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Imagining and practising citizenship in austere times: the work of Citizens Advice.

Sam Kirwan, Morag McDermont and John Clarke

Abstract:

This article explores the significance of citizenship for those working in Citizens Advice, a network of voluntary organizations in the UK that exists to provide peer-to-peer advice and support to those facing problems. Drawing on a recent research study, the article considers the ways in which the ‘citizen in citizens advice’ is imagined and translated into practice. Despite current political and policy moves to shrink citizenship (in terms of eligibility, access and substance), the ‘citizen in citizens advice’ is regularly thought about in expansive ways that draw on other imaginaries of citizenship. We suggest that these everyday discursive practices of citizenship are important both in analytic terms and in reinvigorating a political discussion otherwise focused upon restriction and exclusion.

Keywords: citizenship, advice, dialogism, discursive practice, Austerity

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“By actively putting work at the centre of working-age support we want to create a new contract with the British people” (Duncan Smith, 2010: 1)

The current UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, like his recent predecessors, has been particularly fond of such commitments to a renewed relationship between the ‘people’ and the ‘state’, reflecting the extent to which established conceptions of citizenship are, and have been for several decades, under attack. A variety of anti-statist and anti-welfarist political projects, too conveniently summed as neo-liberalism (Larner, 2003), have undermined the array of legal, social and political rights gathered together in the figure of the modern (national) citizen (see, for example, Brown, 2015; Isin, 2008; Somers, 2008). Austerity politics and policies in the European Union and elsewhere have further eroded the substance of social rights: reducing social benefits, welfare services and other forms of public spending (Blyth, 2013; Evans and McBride, forthcoming). The revival of ethno-nationalist politics (Bosniak, 2008), as well as attempts to stem immigration through the restriction of benefits entitlements (Peers, 2015), have given new impetus to questions of who is eligible to be a member of the ‘political community’. As a result, the character of citizenship has been intensely politically contested.

Citizenship in the (more or less) United Kingdom has been constantly revisited and revised as a political focus of attention during the last three decades (see, for example, Brown and Baker, 2012; Clarke et al, 2007b; Dwyer, 2000). The dynamics of migration and the politics of multi-culturalism have brought questions of membership, belonging and entitlement, as well as debates about the nature of Britishness (and Englishness) to the fore. Hostility toward migration – and migrants – has deepened, with increasingly forceful management of borders (most notably in the fortification of Calais in 2015). Meanwhile, the substance of social citizenship has been reassembled through attempts to change the ‘balance of rights and responsibilities’ between the citizen and the state, with citizens being ever more ‘responsibilised’ (Rose, 2000) and their rights being diminished, particularly under the policies of the recent Conservative-led Coalition government (2010-2015) and its Conservative successor. A particular stress has been placed on ending a ‘sense of entitlement’, or the ‘something for nothing culture’ of benefits, with the aim of making people ‘independent’ (in waged work) and able to ‘make a contribution’. Assaults on benefits – and the demonization of those receiving benefits – have also been justified as remedying the ‘unfairness’ of people living better on welfare than ‘normal, hard working, responsible families’ can do from earned incomes. We might note that this condition has something to do with the combination of wage stagnation, the expansion of low paid and contingent work and the buffering of low wages by state subsidies, but this is rarely picked up in the articulation of a contemporary moral economy of ‘fairness’ (see Clarke, 2014). Of particular significance for the focus of this paper, recent governments have also dismantled Civil Legal Aid funding (Hynes, 2013), undercutting the ‘right to have rights’ by making legal remedies increasingly unaffordable and unattainable (James and Killick, 2012; Singh and Webber, 2010). Such cuts – and the wider reductions in public spending under the ‘Austerity’ programme – have had particular consequences for the work of the

voluntary organizations involved in providing forms of public service, such as the work of Citizens Advice (we take up these issues more fully in Kirwan et al, forthcoming).

In this article we explore the complex relationships between such political and governmental developments and how citizenship is imagined and practised in more ‘everyday’ settings. In particular, we focus on the ways in which the citizen is addressed in one of the most significant large organizations to have the word ‘citizen’ in its name in the UK – Citizens Advice.¹ A network of voluntary organizations in England and Wales (with equivalents in Scotland and Northern Ireland), the CAB Service² offers a range of information and support services (from debt to immigration advice) to those who seek its assistance. In what follows, we first trace the reforms of citizenship, and then explore the salience of the CAB Service as a site for research. We then consider the ways in which the ‘Citizen’ in Citizens Advice is imagined, and the relationship of these to currently dominant political discourses about citizenship. Finally, we reflect on the value and significance of tracing everyday discourses of citizenship.

