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Cultural studies and citizenship

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This issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* makes a bold statement. It presents six widely differing articles as indicative of how we might (re)think citizenship in terms of cultural studies. The articles use various traditions as their points of departure, including political philosophy, sociology of news, gender studies and theories of the public sphere as well as qualitative inquiry into the everyday meanings of politics and our relationships with others. While new perspectives on citizenship are emerging which challenge the traditional, received ones, the articles here do not aim for any final definitions. Rather, taken together, they provide a sense of the range of alternative approaches as well as the issues that are at stake. These debates have become increasingly urgent over the past decade or so, as changing sociocultural realities underscore the limitations of strictly legal–formal notions of citizenship; not least, for example, in the face of the social problematics in post-colonial multicultural societies. Democratic rhetoric contrasts more sharply against perceived inequality in everyday life. Older ideological contracts are losing legitimacy, while ultra right-wing populist parties give an ugly face to unrest and disenchantment among broad groups.

In the past, such political questions have not been key issues for cultural studies at large. The early edited collection *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Hall et al., 1978) stands as something of an exception. Although a strong interdisciplinary academic practice which is invested deeply in empirical research in everyday meaning-formation, cultural studies has not been a close neighbour to political science, political communication or political theory. Politics and power relations are, and always have been, important to cultural studies but via the route of the everyday and especially popular culture. In terms of the practices and meaning-making of citizens, civic horizons have not been prominent in



this work. Given late modern sociopolitical development, cultural studies today needs to address the dynamics of democracy from its perspective. Cultural studies has left too much of the political domain to political science.

One thing is clear: since the Second World War, parliamentary politics as reported in the first three pages of quality newspapers has lost ground steadily in the collective imaginary. Indeed, political science, sociology, media studies and opinion research have been hammering home these and related themes, especially since the collapse of communism (an historical irony sometimes lost on mainstream political research). Not only is participation in formal democracy in decline, but so too is engagement in the associational life of civil society (Putnam, 2000). People attend less to the serious news media, while these media in turn are straying further from the ideals of journalism (Excellence in Journalism Project, 2006). The old lament – that knowledge of public affairs is not widely spread – remains as true today as in the earlier decades of the 20th century (Fishkin, 1995; Fishkin and Luskin, 2005; Gamson, 1992; Hermes, forthcoming, 2006; Schoenbach et al., 2005).

From a cultural studies perspective, this has hardly meant that there is no investment from ‘ordinary people’ in social life. Rather, politics has been taken to have a far broader meaning and significance. Informed discussion and formal participation cannot be understood as the only significant domains when it comes to citizenship as lived practice. Key insights in cultural studies have pointed to the disciplinary effects of citizenship and processes of becoming a citizen (Allor and Gagnon, 1994; Miller, 1993), and to the way in which popular media implicitly provide both a forum and materials that help to reflect on what connects and divides us. ‘Us’ can mean citizens in a national sense, or members of local or thematic communities, that may connect via chance or organized meetings in specific places in ‘real life’ or on the internet. In this vein, John Hartley (1999) has argued that television is a ‘transmodern’ teacher from which we have learned to think about both identity and difference. Popular culture has been understood as a domain in which we ‘work through’ the ambiguities and ideological knots of our time (Ellis, 2000). Audiences refer to these uses of popular culture in their appreciation of crime fiction, football or popular television series (Hermes, 2005). Citizenship then can be found both above ground as parliamentary politics, as the ‘daily fealty to the corporate capitalist state’ (Miller, 1998: 218), and as the ‘underground’ reflection on what binds us, what we expect from life and of what we are critical. We need to broaden and deepen our efforts to understand this.

To promote these examples is to define citizenship implicitly in a low-key manner and to begin to add something lacking in traditional conceptions. In the articles that follow, several definitions will be offered more explicitly. Some stem from the Marshallian tripartite approach, which



suggests that we have progressed from civic to political and social rights (Marshall, 1950). Others start from discussion of the public sphere, of which Habermas' (1989) work is exemplary, or from a concept of community that is redefined as cultural citizenship (Hermes, 2005; Miller, 1998). Even more generally, citizenship can be defined starting from a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity that goes back to Foucault's (1991, 1998) seminal work.

Backing up definitions of citizenship, a variety of definitions of politics and 'the political' can be found in the articles collected here. Politics has been seen by insiders as a sphere of drama and power play in which cunning games are played with far-reaching consequences. Such is the view of those who emphasize the news media and government politics. Such a view does not necessarily disregard popular culture or everyday life yet it does imply an exclusionary mechanism, in that governmental politics is not something that generally engages most people. Therefore, all the articles in this issue, whether or not they refer to politics as government and administration, share a notion of the importance of thinking meaning-making and belonging from a perspective in which power, power relations and identity construction are important. From our perspective, the challenge is to de-emphasize the governmental or even the national – or at least put them on hold – while hanging on to a broad sense of what citizenship might be.

The selection of articles for this special issue shows how the intersection of media and cultural studies is more comfortable both with citizenship and politics, seen especially in the contributions by Peter Dahlgren, Justin Lewis and Liesbet van Zoonen. We are excited by the development in cultural studies which engages with a related intersection in which everyday practice brings together the popular and the public sphere. Rather than define beforehand what the public sphere might be, Nick Couldry, John Hartley and Joshua Green suggest that we need to take our cue from what actually happens in everyday settings. To understand the public sphere (or spheres) as temporary and multiform rather than as fixed and regulated is an immense step forward. Thus, both in terms of space and time, we are moving towards a more widely shared and more widely available form of 'the political' as moments of engagement, of 'public connection' (to use Couldry's expression). In the wake of this discussion we may well want to reconceptualize both citizenship and the public sphere in terms of layers or as an interlocking mechanism in which popular culture – usually understood as 'merely' personal or private – can be understood to have different and changing weight. Thus, we can find space for the political and politics in cultural studies research, deepening our understanding of them through the type of qualitative enquiry that cultural studies has made its own.

