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Citizenship Studies, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2355157

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of heroism as a sufficient condition for the acquisition of citizenship. I define heroism as exceptional, supererogatory, and risky acts of altruism and heroic citizenship as the reward for a heroic action carried out by a non-citizen resident of membership rights. I mobilize in particular the case of Mamoudou Gassama, "the Spiderman of Paris," who was naturalized by the French President in 2018 after saving a child. While such positive outcomes for people in precarious legal and political situations are valuable, I provide a critical analysis of the ideological scaffolding and political meaning of heroic citizenship, i.e., how it is publicly justified and practiced. I argue that heroic citizenship constitutes a fiat of citizenship that reproduces a problematic picture of citizenship, relying on three ideological tropes: nationalism, sovereigntism, and moralism. Heroic citizenship represents the other side of a broader policy trend that has transformed citizenship into a privilege to earn.

Keywords

earned citizenship ; heroism ; moralization ; nationalism ; naturalization

Acknowledgments

The work was first supported by the Leibniz Research Group "Transformations of Citizenship" at the Goethe University Frankfurt (Germany) and further developed at the University of Rennes (France). I wish to thank Chris Bertram, Sophie Djigo, Martin Deleixhe, Speranta Dumitru, Christine Guionnet, Danièle Lochak, Juliette Monvoisin, Maël Petitjean, Alex Sager, Clara Sandelind and Ayelet Shachar for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Heroic citizenship

Introduction

This paper examines the issue of heroism as a sufficient condition for the acquisition of citizenship. By heroism, I mean exceptional, supererogatory, and risky acts of altruism. In the cases I present, a heroic action carried out by a non-citizen resident (e.g., saving a child, preventing a hostage situation) is rewarded with membership rights. Scarce but uplifting, the cases of heroic citizenship are generally seen as unproblematic. But is citizenship the right reward? Why is acting on an impulse to save an endangered child more deserving of citizenship than daily participation in the political community? What do the media and political narratives of ordinary heroism tell us about the meaning of citizenship in contemporary democracies? And which signal do they send to migrants about the risks they should be ready to take to acquire citizenship? To answer these questions, I provide a conceptual and normative analysis of heroic citizenship, drawing on public discourses (political statements, legal justifications, media coverage, and public debates) and theoretical contributions on recent transformations of citizenship acquisition. I argue that heroic citizenship constitutes a fiat of citizenship, which is the statist capture of an 'act of citizenship' (Nielsen and Isin 2008). An act of citizenship means that non-citizens become citizens through a transformative public performance that legitimates their inclusion. Such performance usually entails a rights claim or an activist struggle motivated by principles of 'equality, justice, liberty, emancipation and solidarity' (Isin 2017, 507). By contrast, a fiat of citizenship is an act of the state that transforms the altruistic performance of a subject into a demonstration of loyalty and appreciation of the political community. Such fiat resignifies

heroism as an instance of patriotic concern and constructs citizenship as an object to reward certain types of conduct by non-noncitizens.

Although my contribution relies strongly on normative political theory, I mobilize one particularly salient case that occurred in France in 2018 and has remained the most cited in the literature (e.g. Gerver 2022; Kingston 2019; Van Milders 2021; Voegele 2019), though without any in-depth analysis. Mamoudou Gassama, an undocumented resident in France from Mali, saw a four-year-old child hanging from a fourth-floor balcony, climbed barehanded, and saved the child from the imminent tragedy. The moment of bravery 'was filmed by bystanders and widely shared online, earning Gassama the nickname 'the Spiderman of Paris' (Agnew 2019; Harris 2018). Despite some doubts raised by right-wing media on the authenticity of the events, French President Emmanuel Macron gave Gassama the 'Medal of Honor for Courage and Devotion' and naturalized him soon after as a grateful response from the French Republic. This event is neither isolated nor specific to a French republican context; I also quote several similar cases from Italy, Greece, and Spain, in which fast-track citizenship, long-term residence permits, or immediate naturalization were offered as a reward for an exceptional act of bravery.

These extraordinary heroes are not the typical beneficiaries of the state's exceptional offers of citizenship. The GLOBALCIT Citizenship Law Dataset includes a 'special achievements' mode of acquisition of citizenship (A24), but it codes together entrepreneurs; people with special skills; people who have demonstrated special achievements in sports, culture, or science; or have rendered great (e.g., 'exceptional' or 'extraordinary') service to the country, the population, or humanity writ large. The latter category is probably the closest to my view of heroic citizenship and appears in the legislation of around 50 states (Vink et al. 2021). However, while citizenship for wealthy investors or athletes has been studied closely (Shachar 2021; 2011), heroic citizenship seems comparatively less of an object of inquiry.

Recent cases of ordinary heroization have received further scrutiny after the COVID-19 pandemic (Cox 2020; Mohammed et al. 2021; Shachar 2022; Winter, Bassel, and Gomá 2023). Certain types of healthcare workers—usually racialized women—have become 'frontline workers' or even 'pandemic warriors' (Shachar 2022, 487) deserving to be more permanently included for their risks taken in warlike times. I follow the critical perspective of these authors regarding the moralization of citizenship (i.e., given as a grateful reward for altruistic actions), but I identify specific cases of spontaneous heroism. The latter—typically racialized men—do not constitute a professional group that public policies could target; they are seldom individuals who happen to perform a heroic action that state officials invest with positive symbolic meaning.

It would be excessive to infer a new trend in citizenship acquisition from these singular, rare, and spectacular examples. Nevertheless, I claim that they cannot be reduced to mere anecdotes. As Turner (2014, 332) argues, 'analyz[ing] the process through which a "non-citizen" becomes a "citizen" may be one of the most appropriate ways to investigate the character of political membership in a liberal state.' Hence, even when the process only concerns a few heroes, it is worth investigating why they stand out. The executive power's intense media coverage and dramatization hint at the symbolic importance for the state of this kind of inclusion that I analyze more systematically.

