

Does Urban Citizenship Promote Inclusion for the Poor, Sick, and Outcast?

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Much of the literature on urban citizenship focuses on the promise of inclusion; greater local autonomy might provide membership for refugees and other would-be immigrants whom “the nation state does not want to live in the country and thus the city” ([Harald Bauder](#)). The assumption is that nation-states often undervalue potential immigrants and that cities would better value their potential contributions. Because citizenship involves not only inclusion but also exclusion, however, there are dangers to proposals such as [Bauböck’s](#) that “cities should determine who their citizens are independently of how states do this”.

Some argue that migrants “have a right of entry to places that can afford them a better life. Once they have arrived, they should have the same rights as anyone else” ([Warren Magnusson](#)). Highlighting examples of welcoming practices “that challenge and complement national citizenship”, [Monica Varsanyi](#) argues that “with open borders, we’re able to pair that national political community with a robust membership regime based on residence”; she argues that open borders would facilitate [Bauböck’s vision](#) of a “citizenship based on *ius domicilii* [that] creates a status of equality that is uniquely appropriate for cities”. Yet very few cities voluntarily extend rights to people perceived, correctly or incorrectly, as a threat or burden.

Cost-benefit analysis distinguishing the desirable from the undesirable

My work on multilevel citizenship demonstrates that governments of all kinds engage in a cost-benefit analysis to determine which migrants or residents to encourage and which to discourage (Maas 2008; 2009; 2013a; 2013d; 2017a; 2017b; 2020b). Governments at all levels seek to attract or retain desirable people; governments also generally discourage undesirable people to in-migrate and may encourage out-migration (Maas 2020a). This means that proposals such as [Maarten Prak’s](#) to view citizenship as a club with initiation dues can seem appealing: “Reframing the problem in economic terms [...] could open up the issue of local citizenship to a conversation about ownership and access, including the compensation that the established feel they are entitled to from the new members of their community”.

Such economic conversations are inherently exclusionary. Since the rise of national citizenship, one role for national governments has been to counter the discriminatory tendencies of “mean cities” discussed by [Enrico Gargiulo and Lorenzo Piccoli](#). This role is mirrored by EU citizenship, which provides that citizens of EU Member States may live anywhere within the territory of the Union – as long as they do not ‘burden’ the host society (the [Citizenship Directive](#) now provides permanent residence without preconditions after five years of legal residence). European cities have not been particularly welcoming towards Roma, for example, and some governments have similarly sought to limit access for retirees, students, or members of other marginalised groups (Gehring 2013; Lafleur and Mescoli 2018; Maas 2020b; Parker and López Catalán 2014; Schenk and Schmidt 2018). [Barbara Oomen](#) optimistically opines that people might invoke human rights “when their local government threatens to, for instance, exclude foreigners from the social housing stock or prohibit the use of other languages on shop signs”, but it is difficult to envisage uniform enforcement absent a strong national or international legal order.

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Privileging socio-economic ‘insiders’

For those advocating a greater role for urban citizenship it seems natural to highlight a divide between urban and rural populations. Thus [Avigail Eisenberg](#) writes that “rural peoples are witness to their political, economic and cultural marginalisation”, while [Patti Lenard](#) cautions that, because national citizenship remains the main vehicle for fighting inequalities among citizens, “we should be circumspect about giving urban citizenship a more robust status, since doing so threatens to divide urbanites and non-urbanites” (not to mention Indigenous peoples; who despite their high levels of urbanisation are usually viewed as non-urbanites). [Bauböck views the division more in terms of attitudes](#). Divergent attitudes on open versus closed societies, cultural and gender diversity, and climate change divide people in “metropolitan regions and university towns” from those in “rural areas and declining industrial towns as well as working-class neighbourhoods of larger cities”.

Let me suggest that the most important divide is socio-economic – and that there is a high premium for people who are healthy, highly educated, and able to navigate the demands of a capitalist economy (compare [Sandra Seubert’s observation](#) that “the political culture of democracy stands in systemic tension with a social culture of capitalism with its values of competitiveness, merit and individualising of achievements”). [Margaret Kohn](#) argues that if cities are to promote social justice, they must “defend local normative orders that are inclusive and solidaristic” and that the “right to the city should not be construed as something akin to shareholder value in corporate law”; local citizens “should not use local institutions exclusively to promote the interests of current residents”. But even the most cosmopolitan cities privilege the interests of current residents, perhaps even more than do less ‘urbane’ settings.

For example, the New York City Housing Authority specifies that while non-residents may apply for subsidised housing, “due to NYCHA’s long waiting list, available apartments will be offered to applicants who live or work in New York City first” – effectively barring low-income non-residents. Furthermore, only people who live or work in NYC can qualify for priority assignment as victims of domestic violence, ‘working families’ who “do not live or work in New York City will not be assigned any working family priority”, and even homeless people must have previously resided in NYC to qualify for priority. So, only those with the means to afford market rates can move to NYC; other cities have similar policies.