Sites of citizenship: the work of the CAB Service

So, in this conjuncture, how do people imagine and practise citizenship? In what follows we draw on an ongoing study, part of the ‘New Sites of Legal Consciousness’ Research Programme, of the work carried out by advisers, managers and trainees in Citizens Advice Bureaux³ across the UK. The CAB Service comprises of a network of ‘local’ associations, connected to and supported by national bodies (Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland). The bureaux were first established in 1939, partly as a response to the anticipated disorders and dislocations of citizens facing war (Citron, 1989:2). The idea of a voluntary advice service had first been raised alongside reforms of the Public Assistance system in 1924 in the report of the Betterton Committee on Public Assistance Administration. The original bureaux, of which the image of the bureau located in a horse-box that would travel to bomb-damaged areas has become symbolic, were committed to this voluntary principle and were supported by funds from local government. As the War continued the service grew considerably and by 1942 was operating through over 1000 bureaux around the UK. Despite the increased demand for advice in the post-war welfare state there was a retraction of the service in the post-war years and the number of bureau dropped to 416 in 1960. Yet in the 1970s the service underwent a significant expansion linked to the nascent consumer movement and increased governmental support for the provision

¹ The large other organisation of note is Citizens UK, formed in 1996 with a remit to support and bring together community organisations.

² Following Rhys Jones, we refer to the combination of the central organization and the member bureaux as the ‘CAB Service’.

³ In 2015, following a consultation of member bureaux, it was decided that the term ‘bureau’ be dropped from the title of local organisations. We have retained the term in this text because it remained in regular usage during our fieldwork.

of consumer advice. Following a large grant from the Ministry of Trade and Consumer Affairs, from whose successor the core funding is still drawn, the number of bureaux rose to 566 in 1973 and then 818 by 1978-9 (Citron, 1989:3). Reflecting the ongoing period of mergers, consolidations and closures accompanied by an expansion of the sites through which advice is delivered, by the date of writing (October 2015) there were 338 bureaux operating from 3,300 locations (Citizens Advice, 2015). There are a further 28 bureaux in Northern Ireland (Citizens Advice, 2015) and 61 in Scotland (CAS, 2015).

Around 20,000 volunteers are involved in the CAB Service at any one time – a number that is remarkable when one considers the demands of the training programme and the levels of continued commitment that volunteering requires (Kirwan, 2016). Bureaux have become an institutionalized feature of the organizational landscape in which they occupy a liminal place; they provide independent advice, yet are supported by large amounts of public funding.⁴ With such boundary-crossing in mind Jones (2010) identifies the CAB Service as part of the ‘shadow state’ (Wolch, 1989). Yet, in stark distinction to other such services (such as family mediators, ACAS advisers and youth workers) a key dimension of the service, and how it is engaged with and understood, lies in its having been founded on the basis of a *citizen to citizen* interaction; the service has sought to retain, amidst struggles over the degree of training advisers should receive (Citron, 1989:3) and the incorporation of a non-advisory triaging system (Kirwan, 2016), a horizontality of relationship between adviser and client. Advice work remains largely performed by volunteers, supported by specialist advisors in a range of fields (notably debt, benefits, housing and employment, but also family and immigration in some bureaux).

The Service identifies four principles that underpin the advice given, namely that it be: free, independent, confidential and impartial. With regard the first of these, of equal importance to those we spoke to was that it was not only financially ‘free’ but also freely available to *anyone*, including those who are not officially citizens of the United Kingdom. With regard to its independence and impartiality; this is primarily interpreted in terms of independence from the state, though as McDermont (2013) notes, independence from private funders is of increasing concern. This independence is important for the service since much advice work involves dealing with, and challenging, public bodies. A standard advice interview might involve: helping someone complete an appeal against a benefits decision made by the Department of Work and Pensions; calls to an education or healthcare provider to request evidence that would assist this appeal; and finally calls to a Local Authority Housing Officer to request that, with regard the rent arrears that have accrued as a result of the benefits decision, any debt collection or eviction actions be put on hold.

⁴ This funding is provided by a grant from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for the CAB Service as a whole and Local Government grants for individual bureaux. The remainder of bureau funding is drawn from private funders such as charities and utility providers.

The work of Citizens Advice has been affected by the current political conjuncture in at least three ways: first, current economic, social, legal, and immigration policies have tended to produce more need for support and advice; second, funding for services such as Citizens Advice has become harder to obtain and maintain, leading to an increasing reliance upon precarious portfolios of private funders; and third, the attack on legal aid funding (combined with introduction of fees for court cases and taking claims to tribunals, including Employment Tribunal cases) has seriously affected the capacity of individuals and organisations to seek legal remedies in a variety of situations.

