

# **Citizenship, Participation and the Public Sphere in the Americas**

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# Citizenship, Participation and the Public Sphere in the Americas

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### Introduction

In the last two decades, we have seen the explosion of grassroots participation in civil society organizations across the Americas. At one level, these groups are usually engaged in very concrete and often prosaic struggles around daily survival, health care, literacy, environmental projects, culture, or other basic needs. At another level, however, they represent a challenge to long-standing political practices. They have benefitted from the emergence of democratic regimes in many countries, but have begun to challenge the elite-based model of political decision-making practiced in many of both the newer, and the older, liberal democracies. In its place, they are putting forward a new, more participatory model of politics based on an enriched conception of citizenship, and a redefined and broadened public sphere. Social movements have thus challenged the dominant model of democracy, based on liberal models of representation. This challenge to conventional forms of politics is extremely fragile, however. Economic integration does present some new opportunities, but the individualist logic of the economic model on which integration is based, along with increasing levels of poverty, crime, and social exclusion which have accompanied it, threaten to undermine the ties that bind individuals and communities together.,

Citizenship is a notion that involves the collection of rights and responsibilities that give individuals a formal legal identity within a given state (Lipschutz: 208). Citizenship struggles are struggles to expand these rights to political inclusion and participation, and are underpinned by the individual's basic right: her "right to have rights" (Arendt in Jelin: 104). In addition to civil, social, and economic rights, citizenship also involves responsibilities, including active participation in public life, as well as symbolic aspects such as a sense of identity and of belonging in a specific community. Ideally, struggles for citizenship involve not just the democratization of a *political regime*, but of society as a whole, attacking traditional social relations based on exclusion and inequality (Dagnino: 47). Nevertheless, in practice, citizenship is often practiced in a highly exclusionary way; both formal and informal barriers to full citizenship rights are widespread.

The public sphere is a less well-known but equally fundamental aspect of a full democracy. The public sphere consists of the institutions and social terrain which make possible the resolution of social conflicts through reasoned discourse, not through violence or status or tradition. The adequacy of a given public sphere is determined both by the quality of discourse (and underlying social norms and values) and the quantity of participation involved (Calhoun: 2). The concept of a public sphere also depends upon the assumption that there exists a "common good" that can be articulated through public debate within both state and civil society.

Champions of these concepts - citizenship, public sphere, common good, civil society - all run the risk of falling into unwarranted utopianism or romanticism. It is essential, therefore, to underline the multiple challenges to the realization of these ideals, even in the countries where

democracy is most entrenched. Citizenship, then, is a work in progress, a constantly contested practice.

## **II. Historical Background: Struggles for Citizenship in the Americas**

Citizenship struggles take on different forms in different times and different places. An appreciation of the different historical trajectories of citizenship is therefore important. In Western Europe, citizenship emerged as a result of secularization, the development of a formally rational legal system and the decline of hierarchical forms of status and belonging (feudalism), and its replacement with horizontal and universalistic social relations (Jenson, 1991: 199). Citizenship emerged and expanded over centuries, with the establishment of basic civil rights in the 18th century, the extension of political rights in the 19th century, and finally the development of economic and social rights in the context of the 20th century welfare state (Marshall, 1964). The white settlers of Canada and the United States, (unlike the First Nations inhabitants) were granted limited civil and political rights even prior to independence, and quickly followed a similar path to the Western Europeans after gaining independence. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, the expansion of citizenship rights was largely a response to demands coming from below, often from socialist parties or labour unions.

In the less developed countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, in contrast, the politics of citizenship often looks very different. In the Caribbean, the long and tortuous history of colonization precluded the emergence of political participation and citizenship. After decolonization, struggles for political inclusion were often led by labour unions, focused on attacking social hierarchies by demanding basic economic and social rights for workers. In Latin America, the legacy of colonialism, as well as centuries of authoritarianism, dictatorship, populism and clientelism, also postponed the emergence of universalistic and egalitarian models of citizenship. Formal citizenship rights emerged slowly and were generally granted in a top-down manner. Most countries had universal male suffrage by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but women's suffrage came later than male suffrage throughout the hemisphere and was not in place throughout Latin America until the 1950s. States often excluded indigenous populations from the definition of citizenship, since they have often required literacy in the official language and a foreswearing of traditional indigenous culture. Canadians of Asian descent were not granted normal voting privileges until 1948 and the Inuit, who were disenfranchised in 1934, did not have voting rights restored until 1950. Status Indians living on Canadian reservations did not receive the vote until 1960. In Costa Rica, one of the Latin American states with the longest tradition of consolidated democracy, black inhabitants of the Caribbean coast were prohibited from working outside of the Atlantic zone during the 1930s and 1940s, and, until 1949, even second- and third-generation West Indian descendants were denied citizenship.

