What the Bremen Town Musicians Tell Us about Citizenship's Potential

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A proposal for multilevel citizenship that can flourish inside and beyond the citizenship framed by the nation-state is compelling, in part because it flourishes already inside federal states, confederations, and in different guises within some regional projects, especially the European Union. I follow Rainer Bauböck in the proposal that enfranchising non-citizen residents in the communities where they live complements citizenship-as-nationality. Contrary to what Warren Magnusson suggests, I find that non-citizen local enfranchisement is highly important. Magnusson is, however, right that this forum is about more than non-citizen enfranchisement: it is about urban citizenship as a new narrative to address global problems. So, before I say more about enfranchisement, I want to sharpen some of the blurry contours of the urban citizenship debate in this forum.

A tale of two cities

Bauböck's charming phrase "Once upon a time, all citizenship was urban citizenship" reminded me of the *Bremer Stadtmusikanten* fairy tale about four domestic animals (a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster) who, after many years of service and company, are neglected or destined to be killed by their masters and so each of them decides to head to the free city of Bremen searching for a new beginning. Just like the *Bremer Stadtmusikanten* tale, several contributions to this forum are linked together by the idea that cities hold the promise of freedom and opportunities.

I, too, was a migrant in Bremen, and that city became my home in Germany. Later, becoming a German citizen meant something for me because it was the city-state of Bremen that naturalised me. My little local pride surely demonstrates Avner de Sahlit's remark that cities imply "a certain political and social consciousness". Yet, I was born in a city of 21 million inhabitants that we call, not unlovingly, a "monster." That is a realistic depiction: almost any corner of Mexico City has an overload of information too complex to decode unless it is *your* corner. Generally, cities like this are indomitable: some parts are fine, but others remain stuck in a war of all against all, poor and forgotten. What is worse, such cities are parasites. Beyond some participant government experiments and urban gardening here and there, they consume far more resources (e.g., energy and water) than they give back to the world.

The contrast between my two home cities helps me see that not all cities are or can aspire to be republics, just as not all people living in cities are lucky or wealthy enough to have moved there. The debate about urban citizenship must overcome the false binary of the well-off in the cities vs. the left-behind elsewhere because some cities are so big that they have space for both.

Global potential or urban form?

In the arguments and counterarguments in this forum, there is some arbitrariness about how to define cities and blurriness with regard to their form, on the one hand, and function or potential, on the other. The mere form of the city is of little use for developing a new narrative of citizenship, in my view. The function attributed to cities is that they concentrate resources and are therefore more prone to offer closer and more intense, frequent personal contact than other areas. Yet there is nothing inherent to cities that makes them natural havens for cosmopolitanism, just as the rural world is not necessarily less progressive and open, as Patti Lenard has argued. The proposal by Bauböck is mostly, I believe, about potential. Cities occupy more

of the globalised imaginaries of opportunity and thus are the destinations of not only spatial but also social mobility (Saunders 2011).[1] Thanks to their critical mass of risk-takers (especially the conglomeration of internal and international migrants), cities might be more open to experimentation than rural areas. Yet, Bauböck's argument also gets blurry when he admits that urban citizenship cannot be limited to cities only. It is then not clear why urban is the adjective that should qualify the new integrative narrative about citizenship. If it is supposed to apply to rural municipalities as well as to small towns, then it is perhaps better to speak about *local* citizenship , as suggested by Johanna Hase and others.

I would suggest that we focus in this debate on local citizenship for reasons other than the form of a city: what we are searching is a suitable unit for a contact, a community, and an effective collective organisation of energies to address concrete problems. The eulogies in this forum to the innovation by local polities illustrate a) cooperation to address or contest national or global issues, b) local communities' disobedience, which is in their power when they have some autonomy and can decide at least on policy regulation and implementation, c) democratic local-level practices, such as participatory budgeting. Clearly, these are neither exclusive to cities nor necessarily their attribute: they *can* happen in *some* democratic and governable cities.

For some current political challenges, Bauböck's hope seems appropriate; for instance, the recent alliance of capital city mayors of Višegrad countries shines a light that had almost been extinguished in Hungary and Poland.[2] However, for challenges such as climate change, even the (much cited in this forum) cities of the affluent North are too small to effect a change. We need a higher-level concerted action. Some days ago, a news piece reported that the amount of microplastic particles in the air of London is 20 times higher than in the Chinese city of Dongguan, which has been nicknamed the "world's factory."[3] The city-state of Singapore can be all the shades of green it wants; it still chokes under toxic clouds of smoke when forests burn in Sumatra.

The case for enfranchising all local residents

Now is a good time to come back to why the non-citizen voting rights struggle illustrates the potential that we see in local citizenship.[4] Although enacting local non-citizen voting might seem a rather small thing to do, it is important because of what it represents for citizenship (a formal dissociation of local citizenship from nationality), and because the mere struggle for it changes the way citizenship is exercised and understood (Pedroza 2019). It is important for local polities because it allows them to reinvigorate their democratic commitments, upgrading residence over nationality and allowing for participation on terms that awaken some of the best in liberal and republican traditions. For citizens and non-citizens alike, fighting for the enfranchisement of the latter is, in fact, so important that many are ready to invest years of work in long, painstaking reform processes.