Our exploration of how ‘citizens’ are imagined and addressed within the CAB Service emerged as part of a larger study of advice work as a ‘site of legal consciousness’ (Busby and McDermont, 2012 and McDermont, 2013); a processual space in which legal frameworks are discussed, translated, negotiated and enacted. Whether considered as a space of ‘legal interface’ or at the ‘margins of law’, the dimension of this legal work we will focus on in this paper concerns its implications with regard ‘citizenship’ as a juridical status. If the provision of advice is, almost as a first principle, to be extended beyond the boundaries of official citizenship, what importance does the term hold for those working within the service? Thus we sought to explore how those working in Citizens Advice as managers, volunteers and specialist advisors understood the meaning of the ‘citizen’ in Citizens Advice. We incorporated into the 42 interviews and 5 focus groups carried out for the project a disarmingly simple question; “what do you consider the ‘citizen’ in ‘Citizens Advice’ to mean?”

Discovering the Citizen in Citizens Advice

It is worth beginning from the observation that there is no official definition of the citizen in Citizens Advice, nor does it appear in any of the national organization’s publications and websites, save for its place within the title. Instead, official documentation refers to a bundle of terms: people, communities, the public and clients. So what do people involved in Citizens Advice understand by the citizen? When asked during the fieldwork, people often said that ‘they had never thought about it’. Or even reflected on what an unlikely question it seems:

Q: But had you thought about it before?

No. Never. And I wouldn’t think about it now. [laughs] [Sonia⁵ – trainee in an urban bureau]

When prompted, however, most interviewees and focus group participants offered accounts of how they see citizens in the work of the CAB Service. There are several different views of citizenship in play in these accounts and in the following sections we trace how these accounts negotiate the landscape of discourses of citizenship, working with and against dominant inscriptions. We treat these accounts as examples of *discursive practice*, borrowing from the work of Wetherell and others (e.g., Wetherell, 2013; Wetherell and

⁵ All of the names attached to fieldwork extracts in the paper are pseudonyms.

Edley, 1999). Discursive practice is performed by ‘dialogic subjects’ who actively produce accounts of the significance of citizenship out of contemporary political cultural resources; accounts that are responsive to the multiple contexts that these subjects inhabit. We argue for treating subjects as active sense-makers rather than the passive reproducers of dominant ideologies, interpellations and discourses. In doing so we drew on a Bakhtinian view of the subject as embedded in, and acting through, heteroglossic or multi-voiced fields of knowledge and understanding. This is a conception borrowed from the work of Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave (2001) and previously used in work by Clarke and others on ‘citizen-consumers’ in public services (Clarke et al, 2007a and b). One consequence of this analytic framing is that we present relatively lengthy extracts from interviews and focus groups discussions in what follows to enable the reader to see the work of sense making being undertaken by the speakers.

We have clustered these extracts around a series of themes drawn from discourses of citizenship that are – or perhaps have been – in public circulation. We begin with the contemporary theme of rights and responsibilities, before moving to the question of the relationship between nationality and citizenship. This leads to a consideration of the universalism of citizenship, and then to an exploration of a particular view of citizenship as an egalitarian relationship. As will be clear, these themes are ways of framing particular moments of discursive practice, rather than finished or closed cultural or political categories: they represent the landscape that our ‘dialogic subjects’ work on. In the final section of the article, we return to more analytical questions about the significance of such everyday practices.

Rights and responsibilities.

The contemporary political discourse that shapes the reform of citizenship as matter of changing the ‘balance of rights and responsibilities’ between the citizen and the state forms one central mode of talking about citizenship (Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, 2009; see also Dwyer, 2000). The centrality of this idea in British politics in recent decades is reflected in its appearance as point of reference and comments in our fieldwork often worked around this theme – albeit in rather divergent ways. For some respondents, it offered a basic starting point:

Citizen... well, citizen has a ... the implication that you are acknowledging you're part of a wider group and you have your part to play. Rather than just a person who has a problem and wants someone to solve it for them. If you're a citizen there are rights and responsibilities....It's a personal thing, but citizen, it does bring in this idea that we are part of a group, we have our part to play and the people who come are part of that group. You know, they are the citizens. But it does imply that they have responsibilities as well to try and move themselves on and, you know, not all of them are able to but our job is to help them move on as much as we can. Because we are citizens together. [Jane: Specialist adviser in a semi-urban bureau]

Another interviewee took up the implications of the balance of rights and responsibilities for the practice of advice work in terms that are closer to the formulations of recent politics around citizenship, describing an interaction with one client:

.... And he comes in and says, I think they're expecting too much to be looking for all this work, and so on and so forth. And I said, well, I'm sorry, but you know you're not gonna get your benefits for nothing....

But, really, they, you know, they feel they ought to be getting this free; that kind of idea. So yes, some of them do have the preconceived idea they ought to be getting their benefits for nothing; and you actually have got to be quite firm with them. I'm sorry, you know, that is the law, that you only get that if you do something. So, there are some times when you have got to be a bit tough. [Rosalyn: Generalist adviser in an urban bureau]

This account articulates the contemporary political/policy version of citizenship as a re-specified balance of rights and responsibilities that creates a terrain for the practice of advice. It poses a question for our analysis: is this account driven by a sense of advisor 'realism' (this is what you need to do in order to obtain/maintain benefits) or a willing acceptance of the new politically inscribed balance of rights and responsibilities? Perhaps it is an unstable combination of the two? In the USA, Richard Fording and his colleagues (2007) have pointed to how welfare workers use 'client centred' discourses to legitimate sanctioning poor people – and a strategy of pedagogic realism ('preparing people for the real world') is one element of that. For another respondent in our research, however, the language of rights and responsibilities is precisely what distances them from an attachment to citizenship:

I don't know. To me citizen is such an old fashioned word, you could say People's Advice. Advice for the people sounds like something the Labour Party messed up, doesn't it? But a citizen is doing the right thing within the Law or standing up for things that you think are wrong with the Law...or even you know if you see someone doing something in the street that you don't think they should be doing in the street, that's citizenship holding everyone to account – everyone has social responsibilities and if we're all living in one another's pockets then that's the only way society will function and people will have any quality of life - but the word citizen doesn't convey as much to me as person or people as – I don't think it does anyway. [Jane: Specialist adviser in a semi-urban bureau]

This captures something of the rich complexity of discursive practice, as the interviewee hears the 'echoes' of other discourses as the answer is being formulated and threads their reflection through them (New Labour's imagery of the 'People's X'; wider social theories of how people live together and so on). Yet another respondent works with the discourse of rights and responsibilities in a very different way:

And citizenship has connotations of rights and responsibilities very much. That's about the contract, if it is a contract, between the individual and the state. In my mind, and forgive me, these are personal politics, that has been betrayed and I don't.... a) a great many people I advise are not citizens and b) most who are, as I say, don't feel the other side of that bargain has been upheld. So I will tell people their responsibilities. I have to. It protects them. And I will tell people their rights. It protects them. But I have no emotional need for them be invested in the sense they are responsible. I don't think, in that they have a responsibility that they should have an investment in because they are a citizen of this country and responsible to this state. So yeah, I perceive it as a distinctly secondary part of what we stand for and what we do. Yes, it's a curious word... I'm so used to initials or just saying Bureau that I very rarely think about it. But yeah, I find it quite a difficult concept, particularly in the current political climate. [Susan: Specialist adviser in an urban bureau]

This extract must be taken in the context of an issue raised throughout our research, namely that the many strands of 'welfare reform' had severely affected clients who were already vulnerable and marginalised. The very different inflection of 'rights and responsibilities' raised by this adviser, understood as a political strategy that makes citizenship a 'difficult concept' and creating tensions that have to be negotiated in practice, was the one space in our research where this experience led to a re-consideration of citizenship. Here the speaker creates a necessary distance between the dominant normative construction of 'rights and responsibilities' and her emotional attachment to both the people being advised and the practice of advice. While, as will be discussed below, the principles carried by 'citizenship' were central to the ongoing positive emotional attachment advisers experienced to the CAB Service, in this case it raised points of tension that needed to be negotiated as part of a wider emotional attachment to assisting those most in need.

Citizenship and Nationality

Given its juridical attachment to the nation-state, citizenship is often conflated with nationality (Clarke et al, 2014: chapter 3). As migration flows have increased, so nations (of the global North in particular) have become increasingly defensive of the national character of citizenship, developing a range of conditions, tests and barriers to acquiring citizenship (see, for example, Bauböck and Joppke, 2010; Michalowski, 2011). One effect in the UK has been to heighten the visibility of the national question: who is entitled to be counted as a citizen? The answer presumes a simple binary distinction between the national citizen and the alien (Bosniak, 2009). The distinction is rarely so clear-cut in practice (even though varieties of racist logic assume that the difference between the national and the other is readily visible). Not surprisingly, this framing of citizenship and nationality features frequently in the Citizens Advice reflections on citizenship. For example, one account begins from an understanding of citizenship that reflects contemporary British developments:

A citizen? Well, I think a citizen is someone who has lived here for long enough and settled themselves as whether they're a British born person or an immigrant that's come here, such as me, because I've lived here for 13 years now and, eventually, I acquired an indefinite leave to remain, so basically I have permanent residence in this country. So I do consider myself a citizen, although I'm not born here. So I think anyone who has lived long enough and considers themselves integrated in this culture should consider themselves a citizen of this country.... [Alexandra: Generalist adviser in a semi-urban bureau]

The extended discussion that follows this point explores changing patterns of migration, changing legislation about migration and contemporary media debates about migration. But the speaker then takes the issue back to the specific context of Citizens Advice and argues a different interpretation of the relationship between nationality and citizenship:

No, the advice is open to anyone really who needs the advice because, at the end of the day, everybody who has come to the UK and it doesn't matter for whatever reason or for however long, if they're in a situation where they need help, they use the service. From this point of view, it doesn't really matter if they've arrived last month and found themselves in a difficult situation....It could be a really difficult thing to call on your own, especially if you don't speak the language and so on, so to have a service like this that's open to anyone is absolutely amazing and can only be a good thing. [Alexandra: Generalist adviser in a semi-urban bureau]

In this discussion, need is viewed as overriding formal/legal issues of membership. It speaks to a conception of the citizen as anyone – a view that we will return to in the following section. In other reflections, the national dimension is taken as the first point of reference for citizenship – albeit on the basis of residence rather than legal entitlement:

Well every single person in the country is a citizen of this country. They may have different... what they all do have different backgrounds, they have different beliefs, they have different origins, but they are all people living in this country and we are here to represent them. So being a citizen and having the Citizens Advice to me represents the fact that we are representing each and every one of them. Totally, honestly, openly, no favour. It doesn't matter who they are, creed, colour, ethnic background - it doesn't matter and it really doesn't matter. You know, we're here for the person sat in front of us, but we're here for the person not sat in front of us too. This is another important thing; there are many people who may be sitting at home grateful that the Citizens Advice have done something nationally through our social policies, which may help them. We don't know they are coming to us but they know we're here if they need us and I think that's... that's quite important. It's also important that we be seen to be reaching into each part of our community. [Bruce: Specialist adviser in a semi-urban bureau]

This draws on a liberal or multi-cultural representation of the national community in which everyone is a citizen. This is clearly different from governmental discourses of citizenship as a juridical status which certainly do not assume that anyone living here is a citizen. Nevertheless, some respondents recognized the potential distinction between the openness of Citizens Advice and the potentially exclusionary quality of citizenship as a status:

I suppose the idea is someone who isn't a citizen, if they saw Citizens Advice, would that prevent them from approaching us? I don't know. I suppose it could, I think, because a lot of people are within communities and they know, so someone would say, 'okay, you're not supposed to be an illegal, but Citizens Advice will help'. They will know that they can come here through that maybe. But I suppose it's the ones just walking past, this just-for-Citizens Advice, I'm not supposed to be here... [Amy: Generalist adviser in a semi-urban bureau]

The distinction between the passing non-citizen and those networked through communities in ways that make Citizens Advice available as a resource was taken up in other discussions. For example, one focus group responded to a question about whether nationality status makes any difference in the following way:

Barbara: Makes no difference at all, as far as I can see.

Grace: In fact, it's the asylum seekers who are queuing outside the door at 6 o'clock in the morning because they're the ones who know that we're the only place that they can get support.

Deena: It's word of mouth with them. They know about us through friends who've been here and who realise that we're not biased in any way...

Grace: In fact, talking about the migrant community, apparently there was somebody who said that their client had been told by somebody at Dover to come to [local bureau]...

Eddie: Our reputation goes before us.... So I don't think it's an issue of citizen or asylum seeker or somebody who's ... black, it's somebody who comes through that door that we are going to do our damndest to help, period. [Focus Group in an urban bureau]

All of these speakers explore – and work on – the distinction between citizenship as a relationship (anybody wanting information and advice) and citizenship as a marker of nationality that forms a recurrent (and problematic) blurring in public as well as academic usages of citizenship. In a formulation that recurs across our fieldwork interviews, people resolve this tension in favour of the more open and expansive version: citizenship in Citizens Advice means ‘anyone who walks through the door’.