In recent years, the recognition of political and civil rights has become more widespread. At the same time, a new neo-liberal model of citizenship has gained ground in both North and South. In this vision of citizenship, the role of the majority is limited to voting in regular elections. Politics is the business of elites. In this view, civil society demands are the product of so-called "special interests" and threaten to derail the rational economic decisions of

technocratic elites. This neo-liberal citizenship project thus involves the reprivatization of many aspects of social life popular movements had pushed into the public realm (such as gender relations), the constriction of the public sphere, and the connection of the concept of citizenship with the logic of the marketplace.

This highly exclusionary, often repressive, model of citizenship has been actively contested, however, by popular movements throughout the region in the last couple of decades. These movements, espousing a radically democratic politics of citizenship and participation, are struggling to expand the public sphere and forestall the privatization of social rights. Popular movements are thus contesting top-down models of citizenship, and demanding more bottom-up understandings of citizenship and democracy. In contrast as well with the individualism of the neo-liberal model, these movements espouse values of community and solidarity. Nevertheless, these movements are not immune from hierarchical, clientelistic, and sexist practices. As well, many states have been quite successful in insulating themselves from the movements' demands for a deepening of democracy, and for the expansion of citizenship rights. As the next section indicates, this insulation of the state from citizenship demands coming from below may be heightened in the context of neo-liberal economic restructuring, since the policy options available to states for responding to these demands are significantly constrained by globalization and regionalization.

### **III. Hemispheric Integration: Opportunities and Challenges for Citizenship and Participation**

All of the political processes described above have not occurred in a vacuum, but have interacted dynamically with the rapid processes of economic change occurring in the region. As part of the fall-out from the debt crisis and processes of structural adjustment in the South during the 1980s, the state has reduced its provision of social citizenship rights such as health, education, and social security, while civil and political rights have been expanded (Roberts, 1996). The expansion of civil society was often the result of the privatization of functions formerly undertaken by the state. While elites hoped to harness NGOs and civil society in the process of structural adjustment, citizens refused to passively accept this form of instrumental participation, and were often empowered by their collective struggles over consumption. Since women were most often the ones responsible for family survival, the urban social movements that emerged often consisted mostly of women, resulting in the gendering of citizenship. It thus appears that part of the unintended consequences of economic restructuring may be the destabilization of old patterns of domination and exclusion and the invigoration of demands from below for incorporation. It must not be forgotten, however, that the expansion of civil and political rights came, in some sense, at the expense of social, economic, and cultural rights.

What are the implications of the current changes in the global and regional economies for the ongoing contest over the meaning of citizenship? The phenomenon of globalization, and its Siamese twin, regionalization, present both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, if it delivers on its promises, regional integration may expand the resources available to the state which makes conflicts over resources potentially less devastating. Neo-liberal restructuring may also continue to open up cracks within the dominant elites, creating space

for greater contestation by movements from below. Some argue as well that the availability of new communications technologies and the decline of the nation-state have given rise to new conceptions of subnational and transnational citizenship (Linklater, 1996).

These optimistic scenarios fail to adequately take into account the more ominous aspects of recent trends. Four main dilemmas can be identified:

*Social exclusion* - To date, economic restructuring in most countries of the Americas has resulted in social exclusion, the increased concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority, while the majority are excluded from the benefits of growth. The gap between rich and poor has increased both within and between countries (Common Frontiers, 2000). The consequences of the exclusion of so many from such resources as secure employment, access to education, health and a good environment, and so on, are potentially devastating for the prospects of expanded notions of citizenship. As well, the increase in levels of violence and crime in the region that have accompanied the process of social exclusion, undermine the possibility of building a safe and accessible public sphere in which individuals can build up relations of trust.

*Decline of social capital* - Related to this decline of trust and the public sphere is the sense that social capital - the networks of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity (Putnam, 1996) - is being eroded by trends in late capitalism. Political apathy is endemic, even in the supposedly most developed state of the region, the United States. The culture of consumerism threatens to replace the culture of citizenship. These tendencies represent not just the failures of individuals, but are a result of the atomization inherent in a "hyperliberal marketized society which undermines the basis for any and all collective authority" (Lipschutz, 1999).

*Social fragmentation* - Globalization brings about not just the homogenization of cultures, but also, simultaneously, the increased fragmentation of cultural identities. It is taking place within a plural and fragmented context in which local identities are not annihilated but revived, as people attempt to emphasize their local values, while also sharing global styles and values (Lacarrieu and Raggio, 1997). The result may be a "fragmented citizenship" that which may undermine the concept of a "common good".

*Democratic deficit* - Finally, globalization poses challenges to the historical conception of citizenship which was explicitly linked to belonging in a specific political community, defined as the nation-state. Citizenship thus involves a distinction between "us" and "them", the "self" and the "other". The apparent decline of the nation state associated with globalization thus poses real dilemmas for citizenship - what are we considered citizens of? And if the new transnational structures of authority like Mercosur and NAFTA lack sites for democratic contestation, what are the implications for citizenship?

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### **Web Sites**

Hemispheric Social Alliance. [www.web.net/comfront](http://www.web.net/comfront).

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. [www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org)

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. [www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org)

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