By symbolic, I mean what touches upon the representations that structure a social order. Alongside other fundamental but largely taken for granted or seemingly natural distinctions, the distinction between members and non-members and the rules that organize or allow transgressions of this distinction necessarily involve a symbolic aspect. They concern the way people define, perceive, and value the political community. Therefore, heroic citizenship cases might be both quantitatively negligible and symbolically significant.

The consensus around heroic citizenship—these people are true heroes who deserve citizenship—reveals a certain 'public philosophy' of integration, following Favell's (Favell 2001) conception. Combining the institutional and legal constraints of citizenship acquisition, political statements regarding the meaning of national identity, and normative claims about what good citizens and deserving non-citizens should be, a public philosophy offers a 'rational reconstruction' (Favell 2001, 19) of public policies of integration. It is a sort of ordinary or 'amateur political theory' (Favell 2001, 15) that shapes the interpretation of the (heroic) event and justifies the political response to it. Hence, I will analyze both the process of naturalization or citizenship acquisition (how it is materially made possible) and the public statements and debates surrounding it (how it is politically justified). I do not claim to offer an in-depth empirical study of the cases I will present, even if a certain level of details regarding the discourses surrounding the Gassama case will be necessary. Rather, I provide a critical analysis of the justifications of heroic citizenship.

I argue that heroic citizenship, while offering positive outcomes for people in precarious legal and political situations, mobilizes a nationalist trope of citizenship. A heroic action is resignified as a kind of 'performance of deservingness' (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014, 422) that is supposed to display both the willingness of non-citizens to become citizens and the values a political community expects its members to embody. The worthiness of heroes reflects the worthiness of the nation; the will displayed in heroic actions expresses the 'consentworthiness of the regime by symbolically representing the consent that is effectively unattainable for native-born citizens of a liberal regime' (Honig 2001, 93).

Furthermore, heroic citizenship shapes a moral picture of society and state that can (and should) express gratitude. This picture singularizes a few heroes worthy of extraordinary honor and respect, which further legitimizes the ordinary exclusion of undesirable migrants and the arbitrariness of sovereign power over non-citizens. Heroizing migrants and giving

them citizenship as a reward seemingly offers a new path for inclusion but actually depends on a nationalist, moralist, and sovereigntist justification that leaves intact the power relations between the state and non-citizens. Heroic citizenship relies on a power fiat rather than an emancipatory act of citizenship.

I first provide a detailed account of the cases of heroic citizenship that have occurred in Europe in the last decade. Using official statements, journalistic reports, and interviews, I focus particularly on the one of Mamoudou Gassama, which received intense international media coverage (Section 1). Then, I define heroic citizenship and pinpoint the exact meaning of heroism involved. I distinguish civil heroism from contributing practices of heroism (such as those performed by frontline workers or soldiers), consider alternative definitions of migrant heroism, and argue that the type involved in heroic citizenship should not be generalized to include any form of altruistic or risky action undertaken by migrants (Section 2). In Section 3, I turn to the critical analysis of heroic citizenship. I argue that heroic citizenship mobilizes and reproduces a problematic picture of citizenship, relying on three ideological tropes: nationalism, sovereigntism, and moralism. I show that heroic citizenship functions as a means of legitimating the hardships for a migrant to become a citizen by lifting them entirely in the rarest cases, and constitutes the other side of a broader policy trend that has transformed citizenship into a privilege to earn.

1. The construction of a state's response to heroic actions

Mamoudou Gassama was born in 1996 in Mali and grew up in Bamako. He left a country in the grip of a civil war to 'go on an adventure and make a success of his life' (Agnew 2019). After a failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean that ended in a Libyan jail following a long journey through Burkina Faso and Niger, he arrived in Italy in 2014 and managed to cross the

French border to, eventually, join his brothers in Paris in 2017. On May 26, 2018, at around 8 pm, he saw a young child (four-and-a-half-years old) hanging from a fourth-floor balcony of a building situated at 51 rue Marx-Dormoy in the 18th *arrondissement*. It seemed that the child had fallen from the floor above. In about 30 seconds, Gassama climbed barehanded and reached the child 20 meters above the ground. He grabbed the boy and handed him to a neighbor behind the balustrade. After a day spent together at Disneyland, the father had left the boy unattended while grocery shopping and chasing Pokemon (Bariéty 2018). The boy had apparently thought the father went back to Disneyland without him and decided to go and find his dad, leaving the apartment through the open window.

Several people had gathered to watch and some filmed the whole scene. The video quickly became viral online, accumulating millions of views after a few days. Doubts and conspiracy theories emerged on Twitter as the number of views was growing (Baheux 2018): why did the neighbor not intervene sooner? How did the young boy manage to keep his grip?[1]

The recently elected French President, Emmanuel Macron, heard about the heroic story and decided to invite Gassama to the Elysée Palace. The meeting was filmed and broadcast on Facebook.[2] Macron congratulated Gassama and offered him to ask for naturalization. He suggested that Gassama join the Paris fire brigade, stressing that he would be needed, as firefighters are 'everyday heroes.' He added:

> Now, you have a huge responsibility. You became an example. [...] It is normal for the Nation to be grateful [*reconnaissante*] because you did something exceptional. I want you to understand that we are making an exception [...]. But I do not want to be demagogical and say we are going to do this everyday.

Newspapers reported that Macron also explained that:

[1] There has even been a physics paper written to show the impossibility of the boy having fallen from the fifth floor and caught the balustrade on the fourth (Rousseau 2018). While I am personally unable to assess the scientific demonstration, the fact that the author brags twice in the (unpublished) paper that he was interviewed on a conservative radio show to explain his argument makes me doubt of the quality of the paper and the intentions behind it.