The brave attempt of Hamburg to enfranchise its non-national residents was not the only one in Germany and not the first one either. Bremen's effort came earlier[5] and has also been the most consistent one. Despite the lack of success in enacting enfranchisement (frustrated by higher levels every time), some effects for the politics of migrant integration in Bremen, and beyond, are visible. Alternatives to electoral participation have been sought, tried, and found. The city councils of the district of Bremerhaven gave unparalleled powers to immigrant consultative bodies. Efforts trespassed the borders of the city and served to empower similar initiatives inside and beyond Germany. For years, associations like *Freiburger Wahlkreis 100%* have coordinated across the country to

[1] Doug Saunders, Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World, New York, NY: Pantheon, 2011.
[2] Deutsche Welle, "Eastern European Mayors Forge Anti-Populism Pact 16.12.2019", 29 December 2019.
[3] "Revealed: Microplastic Pollution is Raining Down on City Dwellers", The Guardian, 27 December 2019.

organise symbolic elections and have been training similar groups in Italy, France and in other continents to help them start their own upward struggles.

Such trans-local efforts cross borders and enact an integrative form of citizenship through the fight for the right to define identity and membership. In this sense, even parts of cities (electoral districts) push the boundaries of what seems to be fixed. Except for some federal states, most local efforts across states have to amass patience and political clout for years before they can create the political momentum and clout to hit the hard wall of the nation state's legal powers, and be able to formally redefine local citizenship.

Not only local citizenship should be emancipated from nationality

I do not see in Bauböck's proposal about restoring the local level of its citizen powers a panacea for global problems, but rather the search for a space and unit of social organisation that can define its ways and connect to others. And yet, there seems to be a tension in it because it proposes to keep that space nested in the nation-state, to allow for a larger social order and continuity. The tension comes from setting realistic limits to a narrative that we choose to use, time and again, because of its emancipatory power.

The hardest questions I have had to grapple with after studying non-citizen voting rights have to do with the injustice that some laudable enfranchisement reforms cover only the "legal residents". When we fantasize about virtuous cities in affluent places, we tend to forget that sovereignty and borders allow us to exclude the monstrous rest comfortably, we also bracket that many who are present already remain excluded by virtue of immigration controls. Today, immigration controls would likely impede the *Bremer Stadtmusikanten* to enter the city. Harald Bauder's contribution reveals the problem: "[T]he idea that a sovereign state can arbitrarily exclude people from its national community, even if they are already living in the country, has created the very problem that urban citizenship seeks to solve through including non-national residents".[6] I share his sceptic belief that recycling the same old concepts makes it unlikely that something new will pop up.

Still, we hold on to citizenship for a reason and I do believe in the alchemy of its language, which has transformed it into powerful narratives many times from antiquity until today. To me, some of the ideals contained in it seem a good Load Star to guide us in transcending the boundaries of nationality that trap citizenship nowadays. Since this forum is hosted by GLOBALCIT, I want to widen the challenge to the global/transnational: Why do we speak about local/urban citizenship as if cities and any formal citizenship offered the same opportunities? The most committed, experimental cities that we think of as models of urban/local citizenship rely on parasitic arrangements: a few enjoy privileges that are denied to natives on the margins, to the foreigners, armies of commuters, many migrants and to most people outside the borders. Political and economic interests backed by nation-state laws (by nationality and passports) divide people into categories with nested, but also widely different forms of belonging.[7] We are a far cry from realising the ideal of civic equality if we overlook those larger global relations.

What we are after in a new narrative of local citizenship is the *quality* of some "urban struggles", such as *Seebrücke* in Berlin or the sanctuary cities in the United States. Our task is to translate their integrative language, energy, and perhaps even their format so that they can find their way across borders and upwards, to provide the base for higher level and broader governance structures.

[4] As Magnusson suggests when he writes "people might be willing to cooperate in dealing with mundane issues like water supply and waste disposal even when they are in conflict about other things", local politics have the power to emphasise what is of immediate common concern among residents. Yet, I disagree that local issues are minimal. To assume that they are, reveals methodological nationalism and a biased thinking that anything other than national politics is boring. I fear that waste disposal is often used as an example to symbolically diminish the importance of local citizenship, when there is a range of local issues that are vastly more controversial for people, such as their right to send their children to certain schools, access to subsidies, or housing.

[5] Berlin, bluffing as ever, came later.

[6] Monica Varsanyi's remarks on open borders follow a similar line.

Searching for translocal community

To conclude: there is no reason why we should be partial to cities as suitable places for new emancipatory citizenship practices (as Enrico Gargiulo and Lorenzo Piccoli also show), other than to take it as a fact that these are the units where most of humanity's resources are concentrated. Cities that are similar in form are not necessarily equivalent in function or potential. I do think that the local level, which is different from the city as a form, presents the opportunity to create a community below, before and beyond nationality. In any case, however, local citizenship cannot be the answer to any serious problem of our time if it does not instigate translocal networking and frame a narrative that is ultimately emancipatory of nationality as our main frame for citizenship. It is that potential, not necessarily the form of the city, which we are looking for.

You may know how the Grimm brothers' tale of the *Bremer Stadtmusikanten* ends, but let me remind you of two things: the animals found their strength in creating a community, and did so well before they could reach the city.

See also

- Landau, Loren (2019) "Temporality, Informality, and Translocality in Governing Africa's Urban Archipelago". Conference on Migration, Mobility and Forced Displacement MIASA, Ghana.
- Pedroza, Luicy (2019) *Citizenship beyond Nationality. Immigrant Voting Rights across the World* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Saunders Doug (2011) *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World*, New York, NY: Pantheon.

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[7] This might be what Loren Landau (2019) means with "islands of membership.