

Book Review

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The Paradox of Citizenship in American Politics: Ideals and Reality, by Mehnaaz Momen, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 265 pp. \$130.63 hardback. ISBN: 978-3-319-61529-5.

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The history of American citizenship should not be read teleologically as the progressive expansion of rights on offer to an ever-widening segment of the population accorded the designation of full citizen. Rather it should be understood as shaped by a number of paradoxes that establish enduring tensions and conflicts about the meaning and significance of being a citizen in the American context. This, in a nutshell, is the thesis of Mehnaaz Momen's ambitious book. In her own words, the evolution of "citizenship in the American polity" should be read as "paradoxes and anomalies" rather than as "coherent narratives" (p. 3). To explore this claim, the book is divided into five analytically discrete but empirically overlapping themes: American identity, nation-building, world relations, immigration, and state power.

As with so many works on citizenship, Momen begins by turning, albeit briefly, to the classical essay by T.H. Marshall. It would have been beneficial for what follows to appreciate that however important Marshall's essay is, it does not attempt to address citizenship as a totality, but rather is concerned about the expansion of citizen rights. He ignores citizenship as membership, as belonging to a polity, taking it as a given in what he understood to be a fairly homogeneous and fixed understanding of national identity (this just before the Windrush arrived in Tilbury Docks, a development that as the current scandal in the UK attests, has had an enduring impact on citizenship as a boundary-drawing device). Likewise, he pays scant attention to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship, presuming that in contemporary liberal democracies, the reality is that citizens are asked to do very little besides pay taxes and obey the law—except during moments of collective efflorescence in which the "Dunkirk spirit" takes hold. I note this because Momen's book would have benefitted from a crisper distinction of these three facets of citizenship. It would also have benefitted from a more careful attention to facts, as with the claim that Marshall's understanding of social rights is only in a limited way applicable to the US case since such rights are often tied to employment. In fact, social rights being tied to employment is a general feature of welfare states in all western democracies since they are financed by taxes (this was made quite explicit in the founding of the Swedish welfare state, one of the most robust in the world).

The chapter on American identity examines the tension between republicanism and liberalism, the former stressing the obligations and willingness to sacrifice expected of citizens, while the latter prioritizes rights. Momen contends that as liberty came to be conceived primarily as a private matter, liberalism tended to get the upper hand in this tension, though republicanism never disappeared—a familiar argument dating at least to Tocqueville's account of the impact of individualism on notions of American identity. If issues related to full societal membership early on revolved around issues of class—property owners versus those without property—since race and gender divisions were taken for granted, things became more complicated over time with the expansion of the nation westward, justified by the idea of Manifest Destiny, and the place of the indigenous population remained a fraught issue. This is the topic addressed in the following chapter on nation building. National expansion involved the acquisition and incorporation of territories that resulted in the existing 50 states. Colonialism—predicated on a distinction between colony and metropole—had a limited impact centered on the acquisition of Spanish colonies after the Spanish-American War of 1898. In this territorial expansion, race came front and centre into debates over who counted as a citizen, as it did in the aftermath of the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, which have subsequently served as fundamental to establishing who is a citizen and what the equality accorded to all citizens entails.

The following chapter on international relations looks at the impact on citizenship of the US as an increasingly powerful nation on the world stage—with a particular focus on the post-World War II era. It is at this point in the book that Momen attempts to indicate the salience of the historical sedimentation of citizenship, doing so by making big and sometimes questionable claims and engaging in historical leap frogging, when what was called for was a more careful and nuanced historical analysis. Two examples illustrate the problem. First, Momen states that the social rights of the American welfare state were chiefly the product of the ideological struggle against communism during the Cold War, when in fact the New Deal that established the welfare state was prompted by the distress of the Great Depression a decade earlier. Second, she attempts to tie American citizenship rights to NAFTA, but despite accurately describing some of the impacts of the agreement, fails to indicate how it has transformed rights.

The chapter on immigration offers a thumbnail sketch of the impact of newcomers on understandings of “us” versus “them” in both matters of law and in terms of public opinion. It covers a lot of historical ground, not doing so in sequential order, but rather moving back and forth in time, the recurring message being that immigration policies have been primarily shaped by the tension between political and economic considerations. At times, it muddles the distinction between labour migrants and refugees/asylum seekers and in one instance fails to appreciate the profound differences between two total institutions created by the state: the reservation system versus Japanese American internment camps. Nevertheless, the overall focus on the relevance of race to matters pertaining to citizenship is convincing. The final chapter on state power offers a breezy account of the role of new computer-mediated technologies in shaping new fora for citizenship discourse and debate along with an account of the new potential these technologies afford the state in surveillance—which has become a more pressing issue in the post-9/11 era.

On the whole, the book is engagingly written and has much to commend it. Indeed, I agree with much of what Momen has to say. However, the book’s sheer ambition creates formidable challenges for offering a sufficiently detailed and nuanced analysis of each of five topics it addresses. Moreover, one thing missing is a genuine sense of agency on the part of citizens and aliens seeking to become citizens, be they workers in the nineteenth century, African Americans from Reconstruction through the civil rights movement up to Black Lives Matter, the women’s movement from the Seneca Falls Convention in the 19th century to the #MeToo movement today, and immigrant rights activists past and present. To what extent have they succeeded in bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice?