

# Balibar, citizenship, and the return of right populism

*Philosophy and Social Criticism*

2020, Vol. 46(3) 323–341

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0191453719860228

[journals.sagepub.com/home/psc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psc)**Geoff Pfeifer** 

Worcester Polytechnic Institute, USA

## Abstract

Arendt famously pointed out that only citizenship actually confers rights in the modern world. To be a citizen is to be one who has the ‘right to have rights’. Arendt’s analysis emerges out of her recognition that there is a contradiction between this way of conferring rights as tied to the nation-state system and the more philosophical and ethical conceptions of the ‘rights of man’ and notions of ‘human rights’ like those championed by thinkers such as Immanuel Kant who understands rights belonging universally to all humans as a result of facts having to do with what it means to be human. Étienne Balibar, in his recent work, adds to this by pointing out that there is a contradictory movement between this universalizing tendency in philosophical thought and the production of the citizen-subject out of the exclusionary acts of law and force. In this article, I put Balibar’s work in dialogue with the contemporary moment where we are witnessing the re-emergence of a nativist right populism. I use Balibar to help distinguish between three modes of political existence that we find today. Two of these three are more or less well understood. They are the non-citizen, who has no – or almost no – rights in a given nation-state and the citizen who enjoys the full benefit of the rights a given nation-state has to give. The third category is what I term the ‘nominal citizen’. This last category is somewhere in between full citizenship and non-citizenship. Individuals in this last category have rights in name but are largely unable to exercise them. Understanding this last category can, among other things, help us at least partially make sense of the return of right populism and also help us see the ways in which the modern category of citizenship, with its contradictions as elaborated by Balibar, can provide a means for resistance.

## Keywords

Arendt, Balibar, citizenship, democracy, politics, right populism, rights

---

## Corresponding author:

Geoff Pfeifer, Department of Humanities and Arts, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 100 Institute Road, Worcester, MA 01609-2280, USA.

Email: [gpfeifer@wpi.edu](mailto:gpfeifer@wpi.edu)

It is hard, for some, to imagine that not long ago the national consciousness in the United States had, since the summer of 2014, been captured by young yet strong Black Lives Matter activists working hard to build a new 21st-century civil rights movement in the wake of the very public exposure of the realities of police violence in communities of colour.<sup>1</sup> And at the same time, the world watched the Indigenous Water Protectors and their supporters in the United States at Standing Rock, South Dakota, build a movement (and temporarily win) against the fossil fuel industry and the Dakota Access Pipeline's threat to the water supply in their communities. This also brought a wider critique of that industry's threat to the global climate that affects the larger global population.<sup>2</sup> The world also recently witnessed an historic 195 countries signing on to the Paris Climate Agreement acknowledging that the world needs to work together in addressing climate change.

This is hard to imagine, because now the United States is a country where White supremacists march in the streets of major cities (and on university campuses), people who were brought to that country as children and have only ever known its geography, culture and language are under threat of deportation to places that are not and never have been their homes at the same time that families seeking refuge at the borders of the United States have been separated and forced into interminable detention and/or deportation without their children. Additionally, there is, at the highest levels of the US government, a systematic denial of the realities of anthropogenic climate change and a reopening of the its lands to the ravages of what Andres Malm has recently termed 'Fossil Capital' along with other forms of environmental degradation in the service of material profit.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, it is clear that many of the standard narratives and policies (economic and otherwise) that the United States has seen over the last 25 years or so have not produce positive outcomes for many people in the United States. The economic gap between the wealthy elites and the rest of the population has only widened with income growth at the top 1/40th of the income distribution accelerating while wages stay nearly flat for everyone else.<sup>4</sup> The working class in the United States has seen its power decline as the power of unions has been systematically gutted by political manoeuvring by members of the US government from across its political landscape.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, those living in poverty have continued to be left with no real exit from their situation,<sup>6</sup> and young people in the United States and around the world now have more debt and less job prospects than the prior generation.<sup>7</sup>

It is this latter mix of issues that has fuelled the return of right-populist narratives. The issues mentioned above have been sustained and made worse not only by the party currently in power in the United States but also by the centre-right leadership of the Democratic party and its long-time ideology aptly termed 'progressive neoliberalism' by Nancy Fraser recently.<sup>8</sup> This ideology, writes Fraser, 'combined an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition'.<sup>9</sup> She goes on to explain:

Determined to unshackle market forces from the heavy hand of the state and from the millstone of 'tax and spend', the classes that led this bloc aimed to liberalize and globalize the capitalist economy. What that meant, in reality, was financialization: the dismantling of

barriers to, and protections from, the free movement of capital; the deregulation of banking and the ballooning of predatory debt; deindustrialization, the weakening of unions, and the spread of precarious, badly paid work. Popularly associated with Ronald Reagan, but substantially implemented and consolidated by Bill Clinton, these policies hollowed out working-class and middle-class living standards, while transferring wealth and value upward – chiefly to the one percent, of course, but also to the upper reaches of the professional-managerial classes.<sup>10</sup>

The right populism we see emerging in this moment both in the United States and also around the world – as of this writing Sweden, Greece, France, Hungary, Austria and Germany, have all seen right-wing populist parties gain ground and in some cases, as in the recent electoral victory of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, win recently – advocates for a narrowly focused ethno-nationalism, a kind of xenophobia that places the blame for society's problems on the movement of peoples across borders, and a claim on the part of such right-populist leaders that they'll work to reverse parts of the project of economic globalization that they argue has hurt 'workers' – defined in their narrow – and again ethno-nationalist terms. They argue that they'll accomplish this via the reinstatement policies like trade tariffs, stricter border controls and so forth. It is in this context that I want to think through what it means to be a citizen. Though the United States will be the primary focus throughout this article, it should be acknowledged that many of the issues raised here – such as widening income inequality, over-policing in low income communities and lack of access to the primary goods of citizenship for all but the very wealthy – are mirrored in different ways around the globe and so we should understand them as global phenomena.

