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Rethinking the concept of citizenship: ideology, agency and resistance from the margins

Przemyslenie na nowo pojęcia obywatelstwa: ideologia, sprawczość i opór z marginesu

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Abstract

This essay aims to rethink concepts such as ideology, agency and resistance in order to problematise how these are being instrumentalised by nation states to create hierarchical differentiating categories under the umbrella of citizenship. In order to address the idea of otherness that sustains the discourses that have been generated around citizenship as an element that not only legitimises the existing system, but also the identities and subjectivities that may or may not form part of the enunciated norm.

Through this journey, other ways of approaching these concepts from and for the identities of the margins will be presented, with the intention not to enunciate new truths or definitions of the concepts addressed, but to try to make visible the existing gaps in the system and how we can build on and thanks to these „borders”.

Keywords: ideology, agency, resistance, citizenship, margins

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego eseju jest ponowne przemyślenie takich pojęć jak ideologia, sprawczość i opór, aby problematyzować sposób, w jaki są one instrumentalizowane przez państwa narodowe w celu stworzenia hierarchicznych kategorii różnicujących pod pojęciem

obywatelstwa. Aby zająć się ideą inności, która podtrzymuje dyskursy powstałe wokół obywatelstwa jako elementu nie tylko legitymizującego istniejący system, ale także tożsamości i podmiotowości, które mogą, ale nie muszą, stanowić część głoszonej normy. W trakcie tej podróży zaprezentowane zostaną inne sposoby podejścia do tych pojęć z punktu widzenia tożsamości z marginesu, bez zamiaru głoszenia nowych prawd czy definicji omawianych pojęć, ale z zamiarem podjęcia próby uwidocznienia istniejących luk w systemie oraz tego, jak możemy budować na tych „granicach” i dzięki nim.

Słowa kluczowe: ideologia, agencja, opór, obywatelstwo, marginesy

As Nira Yuval-Davis discusses in her text *Citizenship and Difference*¹, there are multiple ways of understanding the idea of citizenship. However, the fairly general question is that of understanding it as individuals who form part of a “nation”, which makes them citizens of it; and that in turn, this identifying category makes them part of a community that shares a series of imaginaries and conditions. In this way, we approach the idea of citizenship as something individual and collective, but also political, social, cultural and economic.

Consequently, an already problematic approach becomes more complex when we introduce the idea of difference, which can not only destabilise existing parameters but also serve to validate and create what will be considered the norm based on an idea of otherness.

This idea of otherness is not only constructed based on race, sexuality or class but also in terms of gender. This is why it is not only difficult for those of us who fall into different categories to incorporate and identify with the idea of citizenship from a common point of view, but also because the construct itself does not allow us to do so, nor is it really interested in doing so.

Although I am aware that the focus on sexual difference was specified, I consider that it makes more sense not to focus exclusively on gender from a binary perspective due to my own theoretical, personal and political positions. Nevertheless, to take an intersectional approach where the difference does not only lie in the “sexual” but rather to talk about the norm and the margins with all the categories and experiences that we can incorporate into it.

The hypothesis I would like to address is that the category of citizenship as a reproduction of the norm leaves gaps through which not only power can be reconfigured, but also the idea of community can be re-signified while still being critical of its implications and terminologies, and how the margins take up that space.

First reflexive approaches

At a time when we live in an unequal, bordered, (post)modern-capitalist system, we cannot avoid dealing with a difference; but at the same time, the mechanisms that allow us not

¹ N. Yuval-Davis, *Citizenship and Difference, Gender & Nation*, Sage, Los Angeles 2010, pp. 68–92.

only to see it but also to create subjectivities around it create a framework of possibilities for resistance and new ideas of the common.

It is important to point out that I will use the concept of postmodernity and modernity together because I do not see postmodernity as necessarily transcending or counteracting modernity, but rather as a starting point for many of its possible horizons, i.e. as an extension. This does not imply reducing it exclusively to this expansive development since it does not exercise an epochal rupture as such either. Therefore, postmodernism is not the end of modernism but its nascent or continuous state, and this state is constant. I do not consider that we are in an epochal change, but rather that we have expanded our parameters and paradigms.