Attracting desirable residents

Poor people do move to cities in search of economic opportunity, but any public assistance they receive tends to come from national or regional governments rather than municipal authorities, and even liberal bastions such as San Francisco and New York deport poor and homeless people to other jurisdictions (Maas 2020a). This is nothing new. Indeed, as discussed also by [Prak](#), cities were engaging in cost-benefit analysis of migrants and residents even before there were states. For example, the Dutch Republic’s economic success depended on a constant stream of migrant workers, sailors, soldiers, servants, as well as transmigrants to the Dutch colonies in Asia and America (Maas 2013c). Cities such as Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, Rotterdam, Gouda, and Middelburg attracted highly skilled and wealthy migrants by reimbursing moving costs, extending capital to (re)start businesses, making available manufacturing space, and offering tax rebates – benefits that often sparked the locals’ envy.

Late sixteenth-century society in the Netherlands was characterised by the tripartite division, dating from the Middle Ages, between citizens (with full rights), inhabitants (without such full rights), and foreign residents (with even fewer rights). Leading families monopolised political positions while individuals could be stripped of citizenship for irresponsible behaviour. Citizenship was usually acquired through birth or marriage but could also be purchased, which was attractive because of the municipal social welfare provisions reserved for citizens (Maas 2013c, 396).

When northern Dutch cities around 1585 felt threatened by the growing power of immigrants, they restricted political offices to the native-born. Justifying the impossibility of naturalisation, Hugo Grotius

explained that immigrants should ally themselves with the indigenous population so that their native-born children might later acquire citizenship. In 1624, however, Rotterdam further tightened its exclusions by targeting not only immigrants but also their native-born children, decreeing that “no persons shall be nominated to Vroedschap (Council) other than those born Hollanders and born of Hollander parents” (Maas 2013c, 397), which could anticipate contemporary nativist responses if cities were to regain authority over decisions about who to admit or expel.

Banning undesirables

Anyone who doubts the proclivity of cities to ban undesirable people has not followed the news about low-level [sex offenders with decades-old convictions being banned from public areas](#) (and often being unable to work as a result); or about [people with mental health, addiction, or disability issues getting a criminal record for being homeless](#) (and hence becoming ineligible for public housing); or any of the numerous petitions to expel high-profile (or [low-profile](#)) criminals. [President Trump’s executive order requiring states and localities to both consent before refugees can be resettled](#) could be considered a move towards urban citizenship because it gives cities a role in determining who may reside, but it also sets [exclusion as the default](#).

As in the Dutch Republic, today’s ‘world cities’ seek to attract the ‘best and brightest’ – but they sort potential residents by socio-economic status either through the operation of market forces (which may appear neutral but are shaped by many factors that are far from neutral) or through active intervention. Echoing [Seubert](#) (cities are “increasingly less a home for ordinary people who want to live in the city”), a Toronto Region Board of Trade report notes that housing in Toronto is “increasingly unaffordable, unsuitable and unavailable”; existing homes “often do not meet the needs of lower- and moderate-income people. Employers are finding it harder to recruit and retain employees, and workers are facing tough choices between more expensive housing and longer commutes. Left unchecked, these forces will drive Toronto in the same direction as San Francisco, New York and other global cities where only a select class of professionals can afford to live” (Toronto Region Board of Trade 2020, 27).

The report cites as one model the University of British Columbia, which offers “more than 10% of its campus housing portfolio [...] to full-time faculty and staff for 25% below market rates”, is “piloting a rent geared to income (RGI) program for lower-income staff”, and offers low-interest-rate loans and grants for down payments. Another model is Whistler, which requires developers of new properties “to either build accommodation for their future workers or provide cash-in-lieu for the [Whistler Housing Authority] to build workforce housing. The WHA can also negotiate with private residential developers to grant higher density rights if that increase is used for affordable housing for the workforce”. The report notes: “Qualified occupants must work a minimum 30 hours per week at a local business and must occupy their unit full-time as their primary residence. WHA enforces these rules by an annual attestation and a complaints-based investigation and enforcement process”. Such models may seem like a remarkable instrumentalization of housing for workers, yet they are far from unique; qualification for local privileges varies based on socio-economic status.

Cities are increasing inequality

Both public and private housing markets increase inequality in cities by excluding those who cannot afford the most attractive cities and urban neighbourhoods. Public housing authorities tend to increase exclusion through qualifying criteria that keep out newcomers or socially undesirable people. The WHA has a waiting list just like the NYCHA and like public housing authorities elsewhere, which all apply cost-benefit calculations. They may [evict residents for using illegal drugs or abusing alcohol; entire households may be evicted if any member of the household or even a guest engages in drug-related criminal activity](#). In the private market, the affordability crisis discussed in the Toronto report is not unique: young university graduates are flocking to cities, and [living in smaller and smaller spaces](#), but

less educated people are leaving. [Cities are increasingly populated by young, rich workers while older and poorer people or families who want children move out](#) – and [homeless people are forced out](#).

Bauböck is right to worry that “the integrity and inclusiveness of local democracy would be jeopardised if those born in the city or descending from parents established in the city enjoy special privileges – as they do under the Chinese hukou system” – but the above examples show similar privileges at work in liberal democracies (Maas 2013b; 2017b; 2020a). The ideal resident is well off, healthy, and hardworking rather than poor, sick, or needing assistance. An underpaid teacher or nurse may have a higher socio-economic status than an unemployed person or someone with a criminal background or mental illness – indeed just as in the Dutch Republic [many localities try to attract young workers by offering incentives](#) – but increasingly [wealth is the key criterion for urban residence](#). Perhaps Bauböck is right that “cities should determine who their citizens are independently of how states do this”. But how would this help efforts to address economic and political inequality?

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