Genealogies of Citizenship

As market fundamentalism has moved from the margins of debate to global doctrine, three decades of market-driven governance is transforming growing numbers of rights-bearing citizens into socially excluded internally stateless persons. Against this perilous movement to organize society exclusively by market principles, Margaret Somers argues that the fragile project of sustaining socially inclusive democratic rights requires the countervailing powers of a social state, a robust public sphere to hold it accountable, and a relationally sturdy civil society. In this original and path-breaking work, from historical epistemologies of social capital and naturalism, to contested narratives of civil society and the public sphere, to Hurricane Katrina’s racial apartheid, Somers alerts us that the growing moral authority of the market is distorting the meaning of citizenship from noncontractual shared fate to conditional privilege, making rights, inclusion, and moral worth dependent on contractual market value. Genealogies of Citizenship advances an innovative view of rights as necessary public goods rooted in an alliance of public power, political membership, and social practices of equal moral recognition – in short, the right to have rights. A remarkable rethinking of freedom, human rights, and social justice, this is political, economic, and cultural sociology and social theory at its best.

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Cambridge Cultural Social Studies

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“Margaret Somers’ *Genealogies of Citizenship* is a profound and original defence of socially inclusive democratic citizenship. It combines a sophisticated theoretical and philosophical defense of the normative foundations of this moral ideal with compelling explorations of the conditions for its robust sustainability. The book’s provocative thesis – under-regulated, expansionary markets constitute a deep threat to this form of citizenship – is powerfully and convincingly argued. It deserves to be widely read and debated by anyone worried about the future of democratic society.”

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“This book is required reading for anyone interested in how neoliberalism redeﬁnes social boundaries. With characteristic elegance, breadth, and theoretical mastery, Somers develops a complex analysis of social exclusion and inclusion. Knowledge cultures, narratives and the law ﬁgure prominently in this new account of citizenship. A tour de force that will be long remembered …”

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“Disinterring histories of the market-fundamentalist present, this is a devastatingly trenchant, profoundly creative, critique of privatized citizenship. Reclaiming the right to have rights, Somers puts critical social theory to work in what amounts to a radical new vision for social justice and progressive politics.”

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“Margaret Somers is a renowned polymath. In *Genealogies of Citizenship* she obliterates common divisions among sociology, history, moral philosophy, and politics to fashion an exhilarating new form of social inquiry that advances long-standing debates in social theory and offers a searching meditation on contemporary citizenship in extremis.”

Charles Camic
Professor of Sociology, Northwestern University
“Genealogies of Citizenship might well provide the definitive sociological and political critique of the era of market fundamentalism. Building on Karl Polanyi, T. H. Marshall, and Hannah Arendt, Margaret Somers demonstrates that civil society rests on the right to have rights. But this right has been swept away by three decades of market-dominated discourse and policies. Somers brilliantly shows how Hurricane Katrina’s devastating impact on New Orleans was the culmination of this dynamic.”

Fred Block
Professor of Sociology, University of California at Davis

“With extraordinary erudition and theoretical acuity, Margaret Somers examines the dominant ideas, legal and economic practices that link many of us together as a community, and marginalize others of us. She argues that market fundamentalism assaults democratic rights and profoundly threatens democracy.”

Frances Fox Piven
Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology, Graduate Center of the City University of New York

“Genealogies of Citizenship offers many intellectual rewards. Somers provides, at once, an incisive analytic for approaching the internal exclusions of liberal democratic societies, a sophisticated meditation on the citizenship concept, and an eloquent indictment of a ‘market fundamentalism’ which ultimately subverts citizenship’s highest aspirations.”

Linda Bosniak
Professor, Rutgers University School of Law
Genealogies of Citizenship

Markets, Statelessness, and the Right to Have Rights

Margaret R. Somers
Resignation was ever the fount of man’s strength and new hope. Man accepted the reality of death and built the meaning of his bodily life upon it. He resigned himself to the truth that he had a soul to lose and that there was worse than death, and founded his freedom upon it. He resigns himself, in our time, to the reality of society which means the end of that freedom. But, again, life springs from ultimate resignation . . . Uncomplaining acceptance of the reality of society gives man indomitable courage and strength to remove all removable injustice and unfreedom. (Karl Polanyi)

We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights . . . and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights. Stateless people could see . . . that the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was their greatest danger . . . It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man. The loss of home and political status became identical with expulsion from humanity altogether.