[2] It is now partly available on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5B-T55e-6es

> We cannot give [papers] to all those who come from Mali, from Burkina. When they are in danger, we give them asylum, but not for economic reasons. [...] But as far as you are concerned, you have done something exceptional. Even if you didn't think it through, it is an act of courage and strength that is admired by all. (Clavel 2018)

At the following press conference, in which Macron announced that he wishes that Gassama became a French citizen, he gave the following justification:

> France has always had this policy of celebrating exceptional acts by knowing how to recognize these merits to gain access to nationality and sometimes to the greatest responsibilities…I do not compare this young man to them but look, Jefferson, Garibaldi... Not many countries have had that…This justifies an exceptional decision. [Having said that] an exceptional act does not make a policy. (Clavel 2018)

Notice the nationalist narrative: While other cases exist throughout Europe, there would be something specifically French about rewarding heroism with citizenship. The Minister of Home Affairs, Gérard Collomb, ensured that Gassama's request for naturalization would be accepted quickly, and that the Paris fire brigade would welcome as soon as possible 'a new hero.' Even the far-right representative Marine Le Pen agreed with Macron, saying that 'This young man did a heroic act and probably deserves French nationality.' Nevertheless, she added that, 'At the same time, all those who are on our territory, who benefit from a residence permit and who commit crimes and misdemeanors… should de facto be deprived of their right to stay and be deported to their country of origin' (Agence France-Presse 2018). This 'at the same time' is particularly telling: Heroic citizenship and citizenship stripping are explicitly considered as two sides of the same coin.

On November 6, 2018, Gassama was naturalized following Macron's demand and in accordance with Article 21-19 of the Civil Code: 'A foreigner who has rendered exceptional services to France or whose naturalization is of exceptional interest to France may be naturalized without the requirement of a residence period.' He received his naturalization decree from the prefect who talked of his exceptional actions. The Ambassador of Mali was also present, declaring that Gassama 'did what any self-respecting Malian would have done:

save someone at the risk of his life' (Pascual and Doucouré 2018). Briefly put, the nationalist claiming of the case occurred on both the French and Malian sides.

The decree itself, written by the Council of State, mentioned the conditions that Gassama properly filled: his age, his residence permit acquired after his regularization on May 29, 2018, his 'interests' fixed in France as a trainee firefighter, his sufficient knowledge of the French language, and his adherence to French culture and values.[3] It also mentioned the exception made regarding the five-year residence requirement. The Council recalled Gassama's 'act of great bravery' that 'exemplified some of the values that help bind members of the national community together, such as courage, selflessness, altruism, caring for the most vulnerable.' It further argued that 'given the nature of this act, the considerable impact it had both in France and in the world, thus contributing to the international influence of the country, and the importance of the universal values to which it bore witness, the naturalization of Mr. Gassama is of exceptional interest to France.' According to a report by the General Directorate for Foreigners in France, 42 persons between 2013 and 2017 were admitted for 'exceptional talent or service to the community,' which is low when compared to the total of 157,916 exceptional admissions (for economic or family reasons) over the same period (Ministère de l'Intérieur 2018).

Beyond the doubts raised by the conservative press, several newspapers criticized Macron's publicity stunt: the left-wing *Libération* ran the title, 'A grateful nation honors its great migrants. And the others?' (Fofana 2018).[4] The online publication *Slate* denounced the hypocrisy of Gassama's regularization while harsh anti-migrant policies were being enforced. The article stresses how compatible Macron's decision is with the extreme-right program by

[3] Official Journal, September 12, 2018, p. 72, available at: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/securePrint?token=Eifc$YOqBLLMGogghMyZ. Strangely, it misspells Gassama's first name, calling him Mamadou instead of Mamoudou.

[4] This title is a reference to what is inscribed on the front door of the Panthéon in Paris: 'A grateful nation honors its great men.'

mentioning the declaration of Nicolas Bay, one of the National Front's representatives: 'If I am told: "We regularize this one, because of his act of bravery, and we deport all the others", I sign. If the counterpart of his naturalization would be the deportation of all the illegal immigrants, I agree!' (Askolovitch 2018). This is coherent with Le Pen's declaration mentioned above. Even the regional press underlined how many migrants went through hell to arrive in France, or acted bravely without cameras around, pressing the issue of the exceptionality of the case. Briefly put, Macron can't see the wood for the trees.

Similar cases can be compared to that of Gassama, such as Lassana Bathily, who had hidden people during the hostage crisis on January 9, 2015, in a kosher supermarket. This was part of the series of terrorist attacks in France that began with the shooting in the journal *Charlie Hebdo*. Bathily refused to be called a hero, but the Minister of Home Affairs, Bernard Cazeneuve, accelerated his demand for naturalization, explaining: 'He tried to hide the hostages, he managed to deceive the vigilance of the killer. (...) Lassana is one of those people who are not aware of their own heroism' (Agence France-Presse 2015).

Consider also Mohamed Aymen Latrous, a 22-year-old Tunisian who had been refused a residence permit but saved two children from a burning house in 2015. After his heroic action became known, he was offered a permanent job, suspending the obligation to leave the territory, while not being naturalized. The Prefect mentioned that 'the new instruction of the application for a residence permit that will immediately follow will necessarily take into account the positive and altruistic act by which Mr. Latrous distinguished himself in 2015' (Rubetti 2018).

In Italy, under a similar law, a presidential decree gave citizenship to Ramy Shehata and Adam El Hamami in 2019. The two teenagers managed to prevent the destruction of their school bus with 51 schoolchildren trapped inside after it had been hijacked by the bus driver, who intended to set it on fire and 'carry out a massacre' (BBC News 2019). Ironically, the

driver wanted to protest the death of migrants in the Mediterranean. While rewarding both teens, the then-Minister of Home Affairs, Matteo Salvini, considered stripping the driver of his citizenship, calling him 'a Senegalese with Italian citizenship.' Again, the reward and revocation of citizenship seem part of the same logic.