To begin, I want to raise three related points about citizenship in the modern age. The first is that to understand modern citizenship, we have to understand its necessary articulation in more recent times with liberal democracy as well as the even more recent neoliberal ideology that has governed economic and other governmental policy for some time now. The second is that this more recent understanding of citizenship is linked to the idea that the citizen is, in addition to having a particular legal status, also what 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant would call a free, autonomous and self-legislating subject and that all such self-legislating subjects are understood to be equal in the abstract.<sup>11</sup> In connection with this, the ability to be self-legislating is seen as a feature of what it is to be human whether or not one is a citizen of a particular nation-state; so the potential of citizenship applies to all humans universally in this way.

The third point is that modern citizenship as it emerges in relation to these other two points is marked by a number of antinomies or contradictions. I take this point from Étienne Balibar, who has elaborated these nicely throughout his recent work.<sup>12</sup> Two of the antinomies he identifies here will occupy us in what follows as they speak directly to the questions that guide this article relating to the meaning of citizenship now, and what the proper practical orientation of the citizen might be in countering the re-emergence of right-populist political projects.

The first of these two antinomies is that between the universal potential for citizenship for all humans based on the universal capacity for autonomy and ability to be self-legislating that modernity – via philosophical views like those expressed by Kant –

understands as built into human nature (and that undergirds the modern conception of citizenship in many liberal democratic states) and the contradictory movement away from this universality which the default container of citizens – the nation-state – enacts necessarily in the limiting of citizenship through the work of law and force. The second antinomy emerges in relation to the first: the modern citizen as product of this restrictive process is marked by their construction in and out of a given set of laws, practices and structures within a state. That is, the citizen comes to understand themselves as citizen in relation to these, and in opposition to those individuals to whom such practices, laws and institutions seem not to apply and who are named non-citizens in this process. Thus, the ‘citizen’ and citizenship itself serve as one of the many points of social reproduction and perpetuation of a given national – and social – mode of existence.

Finally, I wish to add to this elaboration of the various ways in which the citizen and non-citizen are put into opposition to one another by introducing a third category via an extension of Balibar’s thinking on citizenship. Namely the category of what I call the ‘nominal citizen’. As the term suggests, the nominal citizen is an individual who is a citizen in name only, one who has the legal right of citizenship, but has been effectively barred from sovereign participation in the democratic community by neoliberal politics and policies (as well as other forms of oppression which have a longer standing but act in concert with such policies). Nominal citizenship takes many forms – some of which have contradictory outcomes – and has many consequences for those who inhabit such identities. I will elaborate some of these forms below. It is my claim here that we can understand the recent return of right authoritarian populism better if we understand this category and what it means for those inhabit it as well as what it means for those existing within the more traditional identities of citizenship and non-citizenship. This is because, as will be detailed below, it is those who inhabit the category of the nominal citizen who both bear the brunt of the new authoritarianism and also (importantly) it is some – but not all – who are nominal citizens that help usher it into existence.

Because the modern conception of the citizen also has its foundations in the kind of universalism mentioned above coupled with the link drawn to such an idea in many democratic constitutions across the world (and certainly the US constitution), citizenship in the latter mode acts as (or importantly for us, *should* act as) a continued challenge to the nation-state’s particular and exclusionary ways of subjectivizing individuals and organizing the social field. This also offers a model confronting the various forms of oppression found in both non-citizenship and nominal citizenship. Balibar’s reflections on what he calls citizenship’s simultaneous insurrectionary and constitutive character offer such a promise.

This is to say (and this will be the argument toward the end) that citizenship in this latter register can, and at times does, work to make the idea of universalism not simply an abstract notion, but a concrete and real phenomenon via the practical work of citizens themselves in their recognition of each other as well as those who are traditionally excluded. This is the work of dampening exclusionary processes in favour of an expansion of inclusionary processes. So just as the citizen is the product of a given state and thereby the guarantor of that state’s structures, she is also the point through which the state’s attempts at restricting citizenship are and can be destabilized and transformed.

I will say a bit more about each of these three points in turn before turning to a further elaboration of the conclusions hinted at here.

## **Citizens, non-citizens and nominal citizens**

To begin with point one (the connection between modern conceptions of citizenship and the emergence of the modern state system), as is well-known, most scholars locate the emergence of the modern nation-state system as arising out of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Among other things, that treaty (which ended the Thirty Years War and the Eighty Years War, respectively) set up and guaranteed the mutual recognition of the sovereignty of the various nation-state signatories to the treaty. Additionally and importantly for us, the treaty guaranteed a certain set of rights for citizens living in those states such as the right to practice religions of their choosing even if those religions were not the official state religion.<sup>13</sup> It is this that also began secularization in the West and was the foundation of later and more complete sets of rights of citizenship. The Westphalian system also began in the early days of what we typically define as the modern period and helped usher in the age of enlightenment insofar as it set the stage for a sovereign state entity that allowed citizens some degree of legal freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Writing roughly 150 years later, Immanuel Kant, in thinking about what it means to live in an enlightened state (and here Kant is thinking about a kind of liberal democratic state), argues that in such a state, not only are certain sets of rights given to citizens, but that there is a recognition by the state that the citizens themselves must play an active role in the constitution of that state and the laws the state imposes on them.<sup>15</sup> This is because as Kant sees it, one of the features of what it is to be human is to be, what I have called above 'self-legislating'. This is essentially the idea that what makes us human is the fact that we have reason (or a rational capacity) and that we are also potentially free beings because of this capacity. Kant draws a tight link between reason and freedom insofar as reason is the faculty that allows us freedom: when I act based on reason, I act autonomously, free from being determined by anything else: not my desires, or my instincts, nor coercion from others and so on. In fact, in Kant's view, it is reason that allows us the ability to act against these other forces that exist outside the rational will and seek to determine our behaviour for us. It is this freedom based on reason that also makes me self-legislating insofar as when I act based on reason, I give myself the law of action (it does not come from anywhere else but me, internally, from my faculty of reason). Crucially here, according to Kant, it is also this that makes me a being deserving of respect.<sup>16</sup> To be self-legislating in this way is to have the right to be recognized and respected by others as a potentially and actually free and autonomous being. Citizens in the enlightened state, Kant goes on to argue, deserve this respect from one another and also from their government based on the anthropological fact of this our humanity, which is defined for Kant by this link between our rational capacities, autonomy and freedom.