(Hannah Arendt)

By social citizenship, I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society . . . which in turn means a claim to be accepted as full members of the society, that is, as citizens.

(T. H. Marshall)
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In *After Virtue* the moral philosopher Alasdair Macintyre suggests that all moral and political philosophy presupposes a sociology. To argue for how the world *ought* to be, one must have a set of assumptions about how the world already *is*. Unfortunately, sociologists have all too rarely returned the compliment to philosophers. To this day there exists no such thing as a real sociology of rights. Since its nineteenth-century origins, sociology has self-consciously and militantly carved out for itself a separate professional identity as an empirical science in contrast to the “normative speculations” of philosophy. Because questions of what counts as right or just are seen as normative, not empirical, worries, a division of labor and turf divides sociologists who write about people who fight for rights from philosophers who worry about the *meaning* of those rights. The philosophical and sociological traditions have rarely been joined. Although sociologists too cautiously respect this distribution of intellectual turf, one of the most popular subjects of our discipline – social movements and their participants – have displayed no such cautious professionalism. Social movement actors have almost always articulated their motivations and goals in (often competing) languages of justice, entitlement, and above all rights. Disciplined by the discipline, however, students of social movements have by and large not focused on the meanings and normative impulses behind these rights-based desiderata; instead they have concentrated on the structures, resources, mechanisms, and “frames” of mobilization, organization, and contentious politics. To be sure, organizational mechanisms and the dynamics of power are of critical import to the work of making sense of the social world. But they should not crowd out attention to the more normatively driven powers of justice and rights. In a pluralist knowledge culture, the empirical and the normative are mutually interdependent.
This volume is intended to contribute to a new sociology of rights. Its goal is to identify the processes and relationships that support or disable democratic citizenship regimes, which requires historicizing rights. Throughout the chapters, I aim to identify the conditions – institutional, associational, cultural, normative, economic, etc. – that can account for varying genealogies of citizenship and rights over time and space. By putting together a picture of the different frameworks that have embedded the claims, violations, and support for citizenship rights, we can gain critical glimpses into a sociology of human rights more broadly.

My passion for citizenship theory did not begin as such. Rather it began with an abiding ache and an unrelenting itch – an ache for social justice and human rights, and an itch to understand why they always seemed to be increasingly distant possibilities. First as an undergraduate and then in graduate school I, like so many others of my generation, turned to sociology to salve that ache and scratch that itch. I turned to a sociology of citizenship only when I recognized its signature role as a proxy and sublimation for a sociology of rights. In so doing, however, I discovered that the two are really one, for citizenship rights and rights as such are inescapably mutually implicated and constituted. Citizenship is the right to have rights.

Without an existing sociology of rights from which to draw, mine is also by necessity a project in the invention of knowledge. While I am by training a historical sociologist, the scholarly work in this volume is wide-ranging and eclectic, and the research does not fit neatly under any single area in sociology. I consider myself in equal parts a practitioner of sociolegal studies and citizenship formation, a sociological theorist, an economic sociologist, a sociologist of knowledge and ideas, a political sociologist, and a critical theorist. Beyond sociology, my work draws from the fields of legal theory and history, political and social theory, British, American, and French economic and cultural history, anthropology, historical demography, and politics. My methodology is eclectic and includes comparative historical, theoretical, epistemological, philosophical, and cultural approaches.

