



Book Review

Sociology

1–2

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0038038515581761

soc.sagepub.com



Aoileann Ní Mhurchú

Ambiguous Citizenship in an Age of Global Migration

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, £70 hbk (ISBN: 9780748692774), 280 pp.

Reviewed by: Chris Moreh, *Northumbria University, UK*

Aoileann Ní Mhurchú's first book is an ambitious contribution to 'critical citizenship studies' – where the author herself places the work, alongside the oeuvre of Étienne Balibar, Engin Isin and RBJ Walker, the book's main intellectual influences – shifting our thinking back to the ontological foundations of 'citizen'. Dominant contemporary debates – the book argues – do not make justice to the various political possibilities of citizenship by simplistically opposing a 'particular exclusivist model' (p. 29) – resting on the continued legitimacy of the nation-state – to a 'universal inclusivist model' (p. 32) promoting trans-national and post-national perspectives. The author's critique is primarily aimed at the latter position, which, while presenting itself at the critical edge of citizenship scholarship, 'continues to be based on sovereign autonomous subjectivity in the last instance' (p. 20). As such – the argument goes – the difference between 'exclusivist' and 'inclusivist' approaches is merely one of scale, with both continuing to define citizenship 'in terms of the relations *between* individuals (or groups of individuals) and the sub-/supra-/super-state, and therefore in terms of sovereignty and autonomy' (p. 37). Instead, the author seeks to theorise 'less-than sovereign' political identity through 'experiences of being caught somewhere between inclusion and exclusion, citizenship and migration' (p. 6), what she refers to as 'ambiguous citizenship'.

The author's argumentation is built up around a well-chosen case study of the 2004 Irish citizenship referendum, which ended unconditional birthright citizenship in the Republic of Ireland. The previously mentioned shortcomings of the different dominant approaches to citizenship are highlighted in the referendum debates, and a convincing argument is formulated regarding the need for a 'child-centred focus' in citizenship scholarship more broadly. The 'complex ambiguous subjectivity' of citizen children born to migrant parents provides a very relevant empirical grounding for the theoretical ambitions of the book, especially 'because such children are neither "included in" or "excluded from" the state as individuals, but in between both positions' (p. 12).

In exploring how alternative understandings of subjectivity may be conceivable, the book appeals to the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva, contrasting her notion of 'maternal time' with that of 'national time'. This contrast is meant to 'destabilise' the

spatio-temporal fixity of the 'self' as posited in the linear progressive vision of 'national time', through an understanding of motherhood that makes it difficult to separate 'self' from 'the Other'. The boundary lines between the two cease to serve divisive purposes, becoming 'significant in their own right' as 'a location of and for politics' (p. 203). Finally, the author outlines her understanding of citizenship as 'trace', through which the experiences of such 'ambiguous citizens' as migrants' children can be better understood. Their experiences of citizenship – the author suggests – are 'defined through boundary lines, creating and re-creating fragmented and overlapping traces of us–them, inside–outside, inclusion–exclusion, nationality–humanity' (p. 209). This concept of 'contingent trace' is also aimed to provide 'a much-needed alternative metaphorical starting point' (p. 17) in critical citizenship research.

While the core proposition of the book is robustly developed, it is inevitably bound to attract both praise and scepticism. Placing itself within the '(broadly conceived) post-structuralist tradition' (p. 135), it is unlikely to convince those who profess a 'responsibility to act' as opposed to 'a responsibility to otherness ... openness to difference, dissonance and ambiguity' – as d'Entreves (1997: 2, emphases in original) distinguished the two camps taking sides in the wider debate instigated by Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. The various instances where the latter set of responsibilities are manifestly overshadowing the former are enough to make mild 'modernists' uncomfortable even if they are otherwise sympathetic to the bold proposition of an indeed 'much-needed alternative' vision. Considering the practice of defining second- and later-generation children 'as "excluded", "disadvantaged" or "marginalised" subjects who need to be included in ... society' as 'at best highly problematical' (p. 122), while legitimate from the perspective of the book's aims, would be itself seen as problematic by some readers of *Sociology*. Others may deem that the author overstates the degree to which 'ambiguous' experiences 'cannot be quantified, qualified, disaggregated, measured and calculated' (p. 212, emphasis in original). Those writing in a normative vein, on the other hand, may see their expectations unmet by the author's decision not to expand the 'more robust ontology' developed in the book into an argument that it 'necessarily gives us a better politics' (p. 216). Nevertheless, a more constructive approach would be for them to take up this challenge themselves.

Indeed, the book will have achieved its highest aim if all those working on migration and citizenship from various disciplinary perspectives take account of and engage with the challenge of understanding 'ambiguous' forms of citizenship.

Reference

- Passerin d'Entreves M (1997) Introduction. In: Passerin d'Entreves M and Benhabib S (eds) *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1–37.