Like Emmanuel Macron, Greek President Propokis Pavlopoulos welcomed three fishermen at the presidential palace for having rescued many people who had jumped in the sea to escape wildfires in Mati on July 23, 2021. The two Egyptians and one Albanian became Greek citizens, with the Minister of Home Affairs, Alexis Charitsis, declaring: 'It is the least demonstration of gratitude and honor on the part of the Greek state to these people, whose self-sacrifice and contribution to the social whole is an example to be followed' (Greek City Times 2019).

Three more cases of residence permits granted for heroism should be mentioned. In December 2019, an undocumented Senegalese man, Gorgui Lamine Sow, was offered residency in Denia, Spain, for having heroically saved a disabled man from a burning building. He was compared with Gassama and called a 'model citizen' in the petition asking for his regularization (InfoMigrants 2020). In 2015, in Italy, the mayor of Rome called Sobuj Khalifa to congratulate him for his 'beautiful heroic and human gesture' after Khalifa, a homeless undocumented Bangladeshi man who arrived in 2008, had jumped in the Tiber to rescue a drowning woman. He received a one-year residence permit. A year later, the city of Turin granted an undocumented Egyptian man a residence permit for having foiled an armed robbery in a supermarket (The Local 2016).

In this section, I have established that the Gassama case is not an isolated event. Even if the examples listed above come from different contexts, they share some similarities in the justifications given for granting membership rights as a reward for a heroic action. State officials refer to each other's cases, creating a kind of informal jurisprudence. I have hinted to

the elements I will discuss in section 3, namely the nationalist, moralist and sovereigntist meaning attributed by the state to the performance of non-citizens. Before that, I need to clarify what I mean by heroic, and explain why heroic citizenship constitutes a specific aspect of the heroization in a migration context that is discussed in the literature.

2. What is specific about heroic citizenship? The concept of heroism and the conceptions of heroization of non-citizens

Following the above narratives of heroic cases, I define heroism as exceptional, supererogatory, and risky acts of altruism. Exceptional means that these acts are limited in time, either happening once or limited to unexpected circumstances. I take supererogatory in the usual sense of morally desirable or praiseworthy but not morally or legally obligatory. Risky means that heroic acts involve highly possible significant physical harm. Finally, I consider altruism in its most basic sense of beneficence toward others (i.e., a deed done for the benefit of someone else).[5] This definition aligns with the literature, especially Cox (2020, 1) that defines heroic actions as 'voluntary prosocial actions, associated with an acknowledged degree of personal risk, which transcend the duty of the agent' (see also Kitchen and Mathers 2019, 3; Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo 2011, 99; Fried 1993, 496–97; Frisk 2019, 93; Oliner 2002, 123).

I limit heroism to heroic actions and leave aside heroic personality, for the mere reason that actions are more easily identifiable: To qualify a behavior or an act as heroic is less

[5] This does not exclude actions that *also* benefit oneself. For example, taking significant risks to save someone from a burning house is a heroic act, whether the rescuer was inside or outside the house in the first place. Whether a firefighter doing the same thing is also a hero raises the question of the criteria of supererogation. Firefighters have professional duties to save the child that the rescuer has not; they are not heroes per se. However, there is still ample room between the professionally acceptable (required even) risks taken by a firefighter and those ignored by a heroic firefighter. For a discussion of the specific social construction of firefighters as heroes, see (Hochbruck 2019)

controversial than speaking of heroism as a trait of character that one could find in an individual or a group of people (such as a nation or a sports team). Thus, I contend in this paper that a hero is merely a person who has been publicly deemed a hero for having performed an exceptional, supererogatory, and risky act of altruism.

'Heroic' and the category of hero are both evaluative and descriptive, hence, they are also used to positively value acts or persons beyond the characteristics I have defined. While there are many legitimate reasons for a group to identify someone as a hero (e.g., a general for having won a battle), or for someone to think of themselves as a hero (e.g., a parent for raising their child in difficult circumstances), these kinds of heroism only share partial elements with my core concept.

Beyond these examples, I note, however, that heroization is inherently political as it singularizes, valorizes, and hierarchizes certain actions and people. The unequal distribution of the qualifier 'heroic' requires our critical attention regarding who calls whom a hero, when, and why. Winter, Bassel, and Gomá (2023, 11) have shown how the heroization of certain nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic has tended to 'reproduc[e] particular kinds of subjects for conditional inclusion as a heroic few who have stepped up to the new challenge of the pandemic.' It is important to note how gender and race are crucial criteria of heroization for citizenship, and heroic citizenship is yet another case in point.

First, as historians, literature scholars, and sociologists have shown, gender has always constituted an important aspect of heroism in general. 'Heroism has to take place away from the mundane world of productive and reproductive work; in other words, away from the realm of women. In order for heroism to exist, women must be excluded from the scene, creating a male-only space,' argue Kitchen and Mathers (2019, 9–10). And they further ask a crucial question in current processes of heroization: 'if anyone can become a hero, what kind of a hero can they become?' (Kitchen and Mathers 2019, 213–14). Healthcare ordinary heroes are,

in their vast majority, women, while the spontaneous cases of heroism I discussed involve primarily men. Profession is part of the explanation (healthcare workers are often women), but, more decisively, heroizing practices of care or acts of strength is not equivalent. Simply put, heroized men climb a building or rescue people from a river or a burning house as extraordinarily strong and brave individuals. Heroized women work harder and longer, doing dangerous but also tedious and repetitive tasks beyond what is ordinarily acceptable, and they are rewarded as a group.

Second, as noted by Vincent Geisser (2018, 5), the Gassama case 'reflects more deeply the meanderings of our national imaginary with regard to Blacks, and more particularly with regard to the "Black man".' Gender intersects with race in the construction of a heroized subject that is stereotypically reduced to its strength.[6] Geisser wrote the most critical paper on the case, aptly recalling the early criticisms against Macron's exception made for Gassama to better hide his uglier politics toward undesirable migrants. And he adds a more specific post-colonial critique, asking: 'How can we not bring together…this fascination of the French for the "achievements of Mamoudou Gassama" with the fascination for the black body anchored in our collective imagination?' (Geisser 2018, 9). This is especially salient in the French context, where the imageries of colonialism regularly overlap with the representation of racialized youths in the *banlieues* (Horvath 2020). The racialization of undesired migrants deemed as unfit for a supposedly white and Christian republic (Cohen and Mazouz 2021) goes hand in hand with the fetishization of the hero's black body.