It is this that is the basis for the system of rights and protections that the modern state accords its citizens according to Kant. To be a citizen in the modern (liberal democratic) state is to have this fact about your humanity recognized and protected by law. This is also the primary function of the state for Kant: to protect the rights and promote the freedoms of each individual citizen.<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt refers to this understanding of the

rights of individuals and the role of the state these as the fundamental 'right to have rights'.<sup>18</sup> I will, from here on, use her formulation to refer to this universalist notion we have been describing.

Of course, Arendt is no Kantian, but for her, the 'right to have rights' is in one sense, as Selya Benhabib has pointed out, the name for this (moral) universality of reason, freedom and autonomy that applies to all humans whether or not they are recognized as citizens of a particular state.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, Arendt finds this conception too problematically abstract to be of use in actual political contexts and she points out that we see its limitations 'whenever people have appeared who were no longer citizens of any particular state'.<sup>20</sup> That is, the philosophical conception is simply not political enough, and the rights afforded as a result of it become rights only in the context of the power of the nation-state. In the absence of that power, such a right has little value. Arendt's analysis certainly bears out in the contemporary context as it did her own. We need only think of the callousness with which the US government has treated migrants to this country over time and especially recently: separating children from their parents and not even keeping proper records in order to reunite them (i.e. a most visceral contemporary example of lack of regard for the moral right to have rights of people who have become stateless). It is this that brings us to point three.

A gap opens here between the citizen and the state. We can again see this if we think about the problems of identification of the rights of the human as such (the universal human right, or the right to have rights in Arendt's formulation) with the role of the state as protector of those rights for the citizen community in the context of the democratic state. Think again here, for instance, of the way that this is written into the Declaration of Independence in the United States where there is the recognition of the 'inalienable' right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As mentioned above, the nation-state as container of citizenship necessarily constructs citizenship in a particular way through its laws, structures and institutions to the exclusion of those who are not citizens to whom those rights do not apply.

In this way, national citizenship is at odds with the more universalist notion of the right to have rights. As Balibar points out, the kind of language we find in the Declaration of Independence and other such documents is ideological at best.<sup>21</sup> The kind of universalism expressed here simply does not exist. Nonetheless, it forms the basis for our common conceptions of the rights of the citizen. Further, it is restrictive in different ways and for different reasons, in different places. For instance, one of the marks of citizenship in the United States and many other places around the world is the right to vote in elections. But historically and into the present, some who are citizens have been excluded by either law or other factors even when they retain the legal status as citizens. In the past in the United States, there were times when only White male property owners were allowed to vote, and other times when the right to vote was given to newly immigrated Europeans but not newly freed slaves or Native Americans as a part of the project of racialized westward expansion.<sup>22</sup> In the present, in many parts of the United States, citizens who are convicted of felonies cannot vote. The number of those who are disenfranchised because of this hovers around 6 million.<sup>23</sup> For others, the ability to vote is curtailed based on work-life, proximity to voting locations and other factors that affect access to this particular privilege of citizenship.

Balibar refers to the difference between having a particular right and the ability to utilize or access that right as the difference between nominal sovereignty and what we might call actual material sovereignty where in the former instance, some are merely nominally given the right to have rights and have their autonomy respected but in actuality ‘do not have an equal share in the established power structure’.<sup>24</sup> Here I want to modify Balibar’s terminology and call this the difference between a ‘nominal’ citizenship and a full material citizenship. Nominal citizens are individuals who, though they are citizens in name, have little chance to exercise their autonomy in relation and their rights as such. As Balibar puts it, these are folks ‘for whom the chances to obey will always outnumber the chances to take charge or initiative [they are those furthermore] who are expected to be passive more often than active’.<sup>25</sup>

## Variates of nominal citizenship

We can elaborate here, outside of the example of voting in the United States to other examples of nominal citizenship as it is on display in a variety of ways. As noted at the outside, doing this will be useful in helping make sense of both the ways in which neoliberal policies have exacerbated the problems of nominal citizenship while at the same time reinforcing old oppressions. This will also help us understand how some – but not all – forms of nominal citizenship are instrumental in the return of right-populist narratives and politics even as those same politics reinforce nominal citizenship. Nominal citizenship exists, for example, in communities that are chronically under resourced and over policed. Take Ferguson, Missouri, in the United States for example. In the wake of the unrest that was the result of the police murder of Mike Brown in 2014, what the US Justice Department (and many journalists) uncovered as background to the anger that overflowed as a result of this last straw was a municipal government that was funding itself on the backs of the residents of Ferguson via policing to raise revenue rather than for public safety. As reported by *The Atlantic*, the justice department’s 2015 report found that:

Ferguson’s law enforcement practices are shaped by the city’s focus on revenue rather than by public safety needs . . . the boundary between the fiscal and police functions of the city government of Ferguson had completely broken down. The city manager and the police chief had discussed using tickets to meet revenue benchmarks, and police officers were being evaluated on the basis of their ticket-pushing ‘productivity’.<sup>26</sup>

This structure – the city funding itself and its police department through revenue generation in the work of policing itself – is a classic example of state predation driven by neoliberal governance wherein the state financializes practices of governance by extracting money for services from its citizens.<sup>27</sup> Such practices are the result of decades of declining governmental funding for public goods and continued assaults on taxation for those same goods.