Still, there is a unifying impulse to this multiplicity. It is that same preoccupation with social justice and human rights with which I began, a belief in the necessity and power of history to provide alternative futures, and a deep conviction that the work of building a sociology of rights is through the genealogies of citizenship. In this respect, my work is clearly more than academically detached. I am motivated by the urgency of holding back the corrosive impact on democratic citizenship and human rights of both market fundamentalism and the overreaching of...
state power today. Rather than passively accepting the current erosion of citizenship and rights, we need to reclaim their original promise, and to address the racial, ethnic, and gender injustices submerged beneath their beneficent sheen. And as rights are inexorably matters of the public sphere, it is also a project in public sociology. I aspire to work as a public sociologist to bring to the surface for inspection and demystification all the complexities of citizenship and human rights. I thus take on board the mandate of Michael Burawoy, recent president of the American Sociological Association, in his exhortation to include that of public sociologist among legitimate sociological practices. This book was written with this vision of the public sociologist clearly in mind.
Acknowledgments

My list of acknowledgments is especially long and deep as I have accumulated a true embarrassment of riches and debts in the course of writing the chapters that comprise this volume. For a glorious year and a half between 1995 and 1997 I was in residence at the European University Institute (EUI), Florence, Italy – first, as a Jean Monnet Fellow in the European Forum, and then as a visiting professor in the Department of History. I am enormously grateful to Steven Lukes and Klaus Eder, co-directors of the Forum’s theme year on “Citizenship,” for inducting me into the rich intellectual life of the EUI, introducing me to the addictive wonders of Florence and, above all, for their enduring friendships and abiding confidence in my work. I am also grateful especially to John Brewer who made possible my subsequent appointment in the History Department. While it is John who deserves credit for my good fortune in being able to extend my stay in Florence, it was only possible thanks to generous support from the German Marshall Fund of the United States, which awarded me a research fellowship for 1996–7. While in residence at the EUI, in addition to the aforenamed, I was surrounded by a wonderful group of colleagues and friends, each of whom contributed in critical ways to my thinking and writing on citizenship, political culture, and historical epistemology: Carlos Closa, Laurence Fontaine, Jack Goody, Patricia Grimaldi, Agnes Horvath, Christian Joppke, John McCormick, Alessandro Pizzorno, Gianfranco Poggi, Giovanna Procacci, Yasemin Soysal, Arpad Szakolczai, and John Torpey.

In 1998–9 I was honored to be appointed to be the A. Bartlett Giamatti Faculty Fellow at the University of Michigan’s Institute for the Humanities. So many people contributed to that rewarding year, starting with Tom Trautman, then the Director, as well as Mary Price and Eliza Woodford – the Institute’s two spectacular administrators and friends, who made my year not only productive but also fun and funky. Over the
course of the same period, some critical research needs were met by a small grant I am grateful to have been awarded by the Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline, under the auspices of the American Sociological Association and the National Science Foundation. In 2000–1, I was awarded a residential Research Fellowship at Yale University’s Program in Agrarian Studies. James Scott (one of my long-time intellectual heroes) directed the program and led the legendary Friday seminar with a flair, generosity, and attention that made the year so intellectually gratifying. Several colleagues and lasting friends made my stay in New Haven even richer, especially Arun Agrawal, Debbie Dacunto, Rebecca Hardin, Donald Moore, Sylvia Tesh, and Carol Rose. During this time I was surprised and delighted to incur yet another debt from the George and Eliza Howard Foundation (located at Brown University), which awarded me their generous “Outstanding Mid-Career Fellowship.” It is an award that I especially cherish as I shared the honor with only one other sociologist, Roger Gould, a friend and great social scientist who died so tragically young in 2001.

In 2003–4 I spent a wonderful year as an External Fellow at the Center for Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture (CCACC), Rutgers University. It was an exciting year, both intellectually and collegially, thanks largely to Linda Bosniak’s skillful and creative directorship. Thanks to her own scholarly accomplishments, I benefited not only from Linda’s critical contributions to the theme year on “Citizenship,” but also from the other seminar members and the extended presence of several extraordinary visitors, among whom I must single out Étienne Balibar, someone whose work has for years inspired me and who has since become a friend and generous reader of my work. In addition to Linda and Étienne, I want to note how much my visit that year was enhanced in every way by David Abraham, Sandy Abraham, Susan Anable, Martin Bunzl, Deborah Hertz, and Yoav Peled.