If one reflects on the idea of citizenship by validating its differences on the part of hegemony, one would be more or less consciously legitimising the possibility and existence of resistance. Thus, these categories are made by white-cis-straight-western-bourgeois men for white-cis-straight-western-bourgeois men.

How does this include or exclude us, and how does it explain that there are women, dissidents or racialised people who are able to find themselves in this idea of citizenship and collectivity? Well, because it has been exercised by the individuals themselves and their agencies and the use of their habitus, as I will go into in more detail later, not because the category or the system itself has sought to include us. Let us say that it is very similar to what happens with the masculine generic language with which we must know when we are included in us and when we are not, constructing an inside and outside of which we are made responsible for being conscious and consequent.

There is a norm and people who are and reproduce that norm, and a vast majority who must perform to the extent of their possibilities and the given conditions to try or not to be part of that norm even though they know they can never be 100% so that the feeling of community does not take root and is re-signified. But, nevertheless, at the same time, all this creates the necessary conditions to be a space of agency, resistance and resignification of the idea of citizen community; this is precisely what I would like to focus on.

Taking all this into account, different key concepts come into play, which allows me to generate an explanatory framework that will enable me to analyse and deepen the hypothesis set out above. However, first, the meanings that accompany the concept of citizenship, and the socio-political implications it has, are nothing more than another device or element of an imaginary and ideological thinking.

Ideological agency

Firstly, it should be noted that any social institution that plays a role in the socialisation of any individual could be seen as part of the process of ideological legitimisation and reproduction. Citizenship and its rights and duties, creating that space of legitimised norm vs margin; *the marginal matrix of society*.²

² Ibidem.

Therefore, this process is not simply confined to the state apparatus but is a broader process. This is why the selection of (post)modern narratives becomes relevant in this analysis not only as an educational element but also as a socialising mechanism.

This allows us not only to affirm that the state does indeed nourish and reproduce the dominant hegemonic ideology, but also that, in turn, there are numerous apparatuses that crystallise in various social institutions, such as the same category of citizen and citizenship linked to a nation-state.

From our difference, as women, LGTBIQ+, racialised or precarious people, this dominant hegemonic ideology forces us to resituate ourselves to be part of many different spheres simultaneously and consider ourselves agents present in all of them. This is why the idea of citizenship as a community³ is re-signified because for us, it is not something that is closed and of which we are 100% part. On the contrary, it is pluralised and polarised. So we could affirm the existence of subaltern cultures and ideologies that give rise to processes of ideological transmission and that allow for dissident positions as they permeate the social strata.

Thus, based on these premises, we can speak of the idea of agency⁴, but understanding agency not only as a process of deconstruction as (post)modern ideologies maintain but rather as a possibility as a dialectical struggle between different ideologies as a space resulting from their encounter, as well as their corresponding processes of legitimisation and reproduction.

Under this theoretical model, subjects become governable subjects, but there is a space in which to act, taking into account the agency and the opportunities for change that these subjects can make to mutate the system; subjects are constituted but also constituent.⁵ Therefore, and following Foucault's⁶ concept of governmentality, which would situate this power in the era of (post)modernity, we can point out that these power relations are a type of power „*that acts on and through agency*”.⁷

In other words, the idea of community or citizenship as a community need not be impossible, which is why I have preferred to refer to it as problematic or complex; but rather to understand it as a social apparatus and institution based on the different contexts from which it is enunciated and the governmentality that accompanies it. We speak of a community that is not only mutable but liquid, not hermetic as it acts and is enunciated.

Narratives, therefore, become not only mechanisms for transmitting hegemonic ideology beyond the nation-state, as I have pointed out, but also spaces of possible resistance

³ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1995; A. Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda*, Crown Publishers, Inc., New York 1993.

⁴ Understanding it as the reflexivity that allows us to achieve this agency for me implies that having agency is not equated with freedom or absolute autonomy, but rather implies awareness, decision-making to a certain extent, another way of interpreting realities from the self and from what is lived, or an attempt to change these realities.

⁵ B. Lahire, *El hombre plural. Los resortes de la acción*, Bellaterra, Barcelona, 1998.

⁶ M. Foucault, *Tecnologías del yo y otros textos afines*, PAIDÓS, Barcelona 1988.