Amid such declining funding, municipalities have come, of necessity, to seek different models of generating revenue to fund community services. As Page and Soss (2018) have recently argued, such practices as those in Ferguson and as they exist in criminal

justice contexts where policing is funded in part by the act of policing itself are the result of two types of neoliberal governance structures: The first is the ‘broader migration of government functions into the criminal justice system’ wherein prisons serve as stand-ins for mental health services, and police come to ‘serve as the frontlines for numerous social interventions’ and taxation is increasingly extracted via the judicial system.<sup>28</sup> The second broad structure identified by Page and Soss is that which is first identified by David Harvey<sup>29</sup> as ‘accumulation by dispossession’ wherein as Page and Soss explain, ‘neoliberalism rhetorically celebrates free market exchange but advances through the use of state and market powers to forcibly expropriate resources from subordinate groups who are poorly positioned to resist’.<sup>30</sup>

The policing model in Ferguson exactly tracks this dynamic: wealth extraction from a largely poor community of colour via policing so as to financialize policing ‘services’ in a way that both funds the service itself and brings in further revenue for the municipality. As the Department of Justice report further details, Ferguson had, in 2013, more outstanding warrants per citizen than any other city in Missouri, and 20% of its city budget was generated from fines gathered through these warrants and other violations issued by police to the citizens of Ferguson. It is also known that between 2013 and 2015:

85% of traffic stops [in Ferguson] involved black motorists, even though the city is only 67% black, and its roads are travelled by a large number of white commuters. After being stopped, black residents were twice as likely to be searched and twice as likely to be arrested – despite the fact that, in the event of a search, whites proved to be two-thirds more likely to be caught with sort of contraband. Municipal violations for having an unmowed lawn or putting the trash out in the wrong place at the wrong time, were issued overwhelmingly to black residents. 95% of the citations for ‘manner of walking in the roadway’ and ‘failure to comply’ were issued to African American residents.

In the same period of time, the city issued over 9000 warrants for missed court appearances and unpaid (or incompletely paid) fines. According to a report by the Arch City Defenders, a non-profit legal advocacy group . . . citizens who failed to appear or to pay fines that were ‘frequently triple their monthly income’ were liable to be jailed, sometimes as long as three weeks [which could lead to job loss and other problems]. Those with outstanding warrants were rendered ineligible for most forms of public assistance and government provided social services.<sup>31</sup>

Nominal citizenship and lack of autonomy to say the least. Adding to the analysis above, we can point out here that this is a prime example of what Deleuze and Guattari rightly call the results of the ‘forces of antiproduction’ wherein the police and local government work to make citizens unable to be productive and autonomous as it is more profitable to extract capital and resources from them through force and law.<sup>32</sup>

For another example of the way nominal citizenship functions, we can think again about how the wealth gap in the United States affects its citizens. In the city of Boston, Massachusetts, for example, the median net worth of White families is around US\$247,000 where the median net worth of Black families is US\$8, and life expectancy differs by 33 years across the city’s racially and economically segregated neighbourhoods (the range is 91–58).<sup>33</sup> Perhaps, Boston is an extreme example of this kind of



inequality, but the rest of the United States is not that different – though the life expectancy gap is smaller – it is about 15 years – it is growing rapidly.<sup>34</sup> In fact, one recent study found that life expectancy for White working-class people is declining in the United States as a result of lack of job security which leads to a host of other problems with health impacts.<sup>35</sup>

Millennials across economic classes, as mentioned at the outset of this article, are saddled with more debt (an average of about US\$35,000) and have less long-term job prospects than the generation before them. What jobs there are, are less secure, pay less (about 43% less by some estimates), have less benefits and are more precarious. We can think here about the explosion of jobs in what we now call the ‘sharing economy’ where everyone is a contract worker, ineligible for benefits such as healthcare or retirement.<sup>36</sup> It is hard to say that for communities that are suffering from predatory forms of neoliberal governance like those described here so far, autonomous citizenship is anything more than a myth and actual citizenship is nominal at best. Given that this is the case it is no wonder that people balked when, in response to the Trump campaign’s ‘make America great again’ slogan, the Democratic party claimed that ‘America is already great’. That is hardly the case when looking outside the successes that the top 10th of the income distribution have had over the last decade. Understanding these issues can go a long way to also helping explain why just under half (around 120 million) of eligible voters sat this last election out in the United States and many who had voted for the democrats in the last election flipped and voting in ways that ushered in the Trump presidency and the right-populist turn in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

## Nominal citizenship and right populism

Where the last section spent much time detailing the ways in which nominal citizenship exists in low-income communities of colour (e.g. in Ferguson), this section looks to broaden the analysis begun at the end of the last section about the ways in which nominal citizenship can lead to support for right-populist politics like those of the Trump candidacy. This latter group includes many (but certainly not all) of those whose economic status either became precarious as a result of the 2008 economic crash and never recovered, or who, as younger generations entered the job market in the wake of this crash and experienced a type of economic nominal citizenship that disbars them from full participation as citizens and pushed them in ways that the Trump campaign was able to harness in its ride to power.<sup>38</sup>

Jennifer Silva’s *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in the Age of Uncertainty* offers us a compelling picture of the ways in which folks experienced the effects of the postcrash economic degradation and the growth of precarious labour in the United States.<sup>39</sup> Silva’s overall argument here – given through a series of interviews of young members of the working class in the United States – is that, though some sectors of the working class experience more vulnerabilities related to the growth of precariousness under neoliberal capitalism than others, what is common to all is an intensification of individuation and isolation at the level of subjective awareness, a turning inward to emotional management as the only means for liberation as a result and a deepening suspicion of government and public institutions.

Silva shows us how, in the United States, young members of the working class have found themselves with the ability to define their identities in ways that were common even a generation ago. Here Silva writes, 'insecure and alone, working class men and women cannot point to a blue-collared uniform, a diploma on the wall, or a wedding band on their finger to mark their progress through life'.<sup>40</sup> The point is not that everyone needs a diploma or to get married (Silva is well aware of the changing social norms surrounding marriage for instance), but instead these things along with other types of 'life events' such as 'nest-leaving . . . stable employment, parenthood, and financial independence' are 'commonly recognized social markers of adulthood' across many social and economic classes.<sup>41</sup> It is these 'markers' – or social institutions and practices – that are increasingly unavailable to young working-class adults. They do not, for instance, have the financial ability to get married, have children, are distrustful of long-term romantic involvement, often end up living at home with their parents to make ends meet well beyond when they did in the past and just generally struggle to find stable employment.

