



Discussion:
Is citizenship nationality?

Rebecca Fleckney

Welcome to the Open University's Open Politics podcast on Citizenship and Nationality.

I'm Rebecca Fleckney and I'm joined by Engin Isin Professor of Politics at the Open University here in the UK and Jacquelin Stevens Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University USA and author of States without Nations.

Engin, can I begin by asking you what your interest in citizenship is?

Engin Isin

My interest in citizenship actually comes from my background in activism. I started as an activist, especially in the urban setting, and I was interested in then history of activism in cities. And the idea of nationality came to my attention much later.

Rebecca Fleckney

Jacqui, where does your interest in citizenship come from?

Jacqueline Stevens

Well my interest comes out of I guess a more theoretical concern, that there's a seemingly incongruity between various countries commitments to liberal values on the one hand. And then on the other hand, this common acceptance that one's citizenship, which might be the most important thing one owns, is determined by birth.

Engin Isin

Between the two, there's always a tension. The notion of a citizen who has duties to the political community that one is a member of, is slightly different than one is a member as a national regardless of the duties that it brings. And I think that tension is an interesting aspect of citizenship that never goes away.

Jacqueline Stevens

My argument is that Birthright Citizenship has been the controlling norm for membership in all political societies since political societies existed.

Engin Isin

But Jacqui, I wonder if we can ... critically explore a little bit about it being not only transhistorical but also transpatial. For example, don't we have instances of non-Western societies not being able to really put too much emphasis birthright membership? Don't we have examples of societies or polities outside the West or that experience that we call 'the Western Experience'.

Jacqueline Stevens

Well, if you can come up with any examples, I'm really open to hearing them.

Engin Isin

Well I'll give you one example ...

Jacqueline Stevens

Okay.

Engin Isin

... and it's not, it's not a really well studied example, especially after reading your book, I began to think about it differently. And that example is the Ottoman Elite. For those listeners

who may not be familiar with Ottoman Empire, it's the Empire that lasted about, between 1200 and 1900 roughly and it was centred on, the nation state as we know, Turkey. Now the interesting practice with Ottoman Imperial authorities, was as empire expanded, it incorporated or assimilated subjects. And on the basis of these subjects converting to Islam, it actually received them as either soldiers or as students in schools that particularly were designed for producing Ottoman administrative elite. You could come to Istanbul, and you could just rise all the way to the upper echelons of Imperial administration. No questions ever asked; no problematisation; no really thinking about do we have brotherhood with this person who is now in charge of very significant Imperial administration? Now that changes when Turkey declares itself as a nation state. Turk, as a race, was invented, as recent as 1920s. One could really say that Ottomans did not have an idea of what it means to be a Turk.

Rebecca Fleckney

What sort of problems do you think being stateless causes for people?

Engin Isin

On the one hand we say that Birthright Citizenship is a right, as it is implied in the very phrase itself, birthright that is a right that one is due by virtue of being born in a territory. States, historically, have never hesitated to deprive citizenship rights to any group of people that they deemed as an existential threat to the existence of that state.

It should make us stop and think about what is the investment made in Birthright Citizenship when it cannot actually on the one hand fulfill the very liberal principle of consent to political community, and on the other hand, it cannot fulfill the very promise of fundamental of human rights either.

So Birthright Citizenship is not that far away from all sorts of programmes that we have seen states enact, such as purification, elimination, holocaust.

These are different forms of maintaining the purity as understood by a particular nation of its population. That's where it becomes even tragically dangerous.

Jacqueline Stevens

Rather than thinking of nationality as being built on ethnicity, it's much more accurate to think about ethnicity as parasitic on a nation... ethnicities are the imprint of the nation in different places.

So we only have ethnicities that are associated with past, present or aspirational nations. And then you can look at Yugoslavia as being an example of a country that preserved those kinds of political units, so that even on a Yugoslavian identity card you would have printed, Serbian, Croatian and so forth.

Those were not, subtle or passively experienced cultural attachments, but were still, promulgated through the state so that when political conditions changed those were readily available for people to organise through.

Rebecca Fleckney

How do you think that Birthright Citizenship conflates then with citizenship with nationality?

Engin Isin

Once we are born to a particular territory, we are incorporated in the images of that territory but participating in its myths of nation making. And every nation has a series of rituals and practices through which this myth of nation is reproduced.

From military service and organised war to education, to organisation of family life, it gets incorporated into peoples way of really being in this world as it were. And from that moment on, people take these practices, which are necessary social and cultural, to indicate that something something primordial about being born in that particular territory. Primordial in the sense that it is natural, immutable and unchangeable rather than social cultural and political.

The very idea of liberal citizenship is associated with being able to consent to the political community one is a member of and that one freely participates in it. But this really belies the

fact that, that very consent is not the case with Birthright Citizenship. Very small portion of world's population actually have consented to the state in which they live, the nation state. Vast majority, it's just a birthright or a birth event. And that makes it problematic for us for political reasons.

Rebecca Fleckney

Jacqui, would you agree?

Jacqueline Stevens

Well, as an alternative, I think that...we should eliminate Birthright Citizenship and allow people to become members of any political society with which they choose to affiliate, just as occurs in the United States when people move among states. So the fact that I'm born in California doesn't prohibit me from acquiring residence and living in say New York.

You can't eliminate attachments to the nation unless you eliminate the nation. And so if you only maintain free movement and you don't eliminate the institutions that support ideas of the nation, then there still would be these underlying psychological investments in these different nation states, and then therefore always the possibility of divisions and violence associated with them and not associated with other kinds of administrative units. So for instance, we don't see different cities going to war with each other. And so what I'm proposing is different ways of making the world look more like different cities instead of having these associations with the nation.

Engin Isin

Just think about the amount of resources that are spent in the world to maintain police and control borders, that we don't even ...think about its cost. Just imagine a world where these resources would actually be spent elsewhere, on education, on health, on environment and also it would automatically call into question the expenditure that is spent on military.

Rebecca Fleckney

It's fascinating, a very radical approach from you both, but Jacqui, can I ask you then, how is Birthright Citizenship related to the institutions of inheritance, marriage and land rights?

Jacqueline Stevens

The subtitle of the book *States Without Nations is Citizenship For Mortals*. And one of the overarching objectives is to think about ways of reconciling our laws with the condition of mortality. And one of the arguments is that we have a lot of inefficient laws based on anxieties people have about dying. And so the nation and marriage, inheritance are ways that, people try to confront their mortality.

If you belong to a nation that, one can imagine will exist after one dies, then that may provide some sense of comfort. And the same thing with ideas about passing on one's identity through a family line and passing on wealth. So that there are ways of trying to assuage anxieties about dying.

Rebecca Fleckney

Engin?

Engin Isin

What I find attractive about the way Jacqui's thinking about citizenship for mortals is the necessity to think about citizenship as membership or nationality in much broader strokes. We really need to think in much deeper terms historically, and to see the kind of human societies we have created, the kind of investments we have made and cultures and ways of dealing with one another we have created and where does our investment lie in our immortality.

Rebecca Fleckney

My thanks to Professor Engin Isin of the Open University and Jacqueline Stevens of Northwestern University.

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