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Citizenship under siege in the brave new Europe

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ABSTRACT This commentary piece reflects on the range of contributions to this Special Issue, considering the ways in which the European context fails to offer more inclusionary notions of citizenship in the current era. A long-term decline in state legitimacy in Europe and in the UK cannot be offset by the intensified policing of insecurity that is known as the War on Terror. The Global Social Justice movement is considered as an alternative framework for what security might mean in the absence of state violence. The importance of diasporic identities to such movements comes across in the research project that underpins this Special Issue. States in Europe and the British state, which is focused on here, are experiencing what can be called a ‘besieged legitimacy’. The relative disbelief in official accounts of events by many citizens, such as those interviewed by researchers involved in this Special Issue, combines with a global economy that increasingly resembles a casino.

KEYWORDS *citizenship, diasporic, Europe, exclusion, identity, legitimacy, Muslims*

The research in this special issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* opens up spaces for debate concerning the citizenship of minorities in Europe, especially but not only Muslim minorities, in view of the complex ‘intermestic’ issues of the Iraq invasion, the ‘War on Terror’ and rising racist violence. The central points that emerge for me are that Europe as a whole (the UK is no exception) has no new notions of citizenship to offer and that declining state legitimacy cannot be reversed by hysterical efforts to police the growing insecurity of people’s lives. A possible way forward is offered by the Global Social Justice movement, but most security-conscious states treat this as a threat (Hintjens 2006a, 2006b). Diasporic identities appear intrinsically subversive to states with ‘besieged legitimacy’: besieged from within by citizen indifference, and from without by loss of control over domestic policy, as the global economy comes to resemble a casino.

Western democracies are apparently ‘locking down’ together, in a version of what street protestors do: linking arms, sharing (security)



information and (military and police) tactics. Amnesty International notes a deterioration in the situation of asylum-seekers; European states both together and individually stand accused of 'a consistent pattern of human rights violations linked to the interception, detention and expulsion by states of foreign nationals, including those seeking international protection' (Amnesty International, 2006). Unofficial and semi-legalized hierarchies are emerging among citizens of different 'stripes' across the European Union (EU). The feelings, hopes and insecurities recorded in the research reported here provide important snapshots of this lived experience. Compared with the average member of the public, it does seem that 'the ethnographer has ... privileged insight into the lived experience of globalization' (Burawoy et al., 2000: 4). For once, the supposedly small matters of everyday life are treated here as important and as central in understanding citizenship and identity.

'Identity formation under duress' is a phrase that describes well what happens when ordinary people find themselves in uncomfortable situations, where they are made to feel vulnerable. When asked how they view the epic themes of current media debates, such as multicultural citizenship and participatory democracy, authority and legitimacy, securities and insecurities, most of the respondents in these studies see themselves as mere objects or targets of propaganda. They do not feel like informed and active citizens. Muslim people especially experience the embrace of state authorities as menacing. A strong sense of distrust runs through these accounts, from Northern Ireland to Edinburgh and London.

But the problem of exclusionary forms of citizenship goes deeper than feelings, however important these are. To be ascribed an identity pre-defined as deviant and not fitting in with the norm, is to be excluded from the basic rights and privileges of citizenship. Wherever you are, if you live somewhere in the EU, you are expected to be able to simply 'fit in' with whatever you find. With marked alienation, fear and distrust of the authorities, the legitimacy of states is obviously not enhanced in the eyes of those who do not fit the dominant norm of citizens. Across the EU, minorities – especially Muslim minorities – increasingly view the police, judiciary, legal profession (with noble exceptions) and politicians in general as a hostile force rather than legitimate authorities providing protection (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004). Politicians compete in talking tough on the compound topic of migration, asylum, crime and terrorism. The media fuels mainstream xenophobic sentiment (Harris, 2002). 'Emotional politics' polices the majority for hints of weakness; blame and righteous anger are the morally approved emotions. In these new fairytales, 'foreigners' (even those with full citizenship, but notably non-whites, Muslims, the poor) lord it over indigenous people, pushed to the margins of their tolerance. As Paul Gilroy observed two decades ago, such images gain their 'potency from a striking inversion of the roles of



master and slave, covertly acknowledging guilt while summoning fear' (1987: 85). Regardless of immigration figures, 'governments are aware of the dangers of an outbreak of compassion for the victims rather than rage against the invaders' (Harris, 2002: 48). We have come a long way since the optimism of the early 1990s, when scholars argued that citizenship in the EU was expanding rather than contracting (the best known example being Soysal, 1994). Most long-term studies of citizenship in Europe suggest the opposite, ever since decolonization prompted the exclusion of increasing categories of people from full citizenship (not least in the UK, where *jus solis* was rescinded in 1981).

