



# From acts of citizenship to transnational lived citizenship: potential and pitfalls of subversive readings of citizenship

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2022.2091242>

**Document Version**

Final published version

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Müller, T. R. (2022). From acts of citizenship to transnational lived citizenship: potential and pitfalls of subversive readings of citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 26(4-5), 584-591. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2022.2091242>

**Published in:**

Citizenship Studies

**Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

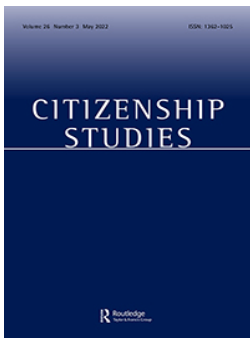
**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Takedown policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact [uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk) providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.





## From acts of citizenship to transnational lived citizenship: potential and pitfalls of subversive readings of citizenship

Tanja R. Müller

To cite this article: Tanja R. Müller (2022): From acts of citizenship to transnational lived citizenship: potential and pitfalls of subversive readings of citizenship, *Citizenship Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13621025.2022.2091242](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2022.2091242)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2022.2091242>



Published online: 30 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 77



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# From acts of citizenship to transnational lived citizenship: potential and pitfalls of subversive readings of citizenship

Tanja R. Müller 

Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

## ABSTRACT

I interrogate the emancipatory potential of the activist turn in the study of citizenship, ranging from the conceptualisation of citizenship as everyday practices and/or resistance to exclusionary nation-state practices to forms of transnational lived citizenship that have become ever more prevalent with globalisation. I argue that such an activist understanding has the potential to advance the well-being of populations that lack legal status. It can also foster rights-based claims for inclusion and create allegiances with different societal actors, locally, nationally, as well as globally. At the same time, such a partly subversive definition of citizenship as practice risks being unduly romanticised in its emancipatory potential. I conclude that activist citizenship as a category of analysis and practice is at its most emancipatory when focusing on new subjectivities that emerge in mobile transnational lives, often literally in the geographical space of the city.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 January 2022  
Accepted 30 March 2022

## KEYWORDS

Transnationalism; solidarity; subversion; emancipation; exclusion; *city-zenship*

The last decades have seen activist turns in the study of citizenship and the emergence of critical citizenship studies with a focus on citizenship as process that in turn can be studied through everyday encounters and practices (Isin and Nielsen 2008). This has been mirrored by a renewed focus on mobility as a core human endeavour. In fact, the figure of the migrant has been identified as the key character in the contemporary age. This has resulted in the claim that it is necessary to rethink political theory as a politics of movement or *kinopolitics* (Nail 2015). Taking mobility as the core human activity goes beyond a focus on migration as necessarily involving the crossing of borders. Rather, it allows to analyse mobility as a social condition based on different forms of expulsions, including territorial, political, juridical, economic, or cultural. The mobilities those create drive the establishment and transformation of societies. This immediately raises important questions in relation to dominant definitions of citizenship based on a statist perspective, a perspective that is built upon a division between migrants versus citizens as outsiders versus insiders.

It also reminds us of what Hannah Arendt wrote in relation to the refugee, who in essence is a migrant whose rights as a citizen have been put into jeopardy: Arendt (2004) observed how the very right to have rights is connected to being a citizen of a particular state. This has led to the claim that the refugee, and the same can be said for mobile populations more generally, embodies the vanguard of a future political community of

cosmopolitan subjects. Precisely because of the existence of the migrant as a key contemporary figure, we are forced to re-consider the presumed close connection between being a human and being a citizen. Alternatively, mobile populations can be regarded as the key symbol for the contradictory logic of an international political order whereby universal human rights are distributed (or denied) in practice through the exclusionary politics of nationalism, be it of the nation state or supra-national bodies.

This has been evident, for example, at various European borders. It includes the current disputes about migrants trying to reach UK territory from France; those stranded at the European Union border between Belorussia and Poland; or the mechanisms of the so-called migration deal between Turkey and the European Union. But even for those stranded at those and multiple other borders in the Global North and Global South, the story is not a simple tale of inclusion versus exclusion. Rather, it is a story of contestation, resistance, and sometimes new forms of solidarity, all linked intimately to transnational forms of identity, belonging, and aspirations, but at the same time nurtured by underlying allegiances to imagined communities deeply intertwined with nation states.