In a migration context, heroism has been conceptualized in three different ways to value specific aspects of migrants' lives and experiences that are otherwise disparaged.

(1) Against the negative depiction of 'economic migrants' as mere profiteers, their journey is depicted as heroic. In one of the first discussions of the Gassama case, Dumitru

[6] On the meaning and practices of stereotyping in the context of race relations, see in particular Hall (1997).

(2018) argues that all economic migrants should be considered heroes: 'Starting with very few resources from the outset, and facing numerous obstacles on the way, these migrants are contributing to development and poverty reduction.' Migrants have been taking deathly risks to cross borders and have become the most efficient actors for worldwide equality, as Dumitru recalls that 'migrant remittances to low and middle-income countries reached US$466 billion in 2017 and continues to rise.' The heroism of the migration journey is also used by migrants themselves to weigh their claim to asylum. Constructing the ordeals, hardships, and individual strive to survive into a heroic narrative is a useful strategy to convince a state of the deservingness of asylum (Pineteh and Mulu 2016).

(2) Against the stigma of emigrants abandoning their country in difficult times (Rizvi 2005), emigration, associated with substantial remittances, has become a celebrated form of heroism in certain contexts. Studies on the Philippines, for instance, describe policies and events enacted to celebrate emigrants as heroes. Emigration becomes a valued project that generates revenues through remittances and expand the development of the state. Then, emigration or 'migrant citizenship' (Rodriguez 2010, 79) enables symbolic recognition and rewards by the state.

(3) Against nativist attacks toward non-citizen residents, the risk that non-citizens take to contribute to the nation qualifies them as heroes. The best examples are military heroes and, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, the different professionals who help to sustain the nation in times of trouble. Michael Sullivan (2014; 2019) studied military forms of heroism or service to the nation and argues that it triggers duties of reciprocity, granting agents of the military and of care who 'sustained' the nation a right to citizenship.[7] Mollie Gerver considered the case of frontline workers who took 'substantial risks throughout the

[7] See also Wong and Cho (2006) and Wong and Bonaguro (2020) who aptly called this '*jus meritum*' or citizenship based on service, as a third principle next to *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*. In the same vein, Shachar (2022) coins the concept of '*jus contribuere*' for a fast track to citizenship for frontline workers.

pandemic to substantially increase citizen's safety' (Gerver 2022, 87), and argues that the gratitude owed to them by citizens would be best translated into permanent residency. This logic notably led to an executive demand in France to fast-track the naturalization applications of frontline workers to thank them for their exceptional contribution to the country. Canada created an application process for eligible refugee claimants to apply for permanent residence if they provided direct patient health care during the pandemic. The United Kingdom initiated long-term visa extensions for those working for the National Health Service (Shachar 2022). Presenting a more critical perspective, Cox (2020) uncovers the simplification and depoliticization at stake in heroizing healthcare workers. Mohammed et al. (2021) and Winter et al. (2023) deconstructs the race, class, and gender dimensions of heroization. They show well how including (usually migrant) heroes in critical times is also a way of deflecting attention from the structural power structures that exclude and minoritize them in normal times.

These three forms of the 'heroization' of migration do not fully capture, however, the phenomenon I wish to study.

(1) While one could argue that all migrants risking their lives to cross borders should qualify as heroes, this is more of a normative argument that dissolves the exceptional feature of heroization. In the press, the depiction of migrants-as-heroes constitutes the least common trope next to migrants-as-victims or migrants-as-threats, as John and Kapilashrami (2021) analyzed in the Indian context. Yet, as I mentioned, studies on healthcare workers argue that only one kind of worker is hailed as a hero (Winter, Bassel, and Gomá 2023). In other words, heroic citizenship empirically functions as an exceptional form of inclusion that would mean something different if offered systematically.

(2) Regarding emigrant heroes, I contend that being altruistic through remittances toward one's family cannot be deemed heroic because it lacks the elements of immediate risk

and individual selflessness. The calculated aspect of such a project conceptually distinguishes the type of heroism that I am discussing. The selfless and spontaneous nature of heroic actions by non-citizens enables the state to which they have immigrated to show gratitude without being bound by a duty of gratitude, which would normalize heroic citizenship instead of it remaining exceptional.

(3) Regarding contributing forms of heroism (both military and professional), I contend that they specifically depend on a professional ethos.[8] Arguably, this ethos goes beyond its limits when it involves taking more risks than required. The soldier jumping on a grenade to save his comrades (Urmson 1958), or the nurse who keeps working in times of a pandemic despite a shortage of masks, are heroes and might deserve gratitude under the guise of citizenship. However, this is distinct from the spontaneous form of heroism I address here. Although Gerver (2022, 96–97) mentions the case of Mamoudou Gassama as one of granting citizenship out of gratitude that could apply to frontline workers, it belongs to another conceptual category. Both frontline workers and Gassama took significant risks, but heroism appears due to the circumstances of the pandemic for the former while it is intrinsic to the act for the latter. Furthermore, while gratitude is explicitly mentioned in both cases, it is unclear, in Gerver's approach, why a single act of bravery benefiting one random family should be rewarded with naturalization similarly to recurrent professional care for a large number of patients. Thus, among the cases of exceptional and extraordinary deeds rewarded with citizenship, I distinguish professional or contributing heroism from the exceptional heroism of the cases discussed in the previous section.

