Chapter II

Old and New Rights: E-Citizenship in Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a long-term perspective on citizenship, questioning one of the basic assumptions of most of the literature on this topic, that is, the nation-state as unit of analysis. Through the adoption of a world-systemic perspective, two basic aspects of the history of citizenship stand out. Firstly, the fundamentally exclusive nature of this category, as it emerged and developed over the history of the modern world-system, since at least the “long 16th Century”. And, secondly, that well before the so-called “information revolution” of the last decades, “technology” has shaped the Western social imagination, acting, in various and changing historical forms, as an effective instrument of control and supremacy, producing asymmetric and inegalitarian effects, and providing a yardstick of the different “levels of development” of Western and non-Western peoples. In this view, the most recent phase of the history of citizenship, his e-form, seems to replicate, in new ways, the explanations of the gap existing both between and within countries—now conceptualized as “digital divide”—and, at the same time, the illusory universalistic promise of an expansion of the citizenship and the rights associated to it.

During their travels, each time the Spanish encountered a native individual or group they read to the Indians a statement informing them of the truth of Christianity and the necessity to swear immediate allegiance to the Pope and to the Spanish crown. After this, if the Indians refused or even delayed in their acceptance—or, more simply, their understanding—of the requerimiento, the statement continued:
I certify you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and Their Highness. We shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as Their Highness may command. And we shall take your goods, and shall do you all the mischiefs and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey and refuse to receive their lord and resist and contradict him (quoted from Helps, 1900, pp. 264-267).

Usually, the Spanish did not wait for the Indians to reply to their demands: «After they had been put in chains, someone read the Requerimiento without knowing their language and without any interpreters, and without either the reader or the Indians understanding the language they had no opportunity to reply, being immediately carried away prisoners, the Spanish not failing to use the stick on those who did not go fast enough» (Todorov, 1984, p. 148).

The reading of the Requerimiento wasn’t necessary to the Spanish in order to perpetrate inhuman violence against the native peoples they confronted. The proclamation, rather, «was merely a legalistic rationale for a fanatically religious and fanatically juridical and fanatically brutal people to justify a holocaust» (Stannard, 1992, p. 66).

The practice of the requerimiento reveals, in a clear and dramatic way, a crucial historical reality: well before the information and electronic “revolution”, technology—that is, the employment of “advanced” scientific knowledges in order to achieve specific ends, given a certain level of economic and socio-cultural development—shaped in an ambiguous and dangerously contradictory way the European imagination. More specifically, within this imagination, two particular aspects of technology, the language and the law, marked the boundaries of the Western man, the citizen of the Old World. The first aspect, the language, represented in fact a barrier to any process of communication. As we have seen, the Requerimiento was not usually translated. On the other side, the second aspect, the law, represented a seemingly non-violent instrument of supremacy, which was nonetheless able to produce effects of tremendous violence: its formally symmetric and egalitarian aspect hardly concealed its despotic, asymmetrical and anti-egalitarian substance.

The use of law mediated by language, therefore, constituted a proper technology. It contributed, scientifically and methodologically, to the achievement of specific ends, and, at the same time, it offered a yardstick of the “level of development” obtained by the European peoples. Given this asymmetry in the control of knowledge and in its use, the image of the European citizen was modeled in its main traits and reinforced in its certainties by its supremacy—technological even before than material—over the non-citizen, and by the demonstration of the inferiority—the underdevelopment—of this non-citizen. The trajectories of the inclusion of the former and of the exclusion of the latter were simultaneously formulated in terms of Western literacy and legal technology. Europeans regarded their own language and legal system as the only existing ones and, theoretically, as the only possible ones.

The list of rights of the European citizen progressively expanded over the centuries, enriching and fortifying his image. In its current phase, the trajectory of citizenship, heavily characterized by informatization, has produced, according to the view of many scholars and experts, a new character: the e-citizen, whose emancipatory potential has been often magnified. It has been argued that, thanks to the information and electronic resources, the participation to the collective choices, from being a nostalgic utopia of the ancient Greek polis, can now become a concrete reality even within modern states.

At the same time, the trajectories of exclusion implied by the e-citizenship, and which can be