The key thing to understand here is that not only are these types of institutions and practices *external* markers of the transition to adulthood, they also serve as *internal* markers of this transition. That is, one's own self-understanding of the transition to adulthood is deeply tied to passing through these and other related social practices and rituals that help define, not just for others, but for oneself also, where one is in life and one's identity. Louis Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation is useful in this context. As is well-known, Althusser argues that subjectivity is cultivated in us through our active participation (or our recognizing ourselves) in a variety of different social practices that are produced and reproduced in and by social institutions such as schools, churches, the family, work and so forth.<sup>42</sup> When an individual leaves the parental home for college or to live on their own as a result of getting a job and having a stable income, they understand themselves to have made a step toward adulthood insofar as these are social practices that, in Althusserian parlance, 'interpellate' individuals as adult subjects in contemporary capitalist society. Further, things like marriage, stable and lasting relationships, or having children also serve as social institutions and practices into which individuals enter when they reach adulthood so they too interpellate individuals as adults. In this way, becoming a part of any number of these (or other similar) institutions, recognizing oneself in them, is also recognizing oneself as an 'adult' (or at least it has been).

Here is the crux of the issue as Silva details it. These institutions and practices still exist but are increasingly unavailable as interpellators of adult subjectivity, especially in working-class communities. That is, working-class folks lack the ability to recognize themselves in such institutions even as those institutions continue to have material and ideological existence as markers. As a result of this, as Silva explains, many working-class adults are seeking other and different ways of cultivating their adult identities, ways which involve deeply individual, personal and socially disconnected narratives of self-transformation in the face of adversity. This is what Silva calls 'Therapeutic Adulthood' and it is the attendant concept of the 'mood economy' that helps make sense of the way that these individuals 'become' or are interpellated as adult therapeutic subjects:

...working class men and women inhabit a social world in which the legitimacy and dignity due adults are purchased not with traditional currencies such as work or marriage, but instead through the ability to organize their difficult emotions into a narrative of self-transformation. The mood economy replaces more traditional forms of organizing the self-it is articulated and instantiated through the telling of a therapeutic narrative. Within the mood economy, *emotional management* has become the new currency or working class adulthood, promising transformation...the mood economy allows for the possibility of self-worth, meaning, and progress.<sup>43</sup>

The narratives of therapeutic self-help and the overcoming of emotional difficulties have become, as Silva argues, part of the 'culturally available toolkit' for making sense of one's identity in the neoliberal economy:

...in this way, the therapeutic narrative has become a vital coping mechanism for combating the chaos, hopelessness, and insecurity that threatens daily to strip working class peoples of all remnants of meaning and order...within the mood economy working class young people make uncertainty, disruption, betrayal, and failure *meaningful*, especially those who find no intrinsic meaning or hope in their jobs or futures...In a time when suffering is plentiful and work and family unreliable, the mood economy allows competent adulthood to be defined in terms of psychic development: achieving sobriety, overcoming addiction, fighting mental illness, or simply not becoming one's own parents.<sup>44</sup>

It is this mood economy that allows one to control one's own identity.

This is the internalization of the neoliberal paradigm. The therapeutic self is one that cannot gain anything from others and in fact, views the social world as increasingly and importantly separated from itself and in many ways, the source, not of solidarity and community, but rather competition, violence and degradation. It is the social world and its institutions that are the cause of the suffering experienced by Silva's interviewees. Social institutions repeatedly fail them in all sorts of ways: from the public schools that failed to identify and help mitigate one interviewee's ADHD which this interviewee blames for her inability to finish college, to the experiences of those interviewees in the labour market where their hard work and dedication to their employers is almost always rewarded with lack of promotion and job loss.<sup>45</sup> The neoliberal gutting of public school budgets that leads to overcrowding, underfunding and certainly the lack of the kinds of support staff that might have caught and helped the ADHD of the aforementioned interviewee, and also the precarious nature of work under neoliberal capitalism which leads to a lack of job security are experiences that confirm the views expressed by Silva's respondents that the social separate from, and antagonistic to, the individual.

This separation extends throughout all areas of social life. Silva's interviews are littered with disdain for those individuals who her interviewees see as weak – often in the form of immigrants and people of colour – for accepting or relying on some of the few remaining government assistance programs and social safety nets, or see themselves as weak for having to partake in these programs, and a hatred for those who benefit from them:

Through this process, they become acquiescing neoliberal subjects, rejecting all kinds of government intervention, and Affirmative Action, in particular as antithetical, and thereby offensive, to their lived experiences. In this way potential communities of solidarity are broken apart by the strain of insecurity and risk. Men hold fast to the few remaining public sector jobs by vigilantly policing their boundaries against women and gay people. White people draw moral boundaries against blacks for taking government money and wasting their tax dollars. Black respondents, draw even stronger boundaries against other blacks who cannot get ahead through hard work alone. Ultimately, young working class men and women believe that if they have to battle through life alone, than everyone else should too. For the post-industrial working class, the necessity of taking care of themselves breeds resentment, fear, and distrust.<sup>46</sup>

It is here that we can see most clearly the ways in which this particular kind of nominal citizenship then forms the backdrop against which some groups who are pushed into nominal citizenship by such policies and practices become divided from others who are in a similar position. This also clarifies how some nominal citizens come to join with others and support right-populist causes and candidates to the expense of many of those who are in their same position and also experiencing the negative effects of neoliberal governance.<sup>47</sup>

In the case of the rise of Trump, for instance, there has been much debate about what drove many voters – voting is obviously one very clear metric for support – to Trump that had otherwise voted with the Democratic party in the past. Some have argued that in the case of White voters (who made up almost 90% of Trump's voting base), it was 'status anxiety' that pushed them toward Trump.<sup>48</sup> This view claims that White voters were driven by fears of 'cultural displacement' by non-White populations. Others have argued that, at least in the case of (the largely White working class) voting block that helped Trump, it was not cultural fears as much as long-term economic anxiety of those who through globalization and other processes have seen their job prospects dwindle over time that the Trump campaign was able to exploit.<sup>49</sup> As Silva's work helps us see – these two arguments are not so neatly separable – the status anxiety of White (and male) working-class individuals that reinforces or leads some to racist, sexist and xenophobic views is driven by neoliberal economic policies which lead to very rational economic anxiety based on actual material conditions.