Anyone who walks through the door: egalitarian approaches to citizenship

The expansive view of citizenship as more than nationality explored above is articulated within a larger disposition towards the figure of the citizen in Citizens Advice – one that sees it as transcending *particular* specifications or conditions. This expansive - and egalitarian - view is most powerfully articulated in the imagery of ‘walking through the door’. It provides a powerful evocation of the space and embodied relationship that forms the basis of Citizens Advice work. Access to advice is not subject to tests or conditions, but is a matter of need:

I personally think it's anybody who walks through the door for advice is a citizen in Citizens Advice Bureaux. So it is anyone within society who basically needs out help, who comes through the door.
[Rebecca: Specialist adviser in an urban bureau]

Hmm. What do I consider the Citizen – just anybody who comes through our door? I think that's the point is that it could be anybody. We have to be whether they're from the UK, whether they're not from the UK, whether they're [...] you know the Citizen just means anybody. I mean generally doesn't mean children but any adult that needs assistance and saying that we've had children come in and point them in – we'll get them support to but I don't know if that's very good answer to the question, I don't know. [Alice: Specialist adviser in an urban bureau]

Here we can see the speaker working with nationality and other potential limitations of who can be a citizen against the commitment to open-ness (when do children graduate to being citizens?). This is picked up in a different way in the following extract where the speaker catches the ambiguity between citizen's neutrality as a term and its constitutional or geo-political delimitation:

Really anybody who just wants information, advice or help, anybody... So I think sometimes there's a perception that we're only here for the underdog and that's absolutely not the situation. Anybody who wants information and advice, whoever they are... anything that improves the general welfare of the community.

And I think citizen is a nicely neutral term, it's not a term that necessarily just implies the underdog or the employer or whoever. I mean I suppose... no I don't even think immigrants have a problem with it because there are people in the country who are not citizens of the country but I think it's sufficiently a catch all term and a relatively neutral term that's not putting judgements and not trying to dictate who it will or won't help. [Marilyn: Generalist adviser in an urban bureau]

This insistence on an egalitarian conception of citizenship in practice is particularly striking in a period where citizenship has been so fiercely contested and around which distinctions of character, worth, merit and social location have been increasingly inscribed in governmental policies and public discourse. This recurring stance of neutrality or non-discriminatory open-ness is the over-riding theme of responses in our fieldwork, and is repeatedly captured in the imagery of ‘walking through the door’ (a strikingly persistent trope in an era of increasingly mediated or non-face to face advice provision):

What do I consider the citizen? Well, the fellow man and woman. It can be anybody. A human being. It can be a young person, an old person, or anybody basically... I have seen a huge range of people here and it's anybody who walks in the door. [Ben: Specialist adviser in an urban bureau]

Horizontalism: citizen to citizen relationships

Discussions of citizenship in Citizens Advice highlight a further important distinction – one that centres on the *horizontal* relationships within which advice is provided (by contrast with the more conventional vertical imaginary of state-citizen relationships). As Kabeer has argued ‘the relationship between citizens is as least as important as the more traditional “vertical” view of citizenship as the relationship between the state and the individual’ (Kabeer, 2005: 23; see also Clarke et al., 2014). Citizens Advice acts on a unique conception of citizenship within the UK: although there are many voluntary organizations providing forms of help, advice and services, there are none in which the client/user is named as a citizen, but also none in which the volunteers and advisors are also understood as citizens. It is worth noting that the name of the organization does not distinguish between citizens as givers of advice and citizens as recipients of advice. In the following extract, the speaker joins up the egalitarian view of citizenship discussed above with the horizontal view:

Well, we're all citizens aren't we, so equal, equality. Anybody essentially, I would say. In Citizens Advice, the citizen in Citizens Advice, I would say anybody who wants to be part of it really, whether you come in as a client, whether you work here, whether you're a volunteer, whether you're the cleaner, whatever you are, the photocopier guy. [Kayley: Specialist adviser in an urban bureau]

The horizontal conception of ‘we are all citizens’ adds something to the commitment to equality (as in the French republican distinction between ‘égalité’ and ‘fraternité’, perhaps, allowing for its French gendering). In one focus group discussion, participants pulled out this horizontal conception more explicitly:

SK: What do you take the ‘citizen’ in Citizens Advice to mean?

Abi: A member of the community

Barbara: Us

SK: Expand on that.

Barbara: We are helping our fellow citizens, we are citizens, they are citizens, and that's what we do.