⁷ A. Agudo Sanchíz, *Knowledge, language, power and intermediation. Contemporary perspectives in the anthropology of public policy*, “Sociological Studies” 2009, Vol. XXVII(79), p. 85.

and dissidence in the face of monopolising discourse and can form spaces of dialectical agency. However, for this approach to be successful, we must reach a consensus on the definition of ideology, as this will allow us to situate ourselves in the analysis of the (post) modern narratives we are concerned with.

If we understand, and following Althusser, ideology as false consciousness and *representation of the imaginary relations of individuals with their real conditions of existence*⁸, we presuppose the existence of a reality in a demanding and insurmountable sense, which is precisely what is denied by other positions when it comes to understanding the concept of ideology, as they advocate polyphony, the existence of equally valid discourses when it comes to characterising reality.

From and with difference, (post)modern narratives have that element of adaptive mutability that circumscribes the ideological interpretation according to the context from which it is enunciated and with the objectives with which it is developed. It is precisely here where their complexity lies; the act of identification allows us to refigure our own identity, which is why they are identity socialising mechanisms; but it also allows us to relate the avatars of our own identity in the act of recognition, that is to say, (post)modern narratives act as moral imputations.

Nevertheless, this concept and its repercussions lead us to ask ourselves how each subject is situated in their community(-ies)? What requirements do we associate with each citizenship to ascribe a subject to it? Does the category of citizen end up being an exclusively differentiating determination? Are the habitus and the agents of socialisation an element that can be overcome and transmuted to adapt it to the margins/standard to which one wishes to ascribe or of which one believes one is a part? Moreover, it is precisely this last question that unifies these previous questions.

Habitus and resistance

The idea of citizenship and the possibility of being considered a citizen would imply *a condition of existence and co-existence subject to a triple constraint*⁹, fundamentally exercised by the socialising agents (family, peers/community and school/nation-state)¹⁰. In short, a reflection on the ontology and epistemology of the social world, which would answer the empirically unsubstantiated speculations about the unity of subjectivity and the relative coherence and homogeneity of embodied experiences.

Broadly speaking, Bourdieu's¹¹ notion of habitus forms a synthesis of experiences; it is conditioned agency. The same actor can be part of several fields, so that:

⁸ L. Althusser, *Sobre la reproducción*, Akal, Madrid 2015, p. 211.

⁹ B. Lahire, *Infancia y adolescencia: de los tiempos de socialización sometidos a constricciones múltiples*, "Revista de Antropología Social" 2007, No. 16, p. 31.

¹⁰ N. Yuval-Davis, op. cit.

¹¹ P. Bourdieu, *Social space and the genesis of „classes”*, "Studies in Contemporary Cultures" 1989, Vol. III(7), pp. 27–55.

*the moment an actor has been placed, simultaneously or successively, within a plurality of non-homogeneous and sometimes even contradictory social worlds, (...) we find an actor (...) with heterogeneous practices which vary according to the social context in which he is forced to evolve.*¹²

Precisely because of this, some identities can recognise themselves in the margins and in the norm, and flow between their different “borders” without this coming into contradiction or weakening the sense of commonality created from the margins by “never being able to become a fully-fledged person within the norm of the common citizen”.

If we take into account one of the approaches of this theoretical model, it is in these processes of exclusion that *a concealment of narratives is evident, (...) their voices are excluded from the discourse with which their reality is described; (...) social actors are classified as unnamed.*¹³ Following this premise, identity and the processes of identifying the subjects become the articulated union between the parameters of action that question us and the discourses that allow us to go beyond a theory of the cognising subject.¹⁴

Thus, it is complex for subjectivity to have unity, the subject cannot be one, but through the multiple constrictions in its socialisation, it incorporates a more or less contradictory repertoire of habitus, a stock in which not all habitus are always necessary at all times, thus constituting a plural actor. Furthermore, it is precisely this way that citizenship affects the subjects of the margins, forcing us to be plural actors, even if it makes us see and play with their escapes and resistances.

We must therefore consider that subjects are plural actors whose experiences are diverse and who, throughout their trajectory, have participated in different contexts and varied social universes: *Consequently, we could propose the hypothesis of the incorporation by each actor of a multiplicity of schemes of action, of habits, which are organised in as many repertoires as relevant social contexts.*¹⁵ My proposal, therefore, places individually experienced social inequalities at the centre of the study rather than asserting the coherence and fragmentation of the subject.