Notice here though that, as Silva shows us, the privileging of the individual and the suspicion of social programs affects everyone in Silva's study – regardless of race or gender. This is an important point to understand in this context – while it is true that outright support for right-populist political programs like that of the Trump campaign is highest among Whites – the attitude of the therapeutic self-vis-à-vis the social exists throughout various identities. So while it is true that nominal citizens of colour may not support the racism and xenophobia present in Trump's right populism (for good reason), the suspicion of government programs and policies exists throughout and is certainly well-founded given the kinds of neoliberal state predation we have explored at various points through this article. And it is this suspicion and individuation that is the ground-work for the contemporary right-populist turn which also claims such a suspicion. This also helps us further understand why so many who could – and we have already pointed

out some of the ways that people are disbarred from participation – might have not participated in the electoral politics of the 2016 campaign. They simply were not given an option that could have helped their situation.<sup>50</sup>

## **Nominal citizenship as a form of non-citizenship**

Once we begin to think carefully about the varieties of nominal citizenship and the types of structural violence experienced in these communities, it seems that even though they retain some of the legal trappings of autonomous citizenship (for instance, nominal citizens can in many but not all cases still participate in electoral politics and they still retain some of the protections afforded in the abstract by law), their actual status begins to look to be closer to that of the non-citizen. To return to the Arendtian formulation here, the nominal citizen has, at best, very little ‘right have rights’ in a similar fashion to the lack of this right experienced by non-citizens. Think here of those who are identified by the now contested Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in the US. DACA recipients are mostly undocumented young adults who were brought to the United States as very young children by families looking for a better life and who have grown up there; have gone to school there; and have friends, family and community there like any other member of the community. Until the institution of the DACA program which gave these individuals protections from deportation, they lived a very precarious existence which made it hard for them to be fully members of society as they wanted to be. This is not dissimilar to the problems faced by those whose status as citizens is nominal at best.

As we saw at the outset of this article, the division between citizen and non-citizen, the combination of the notion of a universalist right of all humans to have rights and that notion having been written into – and undergirding – liberal democratic systems can only happen via a classification system which denies the very humanity of those who are excluded. That is to say, in order to recognize some individuals as those who are deserving of the right to have rights and not all individuals, there has to be a systematic categorization of some individuals and groups as less than human (and so not deserving of those universal rights). This is the foundation of the division that is opened up between the citizen and the non-citizen and the division within citizenship between nominal and autonomous citizenship. It is the very existence of the nation-state system and its liberal democratic expression that produces this. Returning to Balibar with this in mind, he writes:

Modernity promoted or invented a notion of the citizen that implies not only that an individual belongs to a community (the nation) but also that he has access to a system of rights from which no human being can be legitimately excluded... on the other hand, modernity enlarges as never before the project of classifying human beings precisely in terms of their differences, and more importantly, transforms it. Using it to designate... primarily possibilities of human actualization among which individuals must ‘choose’ and that each time represent differentials of power, value, and ability.<sup>51</sup>

He continues arguing that this process:

Opens not just a gap, but an abyss. The principle that establishes the intensive, or qualitative, universality of the *Demos* also involves a seemingly insurmountable qualitative exclusion. . . . Far from relieving this tension, modern universalism's transformation of equal liberty of citizens into the *rights of man and citizen* within the national framework has in fact aggravated it. This tension did not prevent the emergence of social movements and struggles that led entire categories that had previously been excluded, such as women and laborers, becoming or re-becoming citizens; what it did entail, however, was that those who have been excluded from citizenship (and there are always new categories that are) are represented, so to speak, produced, by all sorts of disciplinary or institutional mechanisms, as imperfect human beings, as abnormal, or monsters at the margins of humanity.<sup>52</sup>

## Reinventing citizenship

So what of all of this? And where is citizenship? Is it only exclusionary? Built by the division created by law and institution between citizen and non-citizen? Or the workings of power and access dividing the nominal from the autonomous citizen who has full access to the range of power, choice and autonomy that is supposedly granted by the democratic nation-state? And what does it mean for us, right now in the current moment when it seems we are seeing a more forceful work of exclusion and division of the citizen-human from the non-citizen less-than-human and the autonomous citizen from the nominal citizen?

One answer to these questions comes from Balibar's reflections on the second aporia of citizenship in the modern age mentioned at the outset. This is that not only is modern citizenship marked by the contradictory movements of universalism and exclusion, but it is also marked by the transformations that arise in the midst of this division. As Balibar puts it, the antinomial relation between citizenship as constructive and citizenship as insurrectionary.<sup>53</sup>

Yes it is true that the universalist understanding of the right to have rights is too philosophical and not political enough. Arendt is right on this score: the universalist notion is an ideal with no material instantiation or at least not one which trumps all forms of exclusion. But it can also form the basis for a political project which works to materially instantiate this philosophical notion not as an ideal, but rather as a material process of pushing at and widening the edges of inclusion.

