

Culture, Multiculturalism and Welfare State Citizenship

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Abstract

Theoretical discussion of welfare state citizenship has focused too narrowly on bundles of rights and duties, with too little concern for the cultures of institutions, relationships and meanings that define them. It has been convenient, especially for comparative research, to reduce citizenship to measurable quantities and qualities of obligations and entitlements. The price of such convenience is to abstract these rights from the political culture and social action that make them meaningful for the citizenry concerned. Culture, in its broadest sense of the 'design for living' that a people may share, pervades the rights and expectations of citizenship. Given global migration, cultural differences are increasingly seen among peoples living side by side, within the borders of the same nation state or across territories bridged by supranational frameworks. Modern communications enable immigrants to maintain connections in their societies of origin as well as residence. As national boundaries grow more permeable, the increased mobility of capital, people and ideas raises significant questions about the coherence of the cultural foundations that underpin national social policy arrangements and the capacity of welfare state citizenship to mediate the local effects of global development. These questions are as relevant to developing as to advanced welfare states.

Citizenship is itself a cultural identity in a world where identities are often multiple and less fixed than in the past. Drawing on the work of Turner, García Canclini, Kymlicki, Parekh and Sen, the paper addresses theories of citizenship and multiculturalism. Its premise is that citizen identity marks the intersection of public and private life in relation to the self and is socially constructed. The paper argues that culture forms a thread in the narratives of citizen identity that individuals construct for themselves in the course of daily life, which are correspondingly diverse. Linking public and private in the recognition of rights and responsibilities to self and other, these narratives reflect the nature of the networks and interactions by which citizens of different cultural background (amidst differences of status and class, gender and other important attributes) interact. The mutual recognition amongst citizens that welfare state citizenship entails is not guaranteed but contingent, the byproduct of the social and economic processes that order everyday social life in employment and commerce, cities and neighbourhoods, schools and religious groups.

The paper will conclude with discussion of what its argument implies for welfare states in countries of the north and south. It will point to the importance of institutions supporting the complex identities, loyalties and aspirations of diverse individuals.