Different expressions have been coined for this state of affairs, including the term ‘ambiguous citizenship’ that seeks to denote the various forms of stratifications that determine migrant lives on an axis of inclusion versus exclusion, while at the same time proposing to move away from the nation state as the locus of definitions of citizenship (Ní Mhurchú 2014). Another way to analyse these dynamics is the concept of ‘makeshift citizenship’ (Nyers 2013, 38) that allows us to focus, in concrete detail, almost like under a microscope, on migrant practices at specific moments in time, practices that result in a deeper understanding of transnational belonging.

These modifications in the definition of citizenship are key examples of the activist turn in conceptions of citizenship. This turn has made it possible to move beyond locating citizenship as a form of status that identifies a subject versus the nation state (or some supra-national structure), but instead to focus on the practices that create (quasi-)citizens in relation to the spaces that determine their everyday lives, thus a form of *city-zenship*. The term *city-zenship* denotes the city as a key space where (quasi-) citizenship is being performed and experimented with, visible not least in the naming of such political activism as, for example, sanctuary city; city of refuge; or more broadly, in particular in Latin American cities, communes of reception.

Such a conceptualisation of activist *city-zenship* centres on the in-between spaces migrants as the key figure in the age of globalisation occupy. In doing so, it has the potential to go beyond the often-discussed means to foster agency and resistance against the state that has dominated some of the literature on activist citizenship in the past decades, even if this remains an important aspect. Taking lived citizenship in all its dimensions seriously includes aspirational dimensions of citizenship and asking to what extent the nation-state remains a decisive arena of aspired citizenship, identification, and political belonging (Brubaker 2010). In actual fact, as has not least been demonstrated in important work on refugees and the refugee condition, the dynamics of persecution and national belonging are far from straightforward but messy, complex, and often contradictory. Thus, theorizing citizenship as acts does not inherently write off the nation state. Rather, it is a means for those whose rights to and from the nation state have been denied, and who act against the exclusionary rules imposed on them.

I will below reflect on three different ways in which practices of citizenship can be conceptualised that help us not only to broaden and contest discourses on citizenship but also open avenues to create conviviality and potentially transnational solidarities.

### Acts of citizenship in a system of nation states

Conceptions of global citizenship have been around since the time of Greek philosophy, and are often traced back to Socrates' claim that he was not a citizen of Athens, but 'of the world'. Such conceptions have been discussed as the key means to overcome exclusionary practices identified with nation states. Equally, they have been analysed as a means to diminish enforceable rights to the ultimate detriment of all, pronounced, for example, in Hannah Arendt's warning that the establishment of one sovereign world state would mean the end of all citizenship.

Advocates of global or world citizenship are often driven by a Kantian desire to advance conjectural cosmopolitan rights, or a conception of a common humanity where the boundaries of sovereignty are embedded within mutual social practices. That last point is also at the heart of the acts of citizenship literature and the advocacy for activist conceptions of citizenship, aimed at facilitating claim making and ensuring supposedly universal rights in actual geographical and political spaces where mobile populations are a paradigmatic group lacking those rights.

A focus on activist conceptions of citizenship arguably gained new impetus in recent years through the large-scale movements of refugees into Europe partly as a result of the war in Syria, combined with other geopolitical developments. While not so unusual on a more global scale where South–South movements of people have been a core feature of many peoples' lives for decades, these movements and the various reactions to it have triggered activist protest movements by mobile populations not only in Europe but globally.

Multiple detailed examples of this process of 'remaking citizenship from the margins', predominately focusing on mobile people, have been provided in the literature, including in a special issue of *Citizenship Studies* (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016). These have been called global (instead of national) enactments of citizenship, as they draw on collaboration and lived experiences beyond borders. Through this definition one is almost reminded of past political struggles and revolutionary movements, which across nations and continents provided inspirations, ideology, and strategy to each other. A different way of describing this has been the concept of contentious politics that seeks to combine a focus on resistance (or contention), collective action, and politics. The latter has been discussed as coalitions of people and movements, often migrants with local or global supporters, who act against state practices of bordering.

But this global character of enactments of citizenship is often geared not towards some form of global citizenship, but rather towards becoming a formally recognised member of a state or national community. As such, it is a contestation of static conceptions of citizenship that makes the migrant the key figure of political struggles to secure rights and well-being in a specific geographical location. Such struggles may be won or lost, but by engaging in them the boundaries of solidaristic actions are being expanded.