Deena: We're on an equal footing with them which hopefully helps them feel a bit better. [Focus group in an urban bureau]

This conception of horizontal relationships – and the implied equivalence between client and advisor – appears central to Citizens Advice understandings of the practice of advice giving. For example, one interviewee drew this horizontal sense of citizenship out through a comparison with solicitor-client relationships, stressing the ‘equal footing’ of Citizens Advice encounters:

I just think the ethos of our organization and what we work towards is to engage with people on a more level basis than what a solicitor does with his client. There is a hierarchy with a solicitor being way above his client in the hierarchy whereas we engage with the clients on an equal footing and I think we gain their respect from it. [Focus Group of bureaux managers]

This speaks to a longer historical sense of Citizens Advice, articulated by William Beveridge in 1948: "The Citizens Advice Bureaux make the world appear to many citizens in distress to contain some element of reason and friendship. The adviser at a Citizens Advice Bureau is only a fellow citizen with time and knowledge and, if he is worthy of his position, with infinite patience" (1948: 285). This imagined ‘fellowship of citizens’ remains significant for the ethos and mode of conduct of advice work, for example in the commitment to being non-judgemental. These ideas of horizontalism, equivalence and ‘fellowship’ are often articulated in a sentiment that seems very familiar in Citizens Advice settings – the formulation of ‘there but for the grace of god’:

I have to say, of all the clients I have seen, and we see all levels of all different aspects, strands of society, here I can hardly think of any people that I didn't have some sort of empathy with because, there but for the grace of God go us all... I think I've become a more rounded person because I was quite focused before and I think it's benefitted me, and it's made me far more tolerant, not tolerant, probably tolerant, and shown me an aspect of life that perhaps I didn't fully experience before. [Ben: Specialist adviser in an urban bureau]

Here citizenship is understood and felt in a distinctive register of empathy: connecting across difference because of the perceived vulnerability of ‘us all’ to troubles. There is another, possibly more marginal, version of this sense of equivalence, in which the ‘grace of god’ has not protected the citizen-advisor. Here, the experience of *being* a client is felt to underpin the sense of equivalence:

Because it made a huge impact on my life when I needed it and I got [help from] the service and ordinary people helping other ordinary people to move forward – that’s what it was for me. [Focus Group of Bureaux Managers]

This concern with horizontal relationships draws on long established, but not currently very visible, discourses of citizenship. The interviews and focus groups in our fieldwork have recurrently articulated images of citizenship and models of practice that feel someway from the currently dominant views of citizenship. This sense of disjuncture was explicitly addressed by one of our interviewees with a playful self-consciousness about the present and past political contexts:

I’m quite down in the trenches, recidivist Stalinist communist, so I quite like the word ‘citizen’. I find ownership in it and it means for me, it is about... it is ‘people’. Have you seen any of the old publicity material? They used to have a poor man’s lawyer, things like that...used to be advertised...

So the ideas that [Area] are doing now – let’s get everything together in one place – is not new. They were trying to do this then. And the interesting thing is it was all about health, social, education, legal – getting all these together, but the bit I do like on there is, they say, Pioneer People’s Centre – citizen, it could be citizen – Peckham Pioneer Citizens Centre – people/citizen.⁶ I think it is quite an embracing word. I don’t mind it but I can see... some people say, well, you could get some wag, a sort of UKIP [United Kingdom Independence Party] style person saying about citizens, you shouldn’t be seeing anybody else if he isn’t a citizen. That I would reject. And I would go at that point: Marx’s view of the world – what’s a border, what’s a boundary? We’re all in this common weald together. That could say citizen... So, citizen – I quite like it – as long as we don’t use the essence of what it means really. If you’re trying to use it to exclude, then I would object to it. For me, it’s an inclusive word, it’s everybody, a leveller. Is that what you’re looking at? [Gordon: Manager of a rural Bureau]

All of the extracts we have used in this article are the product of discursive practice – the more or less reflective process of talking through an issue or topic that involves taking account of at least some of what is in public circulation. But this final example is distinctive in the layers of reflection that it contains. It borrows from a rich stock of cultural resources and references – history, theories, contemporary politics. It knows citizenship is the subject of contention and judiciously fights off other interpretations (notably the ‘UKIP’ nationalist/populist view of the citizen). And it is performatively self-conscious – from its opening (‘I’m quite down in the trenches, recidivist, Stalinist communist’) to its conclusion (‘Is that what you’re

⁶ The Peckham Pioneer Health Centre was opened in 1935 as an architectural, medical and social innovation. See, for example, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/heritage/peckham-health-centre>.

looking at?’). Indeed, we would suggest that it is both distinctive in its richness and exemplary – it reveals more than some of the other extracts the *work* of discursive practice, what the linguist Alistair Pennycook calls ‘borrowing, bending and blending’ (2007: 47) of cultural resources to make new utterances.