For making it possible for me to finish this book, my heartfelt gratitude goes to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a 2006–7 Faculty Fellowship for university teachers, and to New York University’s International Center for Advanced Studies (ICAS), where I spent the academic year 2006–7 as a Center Fellow on the theme of “Rethinking the Social,” the last of ICAS’s stimulating three-year project on “Globalization and the Authority of Knowledge.” My thanks go especially to the program directors Tim Mitchell and Tom Bender. In addition, I want to thank Amy Koteles and Greg Morton for making ICAS such a comfortable place to work, as well as the many colleagues and friends whose warmth and generosity so greatly enhanced my New York sojourn, especially Monique Girard, Kathleen Gerson, Linda
Acknowledgments


The challenge of trying to identify by name all of the intellectual communities, colleagues, and friends who have sustained me over the years is daunting, and I can only apologize in advance to those I will have inevitably neglected to list. Among the many students who have performed critically important tasks with brains, brawn, and good-naturedness, I would like to thank especially Weining Gao, Camilo Leslie, Jane Rafferty, and Chris Roberts. Our “Goils Group” was a wonderful setting for intellectual discourse, and served as a fun and stimulating site for a critical reading of a very early version of the introduction. At that time, the group included Julia Adams, Julie Skurski, Ann Stoler, and Katherine Verdery, and I owe them all thanks for their careful suggestions and insights. My intellectual debts to those who read and commented on one or more chapters are ample, and include Julia Adams, Jeff Alexander, Elizabeth Anderson, Renee Anspach, Dan Bell, Mabel Berezin, Fred Block, Rogers Brubaker, Craig Calhoun, Frank Dobbin, Geoff Eley, Gloria Gibson, Wally Goldfrank, Tom Green, Ira Katznelson, Michael Kennedy, Howard Kimeldorf, Hadassah Kosak, Marion Kozak, Michele Lamont, C. K. Lee, Rick Lempert, Terry McDonald, Mark Mizruchi, Gina Morantz-Sanchez, Frances Piven, Art Stinchcombe, Ann Stoler, George Steinmetz, Marc Steinberg, Ron Suny, Charles Tilly, and Mayer Zald. Tom Bender, Tim Mitchell, Steven Lukes and the members of the ICAS Friday seminar provided energetic feedback and excellent comments on the introduction and chapter 1, as did Elizabeth Anderson, Deb Cowen, Julia Elyachar, Wolf Heydebrand, Alondra Nelson, Chris Otter, Marc Steinberg, Diana Yoons, and, above all, Allen Hunter, who gave so generously of his time and bearing intellect. Finally, I owe special heartfelt thanks to Jeff Alexander, Renee Anspach, Fred Block, Chas Camic, Leslie DePietro, Geoff Eley, Wally Goldfrank, Tim Mitchell, and Tobin Siebers who not only read and commented on the introduction and chapter 2 but kept faith with me when all else had failed to get me to let go of this volume.

Several heroic figures are owed special thanks for their remarkable abilities to meet the unusual and truly daunting challenges that have been involved in this book’s production. Thanks go to Claire Whitlinger for her generosity of spirit and computer, organizational, and time-management skills; to Liz Warburton who gave of her scarce time when I most needed it; to Patricia Preston, who never blanched at the extended trials of contributing to a legible manuscript; to Megan Remaly, who seemed to appear almost magically exactly when I needed her to solve emergency technical crises, to apply her boundless computer skills to tame recalcitrant diagrams and figures, and to patiently work through iteration after iteration of my
illegible hand-written editing – all during the crucial last six or seven months of this book’s preparation; and to Carrie Cheek of Cambridge University Press who worked with me with unfailing patience throughout the process of preparation and production.

My final appreciations go to Fred Block, Wally Goldfrank, and Leslie DePietro, for whom words escape me that are adequate to express just how blessed I feel for their presence in my life and for all they have given me in the way of support, inspiration, and exemplary generosity. My mother, Anne R. Somers, continues to amaze and inspire me. Indeed, the more I try to honor her long, brave, and accomplished life, the more grateful I am for her continuous support over the years. I dedicate this book to my mother and to my father, Herman “Red” Somers, as well as to Enid and Stan Adelson, Lynne Klein, Anna Keifer, Ralph Miliband, and Marion Kozak. As corny as it may sound, I also dedicate it to the remarkable people of New Orleans who were betrayed not by Hurricane Katrina but by an indifferent market-driven government.

I am grateful to the following for giving me permission to republish essays that first appeared in their pages. All of these have been revised substantially for this book.


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New York City
January 2007