



The Practice and Promise of Citizenship

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Abstract

Frederick Cooper's thought-provoking, globe-trotting history of concepts and practices of citizenship from antiquity to the present is an engaging book that sheds light on the difficulties we face in a globalizing and persistently unequal world.

Keywords: citizenship, empire, equality, human rights, inequality

Book reviewed

Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship, Inequality, and Difference: Historical Perspectives* (Princeton, 2018).

Frederick Cooper, professor of history at New York University, has published widely on the history of colonial and post-colonial Africa, on slavery and emancipation, as well as on decolonization and empires in world history. He has written archivally-rich, detailed studies, such as his *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (2014), but also more broad-ranging books that test the theoretical limits of history and the social sciences, including *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (2010), co-authored with Jane Burbank. *Citizenship, Inequality, and Difference* falls into the second category.

In this erudite and sweeping historical survey of concepts and practices of citizenship, Cooper takes the reader from antiquity to the

present, leaping from the Mediterranean world to the Americas, Africa, Europe, the Middle East and India. By analyzing such a vast temporal and geographical span, he opens up new possibilities for thinking about citizenship in the present. Cooper structures his study around two main principles: citizenship has been and continues to be exercised and contested in a diverse array of political units, thus confounding the subject-citizen (empire-democracy) dichotomy; and, rather than viewing citizenship as a kind of status, he adopts classicist Joy Connolly's approach to citizenship as a framework for debate and struggle over what it means to belong to a polity. This approach allows Cooper to avoid the pitfall of adopting an a priori normative position of viewing citizenship as a fixed set of rights and instead investigate the contestations over what it meant to be a citizen – how the relationship between the fact of belonging to a polity and the ability to make claims on it has evolved across time.

He begins his study with a short history of citizenship in ancient Greece and Rome, contrasting the more closed practices of citizenship in Athens to the expansion of citizenship under the Roman Republic and Empire. From the 'social war' of 91–88 BC, which Rome resolved by granting citizenship to all Italian males, to the Edict of Caracalla, which granted citizenship to all males within the vast territory of the empire in 212 AD, Rome's expansionist citizenship was fundamental to its success. While Caracalla's edict did not expand the political role of citizens in Rome, the number of people affected by Roman law greatly increased and it helped to establish the ideal of the cosmopolis that the Catholic Church would later inherit. The case of citizenship in ancient Rome demonstrates that citizenship is an ideal concept with which to explore the dynamic relationship between issues of ethnic, religious and cultural difference and the inclusionary logic of citizenship, themes to which Cooper returns in every section of the book.

In the next chapter, Cooper analyzes the evolution of citizenship in major empires from the early modern period to the early twentieth century. Focusing mostly on the Spanish, British and French empires, with brief forays into the contrasting cases of Germany, Russia and the Ottoman Empire, he convincingly argues that while city life stands at the basis of social categories like 'citizen', we must look to the history of empires to understand how concepts and practices of citizenship evolved across the centuries. This is because even within Europe,

early modern kingdoms brought linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse peoples together, and concepts and practices of citizenship bridged these differences to create a political community. Cooper demonstrates that we must not consider unitary citizenship within a modern nation state as an inevitable development or foregone conclusion anywhere in the world.

As an expert in colonialism, decolonization and empire in world history, Cooper presents an insightful analysis of how citizenship functioned in these empires over a period of about four hundred years but with a primary focus on the long nineteenth century. The fight for inclusion in the Spanish and British empires, among others, began as struggles for equality within the context of empire, not as struggles for the creation of an independent nation state that none of the revolutionary leaders foresaw. Time and again, Cooper demonstrates that no matter how oppressive imperial power was, the assertion from the metropole that all peoples who find themselves in the territory of an empire belong to the polity enabled disenfranchised, usually non-white peoples to claim the rights of citizenship. In the British and French cases, for example, the ruling elite implicitly associated citizenship with whiteness and Christianity, but because citizenship imposed a relationship to the state that was explicitly *not* defined by race, class or religion, the claims of colonial subjects (or citizens) could not be so easily ignored. On the eve of the outbreak of World War I, everywhere from the British and French empires to the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian, the political model of empire was far from exhausted. Yet tensions were palpable, especially between imperial and national citizenship as well as between a thickening citizenship for European men in the metropole and a continuing, even intensifying racism against all non-white peoples that threatened the stability of empire as the elites relied on indigenous labour and manpower in military service.