This is the case even if the motivations for engaging in such contestation is triggered by self-interest. The employer who lobbies a government to give valuable staff residency papers may do so at least partly not to harm business interests, but at the same time makes the case that convivial practices at the work place create a form of de facto citizenship and community. Of course, there is always the inherent danger that such engagement creates categories of worthy and unworthy migrants, but this seems to miss the point. In essence, what activist conceptions of citizenship allow us to understand is the ways in which peoples' aspirations, aspirations that drive mobility in the first place, contest the visible and hidden borders that stand in the way of this fundamental human condition: the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004).

### Lived citizenship and the capacity to aspire

Mahmoud (not his real name) left Syria when he was about to be conscripted into an army to fight against his own people. He came to Germany in 2016 after running a successful business in Egypt for a number of years. In Egypt, he felt his life was on hold, as what he really wanted was a meaningful profession that he could be proud of and have a future in, not just work to make a living, even if he did earn a lot of money through his business activities. While he had no clear idea what exactly that profession should be, in his imagination the place to fulfil this aspiration was Germany.

It was not a country he had ever been to or knew much about, but rather the symbol for a place where he could fulfil this core aspiration: a meaningful professional life. It worked out for him, partly through his own efforts, partly through welcoming acts by civil society groups and strangers, partly through support from the company he now works for, and partly because he belonged to a group of people for whom gaining residence papers in Germany was a relatively straightforward process at the time. Mahmoud is thus a pertinent example of how lived citizenship is best understood on a scale between exclusionary boundaries erected by nation states and a global system of governance that relates to mobile people as populations to control for the benefit of nation states, and the navigation of those boundaries. Importantly, his story emphasizes the intrinsic ways in which aspirations that depend on mobility can be negotiated, often through or in encounters with others. But it also demonstrates how such aspirations are deeply intertwined with conceptions of rights as quasi citizens of specific nation states.

In turn, through challenging previous stipulations of citizenship in this case in Germany through the act of migration and subsequent practices of lived citizenship, conceptions of and boundaries around citizenship are constantly challenged. Mahmoud's route to fulfil his aspirations can thus be analysed as a politics of resistance or an act of contentious politics, an act that is more than a private journey.

Conceptions of lived citizenship can also be useful in other ways to understand and analyse people's aspirations and understand the forms of belonging these may produce. This, in turn, can give insights into how solidaristic ways of living can be created and exclusionary politics contested. This becomes particularly pertinent when considering the increasingly transnational character of migrant lives.

## Transnational lived citizenship as a politics of belonging

Transnational lived citizenship, combining definitions of lived citizenship with the concept of transnationalism that has gained some prominence in migration studies, advances the study of activist citizenship as it allows us to understand in detail the intersections between more formal aspects of citizenship as well as its emotional and practical aspects related to feelings of belonging, transnational connections, and circulation of material cultures. It speaks to recent debates that aim to foreground non-state-based connections and conceptions of belonging, while at the same time recognising that the nation-state remains a powerful means of identification, belonging and conditioner of lived citizenship (Kallio and Mitchell 2016).

To understand transnational lived citizenship as a manifestation of belonging and a form of a politics of belonging allows us to re-ground research on transnationalism and focus on how transnational practices are being played out locally. Doing so from a migrant perspective helps expose the contentious ideological underpinnings of global policies on refugees and migrants, such as the Global Compacts.

Belonging and the politics of belonging can be conceived in different ways, and with regard to activist citizenship the broad categories proposed by Yuval-Davis (2006) are a useful point of departure. She defines three analytical categories of belonging: social and economic locations; identification and emotional attachments; and ethical and political values. Obvious from these categories is that activist citizenship enacted as a form of belonging cannot be detached from the broader structural and power dynamics that shape societies. Similarly, material and also temporal dimensions of transnational lived citizenship constitute each other – belonging or un-belonging is highly contingent on material conditions and often intertwined with localised everyday practices of citizenship.

Semhar (not her real name), an Ethiopian migrant mother in Kenya, who waits with her two children to join her partner in the UK under an in-process resettlement scheme used to live comfortably from her partner's remittances. When COVID struck, her partner lost his job and remittances dried up. Semhar had to turn to her local networks in Nairobi, networks that were strongly related to peer groups from her country of origin and the emotional connections those invoked. The longer COVID went on, the less important the connections to the UK have become, whereas forms of everyday conviviality in her local neighbourhood are now a key determinant of her life.

