Vocabularies of citizenship

Citizenship theory has undergone a revival in the past 15 years, with the emergence of journals such as *Citizenship Studies* and many a book and article devoted to its consideration (Balibar, 2004; Klymicka & Norman, 1994; Young, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Citizenship is not merely an academic matter. Debates on who may or may not become a member of a polity and what such membership entails have been fuelled by recent historic events. These include the reshaping of national boundaries in Europe (Balibar, 2004); demands for the extension of rights and obligations to migrant labourers and asylum seekers (Gabriel & Macdonald, 1996; Soysal, 1994); new restrictions on immigration (Balibar, 2004; Sharma, 2006), the incarceration of nationals from other countries at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay (Agamben, 2005); and the suspension of the most basic of civil and legal rights in the wake of the so-called war on terror (Snaza, 2003; Zizek, 2001).

The discourse on citizenship is, as Ruth Lister asserts, “contested at every level from its very meaning to its political application, with implications for the kind of society to which we aspire” (2003, p. 3). In Canada, mentions of citizenship in the media often touch upon the independence and sovereignty of Québec (Oakes & Warren, 2007), on multiculturalism (Bannerji, 2000; Mooers, 2005), and on territorial land claims issues for First Nations peoples (Kulchyski, 2001). The deliberate dismantling of systems of social security and public services has given the concept of social citizenship new life in the field of social policy studies. (Lister, 2003; Marshall, 1950). Although most often associated with politics, the study of citizenship is germane to scholars beyond the disciplines of sociology and political science. Within communication studies, the term “citizenship” is echoed in calls for media democracy (Raboy, 2006), an end to digital divides (Crow & Longford, 2000; Shade, 2002), and for greater participation in and support for citizens’ media (Rodríguez, 2001).

Citizenship has a putative origin story—the roots of citizenship are said to lie in ancient Greece, the birthplace of the civic republic and tradition—however, theories of citizenship have bifurcated in an endless and dizzying set of divisions. In simplistic terms, there exists a primordial distinction between formal readings of political citizenship and more expanded versions of citizenship predicated in a communitarian ethos (Young, 2000). Within this schema the liberal notion of the citizen is a person who bears rights, both civil and political, that guarantee freedom, that provide formal equality to sovereign individuals, and that often bring about sets of obligations to serve one’s country or to obey its laws. In contrast, more communitarian theories of citizenship emphasize that citizenship is not sim-
ply about possessing a birth certificate, a passport, and the right to vote, all of which may instill either a sense of individual or collective rights or, conversely, obligations. From this communitarian perspective, political participation is idealized both as a civic duty and as a calling to realize one’s full potential as a political being (Lister, 2003).

Citizenship has been a key area of discussion for those at the margins of belonging, in either liberal democratic or communitarian terms (Berlant, 1997; Pateman, 1988; Warner, 2000; Yeatman, 2006). Commenting upon Hannah Arendt’s magnificent work The Origins of Totalitarianism (1973), Étienne Balibar notes:

The modern definition of the nation . . . leads to considering nationals who for various reasons are considered incapable of sharing active citizenship, such as in different periods of time women, minor children, sick or criminal individuals, as humans who are generally defective or lacking certain essential characteristics of humanity. In a more theoretical manner, you can say that basic « anthropological differences », such as difference among genders and sexualities, between the normal and the pathological, or differences between cultures and with regard to cultural skills, are systematically interpreted as inequalities, and affect the constitution of citizenship. (2001, pp. 9-10)

Critics of theories of citizenship point out that theoretical espousals of an abstract universal citizen may belie the actual ability of subjects to participate fully within the public life or political affairs of the state.

Morality, rights, law, nation, democracy, and community are a cluster of terms associated with what Ruth Lister so cogently calls the “vocabularies of citizenship” (2003, p. 3)—a lovely phrase that I gleefully appropriate in my retrospective ruminations on the submissions we have received over the past year that now comprise CJC 32.2. In bringing these articles to the last stages of production, I realized that many of them touched upon these themes, although they were not penned explicitly with the overarching notion of citizenship in mind. These discursive threads loosely bind these articles one to the other by way of this generative concept. They give rise to critical contemplation of the dynamics of power in operation within a nation at particular historical moments. For example, in “Cultivating the Taste of the Nation: The National Council of Women of Canada and the Campaign against ‘Pernicious’ Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” Anne-Marie Kinahan discusses the advent of the National Home Reading Union in 1895 and class-based notions of taste imbuing the cultivation of civic virtue. Kinahan critically interrogates the campaign against “pernicious” influences led by middle-class women, who as mothers were charged with the right to act as the moral guardians of national values. In “Locking Out the Mother Corp.: Nationalism and Popular Imaginings of Public Service Broadcasting in the Print News Media,” Sue Ferguson takes up the 2005 CBC lockout as an event that brought into relief the eclipsing of a radical vision of democracy by an overriding concern with nationalism within the ethos of public-service broadcasting. Ferguson’s incisive critique of the media coverage of the lockout is indebted to the work of Canadian postcolonial critics of multiculturalism and nationalism (Bannerji, 2000; Sharma, 2006).
During the past 15 years, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been ascribed with an almost mythical power to deliver information to Canadians and to instill greater public participation in the political process, often drawing upon highly problematic nationalist tropes to do so (Sawchuk & Crow, 1995). The governmental discourse on Internet technology is infused with values of the model citizen, as Naomi Fraser traces in her article “Creating Model Citizens for the Information Age: Canadian Internet Policy as Civilizing Discourse,” which deploys a Foucauldian discourse analysis to highlight the normative ideals conveyed within these documents. The implications of this neo-liberal agenda for the future of publicly available, commercial-free access to the Internet is the focus of Neil Barratt and Leslie Regan Shade’s commentary “Net Neutrality: Telecom Policy and the Public Interest,” which provides a concise summary of the stakes of this debate for Canadians. Gordon Gow’s research in brief “Public Alerting in Canada: Renewing the Emergency Broadcasting System” details the history of Canada’s emergency broadcasting system and the emerging policy framework needed for adequate “all hazards, all media” public alerting. Gow cogently outlines how the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is attempting to negotiate the imperatives of competition versus the public good in its deliberations on emergency broadcasting.