Conjunctural conclusions:

This article offers a rather banal analysis of citizenship in several ways. It operates in the domain of the everyday, dealing with popular stocks of knowledge or varieties of common-sense thinking as they are put to use by located social actors in relation to situated social practices and relationships. At the same time, it does not discover any distinctive conception of citizenship that presents a radical new alternative to the dominant constructions of citizenship as a politicized national-judicial formation. Nevertheless, we would argue that paying attention to the banal – in the sense of the quotidian or everyday – is significant for exploring the ways in which people actively make sense of, and act in, the world. So, by way of a conclusion, we want to draw out a few issues about the value of attending to these ways of imagining and practising citizenship in the present.

Each of these accounts draws on a stock of popular knowledge and imagery about citizenship and puts them to work in articulating a view. The diversity of these accounts and the resources on which they draw indicates just how contested and shifting citizenship is as a ‘keyword’ (Clarke et al, 2014, drawing on Raymond Williams, 1976,). But it certainly is a keyword: it articulates complex understandings of people, practices and policies, and expresses orientations to the social world, relationships, and politics. Indeed, the diversity of these accounts – and the complexity of the positions being negotiated in some of them – should create a degree of uncertainty about analyses of dominant political projects and ideological transformations. The richness of citizenship imaginaries in play here suggests that the diminished, responsabilised and nationalised conception of citizenship that currently bestrides contemporary UK politics is not free of contention in both theory and practice. Nor do all social actors accept it as the taken for granted model for thinking about social relationships.

It is also important to see how different such discursive practice is from attitudinal data. We have drawn on Holland and Lave’s orientation to thinking about ‘subjects who answer back’ (2001) rather than merely reproducing the dominant wisdom. Holland and Lave take Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘dialogic’ approach as a starting point because of its insistence the multi-voicedness of speech or writing (Holquist, 1981). This approach allows us to see people negotiating their way through heterogeneous positions, making sense of contending views and experiences, and relating orientations to context and practice. This is different view from survey data in which people are typically viewed as being singular and coherent subjects, who express one opinion at a time. Even Louise Humpage’s recent (2014) study of social attitude data related to neo-liberal orientations in the UK and New Zealand, despite the subtlety of its approach, is limited by the

methodology of attitude surveys in which people are required to express a singular view, rather than negotiate their way through a complex field of possibilities.

What these interview and group discussions reveal is the heterogeneity of the present conjuncture in which, as Raymond Williams famously argued, we need to look beyond the dominant to see what else is in play (Williams, 1977). Williams goes on to name those elements ‘beyond a specific effective dominance’ as the ‘residual’ and the ‘emergent’: the former marks the persistence of issues and questions that cannot be addressed from within the dominant; the latter names the issues, questions, and answers that emerge in opposition to the dominant – and which the dominant always attempts to suppress or incorporate. In this case, the accounts of citizenship certainly draw on ‘residual’ elements (of equality, of entitlement, of need) to resist the contemporary dominant. But they also put to work other, possibly emergent, elements – the post-national view of the citizen; the ‘open to all’ conception of need and service and the horizontal conception of citizen to citizen relationships. Williams’ distinctions offer a sort of methodological template for analyzing the present which interrupts the temptation towards simply focusing on the dominant – as though neo-liberalism or Austerity occupy a world uncluttered by other ways of thinking and acting. This view of the conjuncture links to a view of subjects (collective and individual) as plural or multiple which implies thinking about the states of paradox, ambivalence, uncertainty and contradiction in which people live their relationship to the dominant strands of political culture. We have shown how thinking about the discursive practices of ‘talking citizenship’ can give attention to the impure and improper ways in which people think and talk about social and political relationships in hard times.

Finally, we would argue that there is an interesting paradox about the citizen in Citizens Advice. Despite the number of participants in the research who begin by saying they had never thought about it, they generated an enormously rich and complex field of discourse about how citizenship might be imagined or practised. Although we have ordered our account of this field of discourse around a number of themes – rights and responsibilities; the nationality question, egalitarianism and horizontalism – it should be clear that their individual and collective accounts work across such categorizations. Citizenship appears as fundamentally connective – linking people, places and practices in complex ways. We might ask whether the richness of this discourse is a function of their engagement in the work of Citizens Advice. Even if they had ‘not thought about it’ much, do the settings, the problems they encounter, do the relationships they seek to create and the practices in which they engage generate a ‘structure of feeling’ in which citizenship is implicated? We have no way of answering this question, short of conducting a comparative study of non-Citizens Advice publics, but think the relationship between contexts or settings and such structures of feeling is worth further attention. If engagement in Citizens Advice does help to foster such a sensibility, then we might wonder about the implications of further public spending cuts that undermine the capacity of organizations like Citizens Advice to continue. Citizenship can be connective – but it needs appropriate settings, relationships and practices to sustain it.

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