More practically the goals of this special issue are, first, to simply (if ambitiously) demystify the origins of the discussion about citizenship.



Second, we wish to ground firmly the concerns and existing research practices of cultural studies as entirely relevant for analysing citizenship and politics. Third, we hope to stimulate reflection on how thinking about – and thinking ‘through’ – citizenship in terms of everyday practice might become a specific strength of cultural studies. After all, citizens have not been treated kindly by academics. They have been shown to be undeserving pretenders who are really consumers or sensation-seeking audience members, or self- or otherwise defined social victims who have become clients of state services. There is too little a sense of ‘good’ citizenship other than that of being a newspaper reader or voter. At the very least, cultural studies can offer a much wider sense of the (hidden) resources for citizenship, as well as help to understand how these hidden resources are both beneficial and detrimental for the idealized public sphere about which political élites like to dream.

This is the very question that Peter Dahlgren poses in ‘Doing citizenship: the cultural origins of civic agency in the public sphere’. Cultural studies can help to rethink citizenship, not least with the assistance of the republican tradition and the literature on civil society. With a more robust sense of civic agency and civic competencies as something more expansive than formal deliberative democracy of the public sphere, the article underscores the inexorable interplay between public and private in shaping civic skills, while offering a host of references. From Dahlgren’s contribution onwards, this special issue charts the dominant perspectives on citizenship while also connecting them to cultural studies as an intellectual and politically engaged project that does not reify politics or the public sphere in and for itself. We go from political citizenship to the public sphere (or spheres), ending with cultural citizenship, where republican and communitarian insights mix.

Political citizenship is the point of departure for Justin Lewis and Liesbet van Zoonen. Lewis probes the traditional discourses about the links between news, citizens and political engagement. He highlights the fact that at bottom, these links are not very successful: journalism simply is not doing a very good job in promoting engagement among citizens. He reviews the main reasons why this may be the case then proceeds, from a cultural studies horizon, to reflect on what journalism might look like if it were to take seriously its communication with citizens. For her part, Liesbet van Zoonen focuses on politics and gender in a case study discussion of two women presidents, Tarja Halonen in Finland and Angela Merkel in Germany. Against the background of the historical impossibility for women to become top guns in politics, she offers an entertaining analysis of how high traditional politics is as a social domain. Cultural studies’ concern with power inequality often has not taken on the case of the powerful. Van Zoonen shows how profitable such an exercise can be for our understanding of the public sphere and its new forms of ‘celebrity politics’. Indirectly this gives insight into how the very domain



in which we expect citizenship to be able to exist for women is probably one of the most conservative places in society, even though it is increasingly ruled by the forces of personalization and popularization.

In their contributions, Nick Couldry, John Hartley and Joshua Green problematize how we think about the public sphere. Couldry argues that the key dimension missing in prevailing notions of citizenship is precisely that of culture. From this starting point, he goes on to explore the implications of various understandings of this central term in the context of citizenship, looking critically at a number of specific efforts that have tried to make such an incorporation. In the latter part of his article he offers some preliminary findings from an ongoing research project on 'mediated public connections', in which himself and colleagues are studying how people try to make connections between the public world portrayed in journalism and their own lives, especially in their talk with others. The research finds that the spaces for such talk are socially delimited, 'shaped as much by disconnections as by connections', concluding that civic culture is something that is both constructed and contingent, and its practices often problematic.

Hartley and Green 'dislodge' established notions of the public sphere, first by taking the view that it is closely linked with 'private pursuits' – activities that are generally associated with leisure and entertainment. Thus, they set their sights on the beach, which plays an important role in this regard in Australia. Second, they suggest that such sites can very much embody political engagement: politics can 'erupt' and become embodied in the social relations and practices that characterize these settings. They illustrate these ideas by examining the so-called Cronulla race riots that took place in December 2005, elucidating the linkages between mainstream media reporting, the cultural practices of the beach and how politics came to enter into the realm of everyday culture.

Karina Hof's article comes from a more recognizably established cultural studies perspective. By starting from the wish to understand the meaning and value of 'scrapbooking', Hof concludes that apart from being a highly productive and important pastime for those who are engaged in it, specific identities are publicly produced and reproduced. 'Scrapping' and 'scrapbooking' refer to a craft which may start out as a pastime, in which the 'scraper' uses odds and ends to produce scrapbooks to memorize what has been important to them. The identities produced summarize and highlight especially what it might mean to be a woman in today's society and how this is connected with a specific type of responsibility, ideals and anxieties – all of which are voiced (semi)publicly in chapter meetings and via the web. In so doing, Hof charts what might be called 'cultural citizenship', in which both a concrete sense of community and reflection on one's own identities are important to those involved.

Last but not least, Nick Stevenson shows how the project of this themed issue is important in foregrounding the philosophical and theoretical work that is not commonly understood as belonging to the core business of



cultural studies. He reviews recent feminist philosophical work by Iris Marion Young and Chantal Mouffe to query the uses of citizenship for their respective projects. He ends by quoting the problem of European citizenship as an interesting test case for understanding citizenship from a cultural studies perspective.

We hope that these articles will prove not only to be interesting reading in themselves, but will serve also as a catalyst to set in motion research activity within cultural studies which will illuminate further the irreducible cultural dimensions of citizenship. The notions of citizenship and civic agency are of utmost importance in understanding politics and the political in contemporary democracy. The prevailing frameworks in this regard have become increasingly inadequate. Cultural studies is in a position to develop a new footing.

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Biographical note

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