In “Victims’ Rights and the Struggle over Crime in the Media,” Carrie Rentschler explains how crime victims have become increasingly prominent in media depictions of crime in the United States. She gives an account of two factors that have contributed to this shift: the production of victims’ rights handbooks in the U.S., which counsel family members on how to conduct themselves during media interviews, and new interviewing techniques for journalists, which stress emotional empathy. For Rentschler, these factors have created a new class of citizens ascribed with rights, which are then taken up by families acting in proxy. This theme of law and order in the media is looked at in the Canadian context by Steven D’Arcy. His article, “The ‘Jamaican Criminal’ in Toronto, 1994: A Critical Ontology,” analyzes the media coverage of the tragic killing of Georgina Leimonis in the Toronto restaurant Just Desserts. Building upon Michel Foucault’s concept of a critical ontology, D’Arcy looks at how the media construction of a “criminal-kind” may all too readily became a euphemism for tighter policing and surveillance over an entire community.

Finally, while not directly tied to questions of citizenship, Jaigris Hodson and Phillip Vannini’s point of departure in “Island Time: The Media Logic and Ritual of Ferry Commuting on Gabriola Island, B.C.” is how community and belonging are experienced affectively within the ritual of commuting. In this case, the ferry ride becomes an occasion to reflect, ethnographically, upon the boat as a medium that instigates particular rituals of communication and a distinctive sense of time.

Although not comprehensive, drawn as it is from diverse submissions rather than from a call for papers, this collection of articles nevertheless indicates how the very notion of citizenship operates from one national context to another and quickly becomes entangled in deliberations on who should be included within or excluded from the territorial boundaries of the nation-state or a given political
and social community. For example, as Lauren Berlant argues, American citizenship has become privatized, sentimentalized, infantalized, and victimized such that “the most hopeful national pictures of ‘life’ circulating in the public sphere are not of adults in everyday life, in public, or in politics, but rather of the most vulnerable, minor or virtual citizens—fetuses, children, real and imaginary immigrants—persons that, paradoxically, cannot yet act as citizens” (1997, p. 5). While citizenship is often discussed in terms of a balance between the rights of individuals and the rights of a community, yet another paradox, as Étienne Balibar so cogently states, is this: “Not everything that is common is good, but also not everything that is good or just ought to be common” (2001, p. 2).

There is no easy solution to this vexed question of how to properly conceptualize citizenship contained in this brief editorial and overview. Instead, I invite you to imagine and deliberate, as Balibar suggests, new forms of “transnational citizenship or the new rights of (new) citizens without a pre-given or preexisting community” (2001, p. 13). In global conditions of the transformation of national boundaries, and in a historical moment when there is a danger that the legal rights associated with the liberal state may be eeked away, the challenge is to return to this fundamental notion of citizenship at the same time as we confront, with honesty, its ethical and political limits. Again, I return to Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism, whose accounts of human displacement, war, migration, racism, and fascism are eerily resonant.

This issue on the “vocabularies of citizenship” is dedicated to Nancy Alison Shaw, poet, media critic, wordsmith, and CJC contributor, who died on April 18, 2007. This quietly brilliant and truly interdisciplinary scholar was above all a writer. In an unfinished paper on the representation of Romeo Dallaire in the film Shaking Hands with the Devil, Nancy wrote that it “approaches memory not as a mechanism of retrieval, but as an act of witnessing, redress and reconciliation” (Shaw, 2006, p. 19). She eloquently commented that “retrospective acts of witnessing, such as Dallaire’s, have the potential given time and distance, to prompt remembrance and reflection while perhaps putting into perspective and/or letting go of what has been banished from memory both in individual terms and on a societal scale” (Shaw, 2006, p. 19). Nancy opened her paper with a moving quote from Dallaire on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Rawandan genocide: “The cold of death has no temperature. It just stings” (2006, p. 1). These words are a fitting honour to Nancy’s memory as well as to the memory of students and teachers who have died within this past year at colleges and universities in both Montreal and Virginia. Nancy Shaw reminds us that in witnessing, we remember, and in remembering, we engage in the never-ending task of critical reflection that can make a difference to the lives of others.

References


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