[8] Since soldier is a profession, my distinction could name two subsets of professional heroism, e.g. armed and non-armed. I follow the literature here, which mentions in particular the 'professional ethos' of nurses for instance (Oliner 2002) and 'martial heroism' (Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo 2011).

Finally, it is important to note that heroic citizenship is different from honorary citizenship, because the latter does not usually confer citizenship rights per se.[9] Historical practices during the French Revolution—like the famous Thomas Paine, George Washington, or Anarchis Cloots, who became honorary French citizens—were assorted with conditions of residence and swearing of a civic oath to include citizenship rights (Weil 2008, 14–16).

3. A distorted picture of citizenship: Nationalism, moralism, and sovereigntism

After having reconstructed illustrative cases of heroism rewarded with citizenship and defined more precisely what heroic citizenship entails, I turn to its critical evaluation. At face value, heroic citizenship does not seem to be controversial. Who would oppose granting citizenship or long-term residency to someone who has been struggling as a denizen for years, and is now noticed for a praiseworthy act of bravery? My goal is not to assess whether heroic citizenship is right or wrong, but to analyze its ideological scaffolding and political meaning, i.e., how it is publicly justified and mobilized, with what effects, and for what purposes.

I have already hinted at several points while recounting Gassama's case: The nationalist narrative justifying heroic citizenship (a heroic action is a sign of both willingness and aptitude to become a French citizen); the parallel between giving citizenship to heroes, and taking it away from villains; the intense public and political dramatization surrounding the President's interview with Gassama and his decision made, seemingly on the spot, to naturalize him; and the contentious critiques of the act both as hypocritical, considering the

[9] There are exceptions, like in Ireland or Israel, where citizenship for extraordinary service or status of 'Righteous Among the Nations' may come with social and political rights, under conditions of residence.

fate of other non-citizens in France, and a sovereign fiat solely decided by the executive power.

To capture more precisely what is at stake, I ask: to what extent does rewarding heroism with membership rights draw a problematic 'picture,' besides the happy outcomes for both the people saved and the precarious non-citizens being given social, economic, and political rights? I understand 'picture' in a Wittgensteinian way, that is, as a conceptualization of a phenomenon that is both prevalent (or natural and obvious to us) and partial or biased. 'A *picture* held us captive,' famously writes Wittgenstein. 'And we couldn't get outside, it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably' (Wittgenstein 2009, 53 / §115). The strength of a picture is that it generates partial and biased knowledge of the phenomenon that reinforces the validity of the picture.[10] A picture holds us captive because it makes us see and act on reality in a way that makes the picture disappear. It is a self-realizing assumption. Heroic citizenship functions in the same way: It is made possible by a specific picture of citizenship that it hides as a specific picture. More precisely, I argue that the picture in question has three ideological dimensions: nationalism, sovereigntism, and moralism.

Nationalism

Let us first notice that the visual metaphor of the picture is telling. The process of heroization is based on a public act testified by witnesses. Recall the case of Mohamed Aymen Latrous I mentioned in Section 1; it had been very difficult for him to avoid expulsion as his heroic rescue of two kids from a burning building had not been filmed. As his lawyer complained, 'it has to be publicized for there to be a solution' (Ouest-France 2018). And to the virality of Gassama's rescue video responds the video of Macron's invitation, who wanted to make

[10] 'One thinks that one is tracing nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.' (Wittgenstein 2009, 53 / §114).

Gassama into an example to be followed and inspired by, especially for would-be citizens. It is also a political message addressed to the public sphere, Macron overtly mentioning how this reward is an exception to his broader migration politics.

Heroization appears, thus, as a highly symbolic public performance that constructs and celebrates a certain idea of national identity. Similarly, Levinson (1986, 1448) talked about 'national liturgy' when reflecting on loyalty oaths, which performatively convert foreigners into nationals while 'defining or even *constituting* communities' (Levinson 1986, 1447). As Anderson more recently argues, 'ways in which non-citizens can become citizens, or acquire citizenship are not simply legal details and technicalities, but indicate and shape the foundations of how membership is imagined' (Anderson 2013, 99). Consider how Macron and his government tweeted: 'France is a will [*une volonté*], and Mr. Gassama has demonstrated with commitment that he has it!' Several members of the government also tweeted, including Government Spokesperson Benjamin Griveaux: 'This act of immense bravery, faithful to the values of solidarity of our Republic, must open the doors of our national community to him.' Without this nationalist narrative, such a gesture would be seen as what it is: a pure act of sovereign power solely deciding what and who constitutes an exceptional case for naturalization. Heroic citizenship appears here as a reward for having demonstrated certain qualities of 'Frenchness' (solidarity, will). In other words, the Republic recognizes its own; acting as a hero is reinterpreted as acting according to French values. This is not specifically French, but specifically nationalist; recall that, for the President of Mali, this is also what 'any self-respecting Malian would have done.'

Heroic citizenship mobilizes the biases that the critiques of methodological nationalism have identified (Sager 2021; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). It reproduces a homogenous picture of society, conflated with the nation, the republic, and the people, as an autonomous agent that can (and should) express gratitude. Citizenship becomes a gift to

bestow upon the hero, both reifying it and making it a 'valued *stable* object to "own," therefore concealing its uncertainty' (Fortier 2021, 14).

At the same time, heroic citizenship singularizes a few heroes worthy of extraordinary honor and respect while failing to address the groupist view of migrants in general. One could think that heroizing individual migrants would allow for a more humane way of considering them, against the typical rhetoric of large-scale anonymous flows, swarming into quiet liberal democracies. But, as Schlechtriemen (2016, 18) argues, 'the homogeneity of the collective mass and the extraordinariness of the single figure mutually constitute one another.' Heroes are not necessarily more known or considered as individuals; they become symbols.