As Balibar points out, what the universalist right to have rights is, is rather a right to a politics: a right to work in transforming the exclusionary processes of states, institutions, communities and organizations into processes of inclusion.<sup>54</sup> Here, Balibar argues that we have to understand citizenship as not something merely conferred on individuals by law and the state, or as something that is already fully constituted, but rather as something that is enacted by groups of individuals living in community with one another. The enactment of citizenship in this register implies the non-finished, non-state-owned nature of citizenship. Citizenship is, in this way a project, owned by the community itself. It involves a continued challenge to the 'constituted' nature of citizenship. Here, Balibar writes:

... the nation or national identity, however effective it has been in modern history, is only one of the possible institutional forms of the community of citizens, and it does neither encapsulate all of its functions, nor completely neutralize its contradictions. The main point therefore is to understand that citizenship as a political principle cannot exist without a community, but that this community cannot be completely unified, that its essence cannot be the consensus of its members.<sup>55</sup>

The community is necessarily heterogenous and non-unified. It is also uneven in the distribution of rights and privileges as we have seen across differing forms on citizenship and non-citizenship. It is nevertheless the community in its recognition of each individual member of the community that provides the possibility of the redistribution of such rights and privileges. Here again is Balibar:

... citizenship as constitution is threatened and destabilized, delegitimated by the very democratic power that forms its constituent power (or whose constituent power it represents), namely the insurrectional power of universalistic civic movements claiming in-existent rights, or broader rights or an effective realization of equaliberty.<sup>56</sup>


'Equaliberty' is Balibar's term of art for the modern conception of the rights of the human to both equality and liberty. His point is that the state is not as modern thinkers like Kant argue, the institution that confers such a right. It is the community that demands it and it is citizenship that provides the means for those demands. Citizenship is enacted when the community recognizes each individual as a member of that community and when it works to expand that recognition through politics and political action. In such actions, the community opens a space for the demand and expansion of right and obligation. This affects a transformation of the meaning of citizenship as constituted through this insurrectionary work.

Modern citizenship in its truest expression then is one which recognizes the non-existence inherent in the universalist demand and works not to exclude and dehumanize based on this, nor does it sit idly by while others exclude, dehumanize and work to shrink the boundaries of autonomous citizenship. Rather a proper modern citizen is one who actively seeks modes of existence, organization and practice that push back on such exclusion and offers not an abstract conception of the universalist right to have rights, but rather forms material communities that instantiate and actively construct that conception in the world.

In order to do this, we have to see the ways in which, in our current moment, there is not only a split between the citizen and the non-citizen, but also that citizenship itself is divided and merely nominal for some. We also have to see the ways that institutional structures within the state and its neoliberal policies have constructed both nominal forms of citizenship and also non-citizenship. And we have to see the ways in which nominal citizenship is expressed differently in different communities and populations such that different expressions are produced as antagonistic to one another on the surface, but at depth, they are product of the same oppressive forces. And finally, we have to understand the ways in which nominal citizenship and non-citizenship are close categories in order that we see avenues of solidarity across these divisions. It is here that we

can both begin to understand the contemporary return of right-populist narratives and also begin to see modes of challenging its rise.

## ORCID iD

Geoff Pfeifer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3085-4472>

## Notes

1. To be sure, Black Lives Matter is as strong as ever and continues to push forward. They just do not command the national spotlight and national conversation like they had prior to November 2016.
2. Of course, this win was turned into a loss when the Trump administration vacated the previous administration's order to stop the pipeline.
3. See Malm (2016).
4. See Leonhardt (2017).
5. See, for instance, Rosenfeld et al. (2016). And for some history and context, see Devinz (2015).
6. See Temin (2017).
7. See Laudicina (2017).
8. See Fraser (2017).
9. Fraser (2017).
10. Fraser (2017).
11. See Kant (1983).
12. See, for instance, Balibar (2015a, 2015b, 2016).
13. To be sure, this only really applied to protestant Christians living in Catholic Countries. And as is well-known, this right was not always respected but it still is the foundation of modern sets of rights of citizenship.
14. This of course does not absolve the Westphalian system of all of its problems. I am merely pointing out here the origin point for the modern conception of citizenship (and really the modern individual in Western thought) and its link to the modern state. On this and related controversies, see for instance: Croxton (1999). And Oslander (2001).
15. See Kant (1983).
16. This is of course the whole foundation for Kant's moral theory. See Kant (2012).
17. See Kant (1983).
18. See Arendt (1973).
19. See Benhabib (2004).
20. See Arendt (1973: 293).
21. See Balibar (2010).
22. See Rana (2010).
23. See Uggen et al. (2016).
24. See Balibar (2015b: 17).
25. Balibar (2015b: 17).
26. See Johnson (2015).
27. For a good complete definition of state predation, see for instance Moselle and Polak (2001).
28. See Page and Soss (2018).
29. See Harvey (2005).



30. See Page and Soss (2018).
31. See Johnson (2015).
32. See Deleuze and Guattari (1983).
33. See Boston University School of Public Health Study (2015).
34. See Dizikes (2016).
35. See reporting on this study in Achenbach and Keating (2017).
36. See Laudicina (2017).
37. For empirical data on this flip in 2016, see for instance Morgan and Lee (2018).
38. For empirical data on this flip in 2016, see for instance Morgan and Lee (2018); of course, the voters who elected Trump include many who were more affluent, but also concerned about their status. See, for example, Diana Mutz (2017). While this study potentially contradicts some of the claims made here, IT seems that status anxiety as linked to issues of globalization discussed by Mutz in the article is itself present in both the affluent and working-class individuals as Silva's work discussed below shows us.
39. See Silva (2013).
40. See Silva (2013: 18).
41. See Silva (2013: 29).
42. See Althusser (2014).
43. See Silva (2013: 116).
44. See Silva (2013: 125).
45. See Silva (2013: 84–87).
46. See Silva (2013: 109).
47. See Carnes and Lupu (2017). Accessed 5 June 2017.
48. See Mutz (2017).
49. See Ferguson et al. (2018).
50. New research shows, for instance, that almost half of non-voters were non-White. Again, there are many reasons for non-voting – some are structural as noted above but some are most certainly choice. See Pew Research Center (2018).
51. See Balibar (2016: 275).
52. See Balibar (2015a: 16).
53. See Balibar (2010).
54. See Balibar (1994), especially 39–60.
55. See Balibar (2010).
56. Balibar (2010).