For people like Mahmoud, introduced above, the situation is different. He feels a valued part of German society, but the documents he possesses only allow him to travel within certain European countries. Yet an important part of his emotional attachment is to his extended family in Lebanon. He has no possibility to travel there – not because of COVID but due to visa stipulations and his status papers. For both Mahmoud and Semhar while everyday lived citizenship is important to advance their aspirations, their transnational lives are hindered by state-based legal stipulations of citizenship and the rights those confer to travel and cross borders, for example. While the analysis of their everyday lives points to successful claim-making of non-citizens and can be seen as an act that redefines boundaries of political belonging, borders remain.

On the face of it, policy initiatives like the Global Compacts on refugees and migrants and their focus on ‘orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people’ could be an important step to advance transnational lived citizenship. But words like ‘orderly’ and ‘responsible’ should make us pause, as they seem not aimed at supporting activist acts of citizenship that redefine boundaries of exclusion but rather suggest a desire to make the migrant a pawn of state interests, as states are the ultimate arbiters of ‘regular’ migration.

While for Mahmoud and Semhar, travel papers and visas may look like a solution, the stipulations of the Global Compacts rather ignore important insights from the literature on activist citizenship and migrant activism, as well as from the literature on mobile lives. Those lives are not easily put into neat categories. The Darfuri refugee who for years has lived in a refugee settlement in Chad and walks back to Darfur a few times a year to look after his fields there would not benefit but rather suffer from ‘orderly’ or ‘regular’ migration. The same is true for the many traders across the borders of many countries in the Global South in particular, who cross those informally often on a daily basis and whose livelihoods would be severely hindered by order and rules.

In fact, the Global Compacts do little to acknowledge the transnational nature of many mobile lives, and the often hybrid status and character of such lives in the locations where people reside. The term ‘responsible’ is even more open to exclusionary definitions and the enforcement of borders, not least as the Global Compacts are to be implemented by nation states. Many mobile lives in fact depend on informal arrangements connected to but often also against or despite states. While one may argue that stipulations like those in the Global Compact have the good intention to prevent exploitation, it is doubtful that its definition of regular and orderly migration corresponds to the aspirations that drive mobility in a globalized world of uneven development.

In contrast, the activist citizenship literature allows us to imagine new subjectivities beyond the state but also aimed at subverting the state. Instead of defining what orderly migration should consist of, it makes the case for analysing mobile, transnational lives in the ways these unfold in specific geographical locations, and focuses on the patterns of belonging that are being created. The analysis of transnational lived citizenship calls for taking the migrant seriously as the driver of the global political economy, and from there migrant rights are to be secured in specific geographical locations.

Such a focus on the transnational in lived citizenship also moves beyond the classical conceptions and definitions of refugees versus migrants, or different types of migrants, as transnational lives take place across global scales and modes – it thus disrupts the state language of migration.

It is perhaps no surprise that (transnational) lived citizenship has often been explored in concrete in the city, or in urban settings, be they capital cities, mega cities, or secondary cities, the latter places where more and more migrants now reside globally. Cities are important geographical spaces where key struggles over rights have historically been fought, and new modes of conviviality have emerged. Global policy agendas on migration would benefit from taking as their starting point how transnational mobile lives have been inscribed into urban landscapes.



## Conclusion

In my contribution, I have discussed the activist turn in the study of citizenship starting from the figure of the migrant as the key character of contemporary times, or perhaps even of mankind more globally, as mobility is a key characteristic of the human existence. Such mobility is deeply intertwined with aspirations, but equally with ideas about identity and belonging, and conceptions of the rights that any human being should be able to claim. At the same time, belonging is often connected to group identities, and the nation state here remains an important frame of reference and source of emotional attachment.

The activist turn in the study of citizenship allows for a conception of citizenship that takes seriously allegiances to so-called ‘modern’ entities, most pronounced possibly the nation state. While acts of citizenship often question, resist, or challenge the nation state and its stipulations, a prominent example being the *sans papiers* movement, at the same time the nation state remains important in the ways mobile populations enact citizenship and belonging.

The nation state, real or imagined or a combination of both, here is not merely or mainly a marker of status – even if status is often a prerequisite to realise or enact modes of citizenship and universal rights, be it simply the right to travel across borders and connect with one’s family, a right often dependent on a certain status or papers. It can also be an important marker in relation to intimate ways of belonging and emotional attachment. It is not only or even mainly an exclusionary category aimed at controlling populations and creating artificial divisions. It is also connected to a sense of ‘home’, identity, and history, to emotional well-being in a broad sense.