Moralism

The different cases I presented have in common a moral picture of what naturalization, citizenship application, and state power entail. By moralism or moralization, I mean the depoliticization of political processes through an ethical and individualist vocabulary, which blinds us to underlying forms of domination. It operates in daily justifications as well as in political theory as a discipline (Galston 2010; Mills 2005). More specifically, it consists in describing the actions of social agents as motivated by moral values rather than interests and neutralizing conflict, competition, and power relationships with detached conceptions of interpersonal moral attitudes and behaviors. It involves concealing political and social interests behind the façade of neutrality and disinterestedness, and disguising relationships of power as relationships of benevolence (Boudou 2023).

In his study on the rhetoric of heroism in the US political discourses, Troy Murphy captures well how heroization is a form of depoliticization:

> [Rosa] Parks as 'heroic citizen' is perhaps not a myth without value. Her example has served as an inspiration for millions of Americans. However, the exclusions made in the narrative portrayal of her citizenship undermine the importance of collective action, strategies of political agency, and collaboration with associations which support active critique and contestation of systemic problems. [...] The ordinary citizen as hero is cast primarily through anecdotes and dramatic narratives that are attuned to

> a more personal, private, and conciliatory form of public discourse. The 'representative character' does not engage in systemic critique. (Murphy 2003, 202–4).

The very vocabulary of heroism is moral, emphasizing the character and virtue of persons instead of social and political structures. In the context of the heroization of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cox (2020) accurately identifies how moralization deflects political considerations: praising the sacrifice of heroes prevents us from judging what caused the situation that forced them to act like heroes. She argues that 'a public narrative that concentrates on individual heroism fundamentally fails to acknowledge the importance of reciprocity. Individual heroism does not provide a firm basis on which to build a systematic response to a pandemic: there must be recognition of the responsibilities of healthcare institutions and the general public' (Cox 2020, 2).

As Shachar (2022, 490) also argues, a potential new '*jus contribuere*' ('essential contribution as a basis for membership') 'runs the risk of romanticizing sacrifice. It sets a high bar by requiring extraordinary contribution while overlooking the reality that many members of the essential workforce may have had little choice but to expose themselves to working in dangerous conditions, at great risk to themselves and their families' (Shachar 2022, 493). Individualization, moralization, and heroization function together to foreclose the possibility of structural critique and legitimize the expectation of disproportionate risk-taking, almost sacrificial, behaviors.

The process of moralization sheds light on how heroic citizenship should be considered alongside broader transformations of citizenship as a privilege to be earned (Orgad 2017). While citizenship used to be considered a right rather than a privilege in liberal democracies, the literature on citizenship tests (Bauböck and Joppke 2010; Blake 2019; Sharp 2022) or citizenship deprivation (Fargues, Winter, and Gibney 2020) illustrates well how moral notions of desert, reward, and punishment permeate the life of non-citizens.

Discussions of 'earned citizenship' have shown how citizenship evolved in the last decades from a status enabling further rights and integration within the political community into a 'prize for performance' (Ahmad 2017).

As Lægaard (2012, 46) argues, this 'desert paradigm of naturalisation' produces requirements that 'make the achievement of citizenship conditional on what is perceived as individual merit; they make naturalisation a matter of *desert rather than entitlement*, and the parameters to be assessed in determining whether an immigrant can be naturalised are of a more *personal* sort than impersonal requirements of residence, and perhaps also of good conduct and the like.' Citizenship is no longer the starting point to ensure basic equality, but the reward for demonstrable loyalty, competence, and performance. As Joppke (2020) shows, it relies on an ideological mix of nationalism (loyalty) and neoliberalism (individual performance as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for earning a position). However, because heroic citizenship resembles more of a one-time event that instantly converts a non-citizen into a citizen, one could argue that it disrupts the open-ended demands for demonstrating deservingness that Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas (2014) have well identified. It is precisely because it is exceptional, impossible to reenact, and based on such good fortune and instinctual courage that it sets an unattainable ideal that keeps open the list of requirements for deserving citizenship.

Similarly, heroic citizenship seems to be the opposite of earned citizenship as 'punitive' (Ahmad 2017, 258). Yet, it depends on the same logic (Schwöbel-Patel and Ozkaramanli 2017, 9). The goal is not to punish those who cannot meet the conditions of citizenship acquisition but to normalize the exceptional qualities needed to better shape the normative construction of what a good citizen should be. Even more, earned citizenship, with its endless demands of cultural, social, linguistic, and political integration, twists the logic of membership: it is as if one needs to be a national before becoming one, which is exactly how

Gassama's actions have been described. He acted out as French in his heroic act, hence, he should become French. The 'call for the Super Citizen,' as Elisabeth Badenhoop (2017) names the demandingness of today's nationalization processes and citizenship testing, has never been louder.

It becomes obvious now why the far-right brings together heroic citizenship and citizenship deprivation. Recall Marine Le Pen's double take on the Gassama case: While the young man deserves to become a national, this should come with the possibility to strip of their citizenship the (supposedly) many migrants who have committed a crime or misdemeanor. If citizenship can be earned as a prize for heroism, it can also be taken back. Heroic citizenship and citizenship stripping are two sides of the same coin.[11]

Sovereigntism

There seems to be a paradox in the way the state, on the one hand, continues to make it harder and harder to access citizenship, and, on the other hand, rescinds all of its usual demands of cultural integration or linguistic knowledge when faced with a heroic act. There is suddenly no need to display specific political competence or to prove any genuine link with the community. I used the vocabulary of performance or conversion to capture the instantaneous quality of inclusion at stake with heroic citizenship. As in the case of a couple becoming instantaneously married once the proper words are uttered, the migrant becomes a citizen the moment the heroic action is performed. This is why such moments could be interpreted as 'acts of citizenship' (Nielsen and Isin 2008; Bassel, Monforte, and Khan 2018, 236; Monforte, Bassel, and Khan 2019, 26) or cases of 'performative citizenship' (Isin 2017). Heroism is a moment of rupture, entirely focused on a particular act, 'when, regardless of status and substance, subjects constitute themselves as citizens or, better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due' (Nielsen and Isin 2008, 2).

