

# Book Review: Citizenship by Étienne Balibar

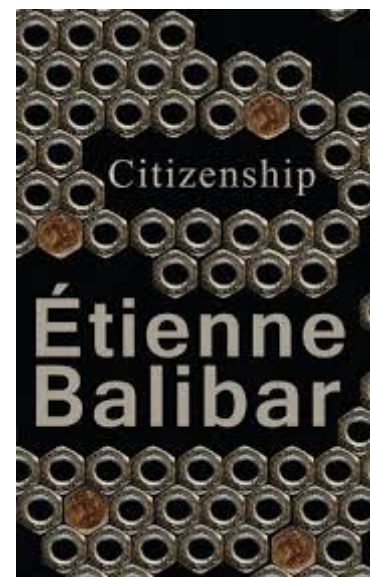
LSE [blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/01/07/book-review-citizenship-by-etienne-balibar/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/01/07/book-review-citizenship-by-etienne-balibar/)

January 7, 2016

**Citizenship** presents a collection of seven lectures by Étienne Balibar, extending his longstanding engagement with citizenship as a concept that is both inextricably linked to, and in contradiction with, democracy. While the text may occasionally lose sight of its central topic of citizenship, Chris Moreh highlights its 'affirmative' agenda in the face of contemporary challenges to democratic politics.

**Citizenship.** Étienne Balibar (trans. by Thomas Scott-Railton). Polity. 2015.

Étienne Balibar needs no introduction to readers in the field of citizenship studies, yet precisely for this reason it is useful to place his latest book, *Citizenship*, in the context of its author's body of work and broader intellectual background. Balibar came to prominence as one of Louis Althusser's preeminent students at the École Normale Supérieure, with whom he co-authored his first book on *Reading Capital*, originally published as *Lire le Capital* in 1965. Including additional contributions from other participants in Althusser's reading seminar, the abridged English edition five years later became one of the most influential texts of Marxist philosophy internationally. After two decades dedicated to elucidating core Marxist concepts – amongst which *historical materialism*, *ideology* and *the dictatorship of the proletariat* were the most central to his interests – it was in the second half of the 1980s that Balibar became increasingly engaged with questions of race, nationalism and citizenship. His early work on these topics was collected in the volumes *Race, Nation, Classe: Les identités ambiguës* (1988, co-authored with Immanuel Wallerstein) and *Les Frontières de la démocratie* (1992); these contained the origins of the central ideas in the present volume.



Approaching the topic through his sophisticated dialectical lens, Balibar described 'citizenship' in one of his earliest interventions on the subject to be translated into English as bound to both a principle of public sovereignty and to an individual capacity towards political participation. 'This is why the dimension of *equality*' – he noted – 'is always present in the constitution of a concept of citizenship' (1988: 723). It is this idea of a constituent antinomy at the heart of citizenship that has been most dominantly retained in Balibar's decades-long engagement with the political concept.

Citizenship, for him, ultimately rests on a 'dialectic' between *rights* and *duties*; between the principle of *liberty* and that of *equality*; tautologically, between democracy and citizenship itself. In discussing these characteristics, he famously adopts the notion of *equaliberty* – first introduced in a talk given in the fateful year 1989 and now the English

title of another of Balibar's influential recent books – which traces back to the political tradition of Roman republicanism and Cicero's conviction that liberty, that most desirable of blessings, 'if it be not equally established for every one, it is not even liberty at all' (30). This is the foundational social democratic principle underlying Balibar's thinking on the subject.

*Citizenship*, the book, is not a new stage in the intellectual development of its author, but rather a collection of seven lectures, many of which have previously seen print as individual essays and first came together in the original Italian edition of 2012. The text's novelty, however, rests in the teleological structure of argumentation, culminating in the formulation of seven 'theses' or 'theoretical propositions' at the end of the volume (indeed, *Theses on Citizenship* could have been just as valid a title, if only for the final chapter). The last, recapitulative proposition, which somewhat abruptly concludes the book – avowedly a 'provisional conclusion' (6) – besides encapsulating the main argument, also echoes the determination of Karl Marx's own famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, proclaiming in an equally powerful voice that 'insurrection, in its *different* forms, is the active modality of citizenship: the modality that it brings into *action*' (131).

Building up to this apotheotic conclusion, the chapters of the book undertake an archaeology of the dialectic of citizenship and democracy from Aristotle through to the emergence of 'the Rights of Man and Citizen' in modernity's archetypal insurrectional moment, to the consolidation of the European welfare state – or the 'social-national state', as the author prefers – and its paradoxically inherent propensity to create new social exclusions and civil conflict, to the adversities of neoliberal 'governance'.



Image Credit: Panoramic image of Acropolis Hill and Parthenon at night ([Ggja](#))

The working hypothesis of this book affirms the antinomy between citizenship and democracy; the two concepts are 'inextricably linked', argues the author, yet 'at the heart of the institution of citizenship there is a contradiction with regard to democracy' (2). According to Balibar, democracy or the 'constitution of citizenship' is something that can never be fully achieved, for 'a democracy whose role is to "preserve" a certain definition

of citizenship is also' – he argues – 'incapable of resisting its own "de-democratization"' (37). Following Wendy Brown, he contends that neo-liberalism is currently achieving such a 'de-democratization', and adopts Boaventura de Sousa Santos's view that countering it requires a 'democratization of democracy': an *active* citizenship through means of *insurrectional* politics.

Despite the bluntness of its title, the book is not an introductory text to the concept and politics of citizenship, but rather a composite analysis reliant on 'a specific conception of political philosophy' (3). In fact, at times it feels like the text itself – consciously or unconsciously – reflects the contemporary emptiness of citizenship, its demise and overshadowing by the neoliberal discourse of democracy as a product readily packaged for export. It is indeed the case that 'de-democratization' employs a narrative abduction and exhaustion, and in refuting such an understanding of democracy, Balibar also lets citizenship slip into the background. While this doubtfully intended artistic effect may rouse the insurgent instincts of some, it leaves most readers interested in citizenship even less reassured.

On the other hand, one of the great theoretical achievements of the book is in distancing itself from the negativity of many leftist critiques of global capitalism to instead propose a positive, 'affirmative' agenda when identifying the foremost challenge facing democratic politics today: 'finding forms of collective autonomy that would correspond to the environment of globalization' (122). It is solely by virtue of the author's ingenuity that such a characteristically 'third way' stance could still be coupled with an electrifying radicalism. At the same time, this may just become the Achilles heel of the book in the close reading of an equally resourceful reader. It is, therefore, a work that opens up to many possibilities of appropriation, and should attract the attention of many.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*