Several respondents describe the terror that they felt on realizing that Muslims *en masse* – whatever their citizenship status, their loyalty to the state or other signs of integration – were seen as hell-bent on destroying western civilization by violent means. Minority people find themselves sometimes painfully (and also creatively) at the intersection of local, national and transnational influences. Their stories show that 'a watertight distinction between different spatial levels is untenable' (Olsen, 2005: 58). New media forms display the same 'imbrication': internet-produced news blurs boundaries between production and consumption and facilitates more fluid interchanges between different spatial 'levels' than in the past. Muslim informants, especially young people, do most of the talking here. The older generation is heard, but little from the old men. They may have been judged to have other outlets. In Sadaf Rizvi's and Ammar Al-Ghabban's work, the responses to insecurity and the 'War on Terror' are ambiguous. Pakistani mothers defer to their sons' reports of news about what is happening. There is a mix of revulsion and fascination when schoolgirls recount how images of 7/7 appeared on their mobile phones and images of Ken Bigley's beheading were transmitted through MSN Messenger. In the relative security of Edinburgh, Karen Qureshi contrasts the complacency of one 'white' family with a formerly well-integrated Pakistani family's visceral sense of insecurity. They indicate that they no longer consider the UK to be a secure place. Even formally equal citizenship does not reassure many Muslims about their future in Europe.

For many respondents (chiefly, however not only, Muslims), terror attacks are less frightening than the 'security' responses to them. Stories abound of the respondents or their relatives detained, journeys delayed, people stopped and searched. Everyone knows someone who has experienced what seems like anti-Islamic or racist prejudice from authority figures or passers-by. Media support for curbing human rights in the interests of the 'War on Terror' is threatening, and as Howard Zinn remarks: 'It's not just Muslims who are in danger but anyone who speaks out' (2002: 39). Detention without trial, rendition kidnappings and torture become normal under a system of 'global apartheid' which involves the 'forcible



isolation of people who are different' (Richmond, 1994: 206). The net effect is to further deprive states of what legitimacy and moral authority they had left. What is 'normal' is obviously not the same for everyone. 'Dominant groups seem uncannily able to shut out or ignore the injustice and suffering around them' (2001: 5). Samuel Cohen's observation seems peculiarly salient in the EU today. The Europe-wide network of detention camps for 'foreigners', for example, is almost invisible to the average EU citizen. A decade ago there was a handful of such camps; now they are legion (see Indymedia, 2006). Security breeds insecurity and profits for private businesses, further undermining state legitimacy. The implications of the 'War on Terror', its systems of detention, heightened border security and privatized security operations, are spelled out by Giorgio Agamben:

If sovereign power is founded on the ability to decide on the state of exception then the camp is the structure in which the state of exception is permanently realized. Hannah Arendt observed once that what comes to light in the camps is the principle that supports totalitarian domination and that common sense stubbornly refuses to admit to, namely, the principle according to which anything is possible. It is only because the camps constitute a space of exception – a space in which the law is completely suspended – that everything is truly possible in them. (2000: 22)

If such spaces are allowed to extend themselves yet further, the problem of legitimacy, democratic norms and inclusive citizenship may become irresolvable within the existing social order.

Some Muslim minorities in the UK live under conditions which approach siege, with whole families staying home at times of public feeling following terror attacks. The resources provided by the transnational framing of their identities and solidarities may come into their own during such times of crisis of the public authorities' legitimacy. Transnational modes of identification and solidarity represent not so much a lifestyle choice as a means to secure psychological and economic survival. Virtual and diasporic communities of solidarity are revitalized by the processes of racialization described in this volume. This includes second- and third-generation groups. Among the younger generation, online sources of information and outlets of expression have largely replaced the constant TV news characteristic of their parents' generation. New framing processes create new 'glocalized' spaces. Here the young in particular, with mixed and complex identities, can thrive, driven to assert themselves virtually and in physical space as more than passive victims of official neglect and media vilification. Within such spaces, people who are not used to being listened to can define their problems articulately, even come up with creative solutions. Thomas Olsen's study of the transnational Zapatista activist community is relevant here. He argues that:

The process of neoliberal restructuring since the 1970s and 1980s has affected large parts of the world's population in a way that enhances the potential



for constructing injustice frames that resonate beyond physical, social and cultural borders. (2005: 24)

There is a specific ‘injustice frame’ which the Muslim respondents in these studies largely seem to share, with many nuances: a worldwide Islamic diasporic community identified as dangerous by much better armed and media-rich western states with all their might within and at the borders. True, there are references here and there to the Islamic world’s imperfections. Moderate Muslims are besieged from all sides: by corrupt states in the lands of their forebears; by imperial military aggression throughout the Muslim world, especially in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine; by denigrating (or, at best, indifferent) media images of the West, simply for being Islamic. The sense of being targeted – even covertly – as guilty is a terrifying aspect of these studies. It seems to result from media and public blame in the ‘War on Terror’, but can be traced to the end of the Cold War, when a ‘new enemy’ was identified by defence experts. The bodies of Muslims, globally subject to multiple forms of humiliation, are always in a transition to a shared site of pride, the *umma*. Harassed, insulted, detained and fearful of deportation, Muslims identify with one another as besieged citizens of a non-existent ideal state. New and creative, transnational forms of communication and identity-formation enable some to renegotiate a sense of safety.

In these articles the local, national, global and individual levels are constantly connected and reconnected. The research respondents are almost entirely aware of what they are confronting and have relatively few illusions. This is not to say that they see things as they ‘really’ are, or have some privileged insight as ‘insider-outsiders’, although they may have. But clearly, the liberal dreams of democratic citizenships overcoming social polarization and the politics of identity are no longer so widely dreamed.

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