In the last chapter, Cooper traces citizenship from World War I to the present, focusing especially on different levels of citizenship, such as overarching citizenship superposed on a nation (e.g. the European Union from 1993 onwards) or differentiated citizenship within a nation state (e.g. France for part of the twentieth century and present-day India). The racialized nature of citizenship in particular came to a head in the twentieth century, as non-European political activists such as Mohandas Gandhi first began a fight for equality within empire but

came up against a rigid white supremacy that pushed them to advocate for independence from empire. Meanwhile, many French settlers in Algeria argued that they should have full citizenship rights but also full autonomy in Algeria in order to maintain the subjugation of indigenous Algerians. Cooper convincingly argues that while the standard history of post-revolutionary French citizenship is the story of one indivisible national citizenship, the French actually debated the possibilities of a differentiated imperial and post-imperial citizenship well into the 1950s. He highlights how colonial subjects from diverse parts of the French empire, such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, fought for the equal rights of colonized peoples while the French colonial lobby attempted to block such activism but fight for their own equal rights and autonomous power in the colonies. Decolonization occurred in the post-World War II period not because of the benevolence of Europeans but because of the active claims made by indigenous peoples and because European states were unwilling to take on the financial burden of extending an increasingly expensive social citizenship that resulted from the rise of the welfare state.

Cooper concludes his historical survey with some very insightful comments on the prospects of citizenship in the twenty-first century. Firstly, he reminds us that unitary citizenship in the nation state is a relatively recent development, being a reality in most of the world only for the past half century, while differentiated citizenship in the context of empire has a much longer history throughout the world. As he remarks, this should open us up to the possibility that rights can be defended at different levels, offering us new ways of thinking through the dichotomy of the inclusion offered by cosmopolitan citizenship and the oppression of conformity to local custom. He charts a middle course between left-wing advocates of global citizenship and right-wing nationalists:

There are too many differences in values and interests around the world to think, beyond the most utopian imagination, of a single global citizenship enforced by a single set of institutions, and there are too many connections across borders to think of a future in enclosed blocks of citizens. The question is whether we can debate and work through these two perspectives, acknowledge particularity and commonality, and reconfigure state and international institutions that cut across such lines. (144)

Covering such a large geographical and temporal scope in just 150 pages opens one up to certain criticisms. Cooper is at times overly schematic such that a wider social and cultural context behind different concepts and practices of citizenship is lacking. While his book is structured chronologically, the geographical expanse that he covers occasionally makes his story a bit disjointed; at times, one encounters description of various moments in time and place rather than a close analysis of change over time attuned to explanation. Additionally, one immediately gets the sense that Cooper is on more solid ground when writing about the history of France and its empire, as the broader context comes more sharply into view than when he writes about the Ottoman or British empires, for example.

The benefits of Cooper's expansive treatment certainly outweigh the drawbacks, however. He shows that citizenship is both about our relationships with each other and with a state and that the concept is therefore of central importance if we want to confront enduring inequalities both within and between states. His claim at the close of his study that 'enjoying civil, political, and social rights becomes a value that, one can argue, should apply to everyone' (145) might not seem sufficiently radical to some, but given the frequency of exclusion, racism and genocide in world history, it becomes clear just how revolutionary the inclusive logic of citizenship was and continues to be.

About the Author

Devin Vartija obtained his PhD (cum laude) in history at Utrecht University in 2018 where he is currently a lecturer in the Department of History. His book, *The Colour of Equality: Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought*, is the first study to systematically interrogate the strands of equality and inequality, common humanity and racial classification that run through Enlightenment thought and is under contract with University of Pennsylvania Press. His essay 'Racism and Modernity' was recently published in the *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* and his paper 'Empathy, Equality, and the Radical Enlightenment' appeared in the volume edited by Steffen Ducheyne, *Reassessing the Radical Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017). E-mail: d.j.vartija@uu.nl