens but are nonetheless confronting processes of differential exclusion. A politics of solidarity

among such figures may require a lot of work on the ground, we know that it is not to be taken for granted. But taking a migration as a lens for investigating wider transformations of labor can help shedding light on the material condition of such a politics. And a detailed analysis of the daily practices with which migrants resist processes of exploitation and discrimination, opening up spaces of common life and cooperation, is crucial to begin to discern the resources for a political struggle capable of nurturing the formation of new coalitions and subjectivities. Today, even in front of the rhetoric of ‘renationalization’ that characterizes the pandemic conjuncture, the materiality of migrant labor demonstrates the transnational and transcontinental constitution of European societies. This is the reason to insist on the freedom of movement as a fundamental field of struggle amid the tensions and conflicts that shape our time. And the practices of migrants have prominent roles to play in any attempt to reinvent citizenship, smashing ‘the point of view of the dominant’ and opening new political possibilities in Europe – and elsewhere in the world.

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