This becomes obvious when, for example, reading the reminiscences of Behrouz Boochani (2018) from Manus Prison. He describes how inside the Manus Prison system the refugees stranded and incarcerated there informally swapped rooms to gather in groups of nationality and identity, as this gave them comfort and solace. In his telling, these allegiances slowly started to override the comradeship that was created with others from different geographical origins while traveling on the same boat to reach Australia. The same could be observed when in the centre of Tel Aviv tents that were erected by the mayor in a particularly cold winter for Eritrean and Sudanese refugees quickly became ‘Eritrea house’ and ‘Sudan house’, with clearly marked boundaries. This is equally the case in the times of COVID, where various forms of everyday humanitarianism as expressions of lived citizenship sprung up among migrants in cities in the Horn of Africa, for example, often glued together by nationality or sub-nationality/ethnicity, even if including other societal actors (Müller 2022).

This also points to the value of conceiving of citizenship as a process bound in space and time, and not as some sort of universal or global category that eliminates any boundaries between people. Maybe not only mobility is a key human characteristic, but equally the need to bound based on categories that while partly communal and convivial are always also defined by bordering practices. Activist citizenship can then be understood as a means to create conviviality at local levels, in a geographical space where more exclusionary forms of belonging move to the background in favour of solidarity in the here and now.

In that sense, citizenship may indeed be at its most emancipatory when conceived of beyond or post the nation state, as new subjectivities may emerge that create new communities and new thinking about acting out citizenship – centred at the actual geographic category of the ‘city’. This relates back to the figure of the migrant not only

or even predominately as the figure who actually crossed borders, but somebody who through sheer presence in a defined geographical space enacts a politics against frontiers. Activist citizenship can then serve as a category of analysis and a category of practice. Returning to the ‘city’, literally and metaphorically, as the geographical space where citizenship practices unfold, are contested, created, performed and globally connected, will be a key future agenda for the study of activist citizenship.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Tanja R. Müller* is Professor of Political Sociology at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester. She has published on conceptions of transnational lived citizenship, conviviality and everyday humanitarianism in leading journals. Tanja is currently the Principal Investigator of an ESRC-funded research project on transnational lived citizenship and political belonging among diasporas in the Horn of Africa.

## ORCID

Tanja R. Müller  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1497-918X>

## References

- Appadurai, A. 2004. “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition.” In *Culture and Public Action*, edited by V. Rao and M. Walton, 59–84. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Arendt, H. 2004. (orig. published 1951), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Ataç, I., K. Rygiel, and M. Stierl. 2016. “Introduction: The Contentious Politics of Refugee and Migrant Protest and Solidarity Movements: Remaking Citizenship from the Margins.” *Citizenship Studies* 20 (5): 527–544. doi:10.1080/13621025.2016.1182681.
- Boochani, B. 2018. *No Friend but the Mountains. Writing from Manus Prison*. Sydney: Picador.
- Brubaker, R. 2010. “Migration, Membership and the Modern Nation-State: Internal and External Dimensions of the Politics of Belonging.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XLI 1 (1): 61–78. doi:10.1162/jinh.2010.41.1.61.
- Isin, E. F., and G. M. Nielsen, eds. 2008. *Acts of Citizenship*. London: Zed Books.
- Kallio, K. P., and K. Mitchell. 2016. “Introduction to the Special Issue on Transnational Lived Citizenship.” *Global Networks* 16 (3): 259–267. doi:10.1111/glob.12113.
- Müller, T. R. 2022. “Transnational Lived Citizenship Turns Local: COVID-19 and Eritrean and Ethiopian Diaspora in Nairobi.” *Global Networks*. doi:10.1111/glob.12359.
- Nail, T. 2015. *the Figure of the Migrant*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ní Mhurchú, A. 2014. *Ambiguous Citizenship in an Age of Global Migration*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Nyers, P. 2013. “Liberating Irregularity: No Borders, Temporality, Citizenship.” In *Citizenship and Security: The Constitution of Political Being*, edited by X. Guillaume and J. Huysmans, 36–52. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Yuval-Davis, N. 2006. “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214. doi:10.1080/00313220600769331.