Based on this new theoretical model, agency does not disappear due to the creative “norm” and the devices of control. My starting point is that having agency is not equated with absolute freedom or autonomy but implies awareness, decision-making to a certain extent, and any attempt to change realities. Because of this construction, the role of social agents can take various forms regardless of the realities or fields to which they have been reduced. I believe that *modernity is negotiated with, modernity is resisted, modernity can even be „appropriated” by someone.*¹⁶

¹² B. Lahire, *El hombre plural...*, op. cit., p. 47.

¹³ J. Jaramillo Marín, *Social representations, social practices and discourse orders. A conceptual approach based on Critical Discourse Analysis*, “Entramado” 2012, Vol. 8(2), p. 129.

¹⁴ S. Hall, *Introduction: who needs „identity”?*, [in:] S. Hall, P. du Gay (eds.), *Cuestiones de Identidad cultural*, Amorrortu, Buenos Aires 2011, pp. 13–39.

¹⁵ B. Lahire, *El hombre plural...*, p. 55.

¹⁶ M.I. Neuman, *Social appropriation as a practice of resistance and negotiation with modernity*, “Universidad Nacional de Río, Comunicación, Tecnología y Desarrollo” 2008, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 25.

I thus consider that *resistance is not merely the counter-attack to power; it is also that which directs and shapes power.*¹⁷ That is to say, resistance will not be understood as mere opposition to power, but resistance will also exist as a reformulation or even appropriation of certain narratives or experiences provoked by power relations. The individual is not merely the fruit of social structures and a mere recipient of them, but is *the result of the sum of individual behaviours dictated by these motivations. And this position is valid regardless of the form of the phenomenon to be explained.*¹⁸

Concerning these options for action, it can be confusing that appropriation can mean resistance, as it would come to assume processes and concepts that are being “imposed” by this system. But, on the other hand, appropriation, in this case, is an intentional act since what is appropriated becomes one’s own from that moment onwards, and this process would form part of the sphere of subjectivity since it is recorded from this otherness. Therefore, as María Isabel Neüman points out, appropriation in this framework to which I refer is:

*a process by means of which marginal social groups of the capitalist economic system interact with the cultural, economic, organisational or consumption proposal of that system through forms of adjudication of new meanings, uses and purposes that act as filters and allow them to maintain their own horizon of understanding of the world.*¹⁹

Final reflections

Finally, I refer to historical analysis as a clarifier of this reflection, since the mutation of narratives, as well as the ascription of the concept of (post)modern, is not circumstantial due to the era in which we find ourselves; rather, it implies an imaginary in itself. Where is the difference? Can we really do away with it? Should we do away with it? It is difficult to answer these questions when we live in an era and a system in which every social position tries to become hegemonic and reproduce its ideology.

In the current historical moment, we could describe the idea of citizenship as a (post) modern narrative. We can understand it as part of hegemonic education, a daughter of modernity, of the Enlightenment, that is to say, of capitalism. Moreover, it is a crucial element in the transmission of liberal, racist and patriarchal ideology, the ideology of self-sufficiency, the social ladder, individualism, and so many others that allow the brutal system of capitalism to function correctly.

Finally, I believe that we can clarify that due to the times and narratives in which we find ourselves, we must constantly be open to change, mutate, re-signify. Re-appropriate existing concepts and paradigms – critical to the hegemonic norm, finding the gaps, visualising and making resistance visible. We cannot let difference and the margins constrain us in static and “victimising” categories of a system but make use of its inequalities to

¹⁷ U. Bröckling, S. Krasmann, T. Lemke, *From Foucault’s Lectures at the Collège de France to Studies of Governmentality An Introduction*, [in:] U. Bröckling, S. Krasmann, T. Lemke (eds.), *Governmentality. Current Issues and Future Challenges*, Routledge, New York 2011, p. 19.

¹⁸ P. Corcuff, *The new sociologies. Constructions of reality*, Editions NATHAN, Paris 1995, p. 17.

¹⁹ M.I. Neüman, op. cit., p. 24.

advocate and expand from subalternities the plural actors that we are and the current obsolescence of categories such as citizenship or community as closed and not mutable, static and not liquid, differentiating and not of the difference.

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