## References

- Achenbach, Joel, and Dan Keating. 2017. "New Research Identifies a 'Sea of Despair' Among White Working Class Americans." *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2017. Accessed September 30, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/new-research-identifies-a-sea-of-despair-among-white-working-class-americans/2017/03/22/c777ab6e-0da6-11e7-9b0d-d27c98455440\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/new-research-identifies-a-sea-of-despair-among-white-working-class-americans/2017/03/22/c777ab6e-0da6-11e7-9b0d-d27c98455440_story.html).
- Althusser, Louis. 2014. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. New York: Verso.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1973. *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich.

- Balibar, Étienne. 1994. *Masses Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*. New York: Routledge.
- Balibar, Étienne. 2010. "The Antinomies of Citizenship." *Journal of Romance Studies* 10, no. 2: 1–20.
- Balibar, Étienne. 2015a. *Equiliberty: Political Essays*. Translated by James Ingram. Indianapolis: Duke University Press.
- Balibar, Étienne. 2015b. *Citizenship*. London: Polity.
- Balibar, Étienne. 2016. *Citizen Subject: Foundations for a Philosophical Anthropology*. Translated by Steven Miller. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Benhabib, Selya. 2004. *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boston University School of Public Health Study. 2015. "Health and the City." Accessed September 28, 2017. <https://www.bu.edu/sph/2015/03/08/health-and-the-city/>.
- Carnes, Nicholas, and Noam Lupu. 2017. "It is Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class." *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2017. Accessed March 10, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/>.
- Croxtan, Derek. 1999. "The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Origins of Sovereignty." *The International History Review* 21, no. 3: 569–91.
- Deleuze, Giles, and Felix Guattari. 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 236–37. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Devinatz, Victor. 2015. "Right to Work Laws and the Southernization of U.S. Labor Relations and the U.S. Trade Union Movement's Decline." *Labor Studies Journal* 40, no. 4: 297–318.
- Dizikes, Peter. 2016. "New Study Shows Rich and Poor have Huge Mortality Gap in the U.S." Accessed September 29, 2017. <http://news.mit.edu/2016/study-rich-poor-huge-mortality-gap-us-0411>.
- Ferguson, Thomas, Benjamin Page, Jacob Rothschild, Arturo Chang, and Jie Chen. 2018. "The Economic and Social Roots of Populist Rebellion: Support for Donald Trump in 2016." Working Paper no. 83. The Institute for New Economic Thinking. Accessed June 5, 2019. [https://www.ineteconomics.org/uploads/papers/WP\\_83-Ferguson-et-al.pdf](https://www.ineteconomics.org/uploads/papers/WP_83-Ferguson-et-al.pdf).
- Fraser, Nancy. 2017. "From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump- And Beyond." *American Affairs Journal* 1, no. 4. Accessed June 15, 2018. <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/>.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Walter. 2015. "Ferguson's Fortune 500 Company." *The Atlantic Magazine*, April 26, 2015. Accessed October 2, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/ferguson-fortune-500-company/390492/>.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1983. "What is Enlightenment." In *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, Translated by Ted Humphry. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2012. *The Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laudicina, Paul. 2017. "Wages Have Fallen 43% for Millennials. No Wonder They've Lost Hope." *World Economic Forum Annual Meeting*, January 15. Accessed October 2, 2017. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/wages-have-fallen-43-for-millennials-no-wonder-they-ve-lost-hope/>.

- Leonhardt, David. 2017. "Our Broken Economy in One Single Chart." *New York Times*, August 7. Accessed October 5, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/07/opinion/leonhardt-income-inequality.html>.
- Malm, Andres. 2016. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. New York and London: Verso.
- Morgan, Stephen, and Jiwon Lee. 2018. "Trump Voters and the White Working Class." *Sociological Science* 5: 234–45.
- Moselle, Boaz, and Benjamin Polak. 2001. "A Model for the Predatory State." *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 17, no. 1: 1–33.
- Mutz, Diana. 2017. "Status Threat not Economic Hardship Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote." *PNAS* 15, no. 19: E4330–E4339.
- Oslander, Andres. 2001. "Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth." *International Organization* 55, no. 2: 251–87.
- Page, Joshua, and Joe Soss. 2018. "Criminal Justice Predation and Neoliberal Governance." In *Rethinking Neoliberalism: Resisting the Disciplinary Regime*, edited by Sanford Schram, and Marianna Pavlovskaya, 139–59. New York: Routledge.
- Pew Research Center. 2018. "For Most Trump Voters, 'Very Warm Feelings' For Him Endured. Also, A Detailed Look at the 2016 Electorate Based on Voter Records." Accessed June 5, 2019. <https://www.people-press.org/2018/08/09/for-most-trump-voters-very-warm-feelings-for-him-endured/#in-march-2018-modest-gender-gap-in-views-of-trump-among-supporters>.
- Rana, Aziz. 2010. *The Two Faces of American Freedom*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Rosenfeld, Jake, Patrick Denice, and Jennifer Laird. 2016. "Union Decline Lowers Wages of Non-Union Workers." *The Economic Policy Institute*, August 30, 2016. Accessed October 4, 2017. <https://www.epi.org/publication/union-decline-lowers-wages-of-nonunion-workers-the-overlooked-reason-why-wages-are-stuck-and-inequality-is-growing/>.
- Silva, Jennifer. 2013. *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in the Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Temin, Peter. 2017. *The Vanishing Middle Class: Prejudice and Power in the Dual Economy*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Uggen, Christopher, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon. 2016. "6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016." *The Sentencing Project*, Accessed May 30, 2019. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/6-million-lost-voters-state-level-estimates-felony-disenfranchisement-2016/>.