[11] See also Kingston (2019, 169).

However, heroic citizenship results from the state's capture of heroism for its own agenda, which twists the meaning of the heroic deed by converting it into an act loyalty or appreciation of the political community; in return, the state gratefully offers membership rights. Even more, if heroic citizenship was to be interpreted through the acts of citizenship paradigm, that would fuel both the narrative of the state (the hero acted as an impossibly *ideal* citizen; thus, he deserves to be one) and of the conspiracy theorist (the hero staged a rescue *in order to* become a citizen). In other words, while heroic actions may entail a transformative performance akin to an act of a citizenship, heroic citizenship remains entirely determined by the sovereign state. The state captures the performance of non-citizens to promote its supposed generosity, expressed in its power to offer citizenship to the deserving ones. The political interpretation of the act can only be made by the sovereign in the rewards it decides to grant, while performative citizenship is an emancipatory and agentive process of claim-making by non-citizens (Bloemraad 2018). This is what I earlier called a fiat of citizenship, which underlines the sovereigntist dimension of heroic citizenship.

Heroic citizenship reveals a form of sovereigntism that I define as an ideology legitimizing an executive privilege, i.e. decisions made by the executive power that are legal but unencumbered from the usual demands of democratic justifications and liberal checks and balances. Granting citizenship as a pure privilege decided upon by the state authority, as a modern *fait du prince* [act of the Prince][12] or 'Caesarean intervention' as Van Milders (2021, 1068) puts it, falls within sovereigntism. Reminiscent of ancient practices of pardon, grace, or gift, the state is both partly deaf to legitimate rights claims made by would-be citizens and merciful for the deserving few who risked their lives.

[12] The expression *fait du prince* has a precise legal meaning in French administrative law. I refer here to its political meaning, which is, historically, the prerogative of the sovereign king to make decisions when the law does not explicitly prevent him. It now has a negative connotation, suggesting, more generally, an arbitrary decision made by a superior authority. It usually translates as 'act of state,' 'executive privilege,' or 'government fiat,' but I keep the French expression to underline its monarchical undertone.

By speaking of executive privilege or *fait du prince*, I want to insist on the individualization of decision-making, which comes with a certain degree of arbitrariness,[13] granted by a few political figures, such as the President or Prime Minister alone. The exception made by one state representative directly concerns one exceptional individual. The hero embodies the exception that proves the rule. As pointed out by early critics of heroic citizenship, the risk is that the practice comes hand in hand with xenophobic rhetoric against all the others (Voegele 2019, 141; Geisser 2018, 8; Van Milders 2021, 1068–69). In socio-anthropological terms, heroic citizenship constitutes, through its public, symbolic, and ceremonial components, a kind of ritual transgression that justifies the national order of things. Following Pierre Bourdieu on 'rites of institution,' it functions as a way of legitimating the hardships for a migrant to become a citizen by lifting them entirely in the rarest cases. As Bourdieu writes:

> Any rite tends to consecrate or to legitimize, that is to say to make ignore as arbitrary and to recognize as legitimate, natural, *an arbitrary limit*; or, which amounts to the same thing, to operate solemnly, that is to say in a licit and extra-ordinary way, a transgression of the constitutive limits of the social order. (Bourdieu 1982, 58)

Thus, the social, legal, and political border between citizens and non-citizens is legitimized and naturalized as it is exceptionally crossed by special individuals that are heroes, and authorized only by the highest figure of political authority.

Conclusion

Having studied a particular French case of nationalization as a reward for a heroic non-citizen, I do not claim to have exhausted the meaning and political and symbolic significance of heroic citizenship. I also acknowledge that the exceptional nature of its practice limits its

[13] While, again, remaining within the confines of the law; I am not speaking of an authoritarian regime or a form of state of exception.

importance for the broad questions of justice in migration or democratic inclusion that political theorists usually study. Why, then, has it been so memorable? The spectacularization of citizenship acquisition that it conveyed is a sign in itself that the state, and the national community it claims to represent, performed a symbolic act that went beyond a strict and predictable application of the law. That requires a specific inquiry to reconstruct, analyze, and interpret the meaning of such performance. The fact that heroism is rewarded with citizenship without much political opposition reveals a public consensus about ideals and values related to membership in liberal democracies. It shapes a public philosophy of integration based on deservingness for service to the nation.

Hence, beyond the legal provisions that allow heroic citizenship, I asked several conceptual and political questions: what does heroism mean, how does it affect the conceptual space of citizenship with notions of performance, deservingness, civic virtue, or altruism? And what are the ideological and political conditions for heroic citizenship to be possible and acceptable, hence, legitimate? I did not directly address the normative question—is heroic citizenship desirable?—as I believe it depends on broader and more systemic considerations that my case studies could not have properly informed. However, I have considered that taking heroic citizenship as unproblematic, or critiquing it on the sole ground that it might be hypocritical, was unsatisfying.

Neither the ignorance of heroic citizenship nor a moral condemnation of it can make sense of what it says about the meaning of citizenship, and hence, of the norms and values that a nation-state attempts to construct and convey through its enactment. In this paper, I argued that heroic citizenship constitutes a fiat of citizenship that mobilizes and reproduces a distorted picture of citizenship. It relies on the ideological tropes of nationalism, moralism, and sovereigntism. Heroic citizenship constitutes the other side of a broader policy trend that transforms citizenship into a privilege to earn, a privilege that can also easily be taken away. I

aimed to contribute to the literature on migration, citizenship acquisition and heroization of non-citizens by analyzing the rare cases of spontaneous heroism. Although the examples I discussed differ for instance from the heroized nurses in times of the pandemic, I find a similar pattern that legitimizes systemic hardships by lifting them entirely in exceptional cases and a comparable discursive strategy: the heroization of non-citizens and the civic meaning given to their heroic actions legitimate the exceptional inclusion of the truly deserving few and the ordinary exclusion of the never-fully deserving many.

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