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By training I am a sociologist and political scientist. Since the mid 1980s, I have been involved almost continuously in comparative empirical research on immigration and citizenship in Europe. My broader interest is, however, in a theory of political boundaries and their significance for liberal democracy. Such a theory needs to examine phenomena of boundary crossing, boundary shifting and boundary blurring. Its main empirical themes are migration, self-determination claims, and the supranational integration of polities. The theory is not merely concerned with the state level but uses a broader conception of self-governing polities that applies also to sub-state and supra-state levels. In this perspective, migration generates overlapping boundaries of membership, whereas sub-national autonomy and supranational integration produce nested types of multiple citizenship. Overlapping membership can be illustrated by multiple nationality, but also by informal political ties that migrants have to sending and receiving countries. Subnational autonomy is a basic feature of all federal states, but exists also in some unitary countries that grant special autonomy to national minorities. The only case of supranational political integration that goes beyond an alliance of independent states is the European Union.

I define citizenship as a status of full and equal membership in a self-governing political community. Formal citizenship is a legal status as well as a bundle of legal rights and duties attached to this status. In a broader sense, citizenship refers also to civic practices and virtues that sustain a self-governing polity, such as voting or protesting against abuses of government power.

Two closely related historical phenomena have shaped modern conceptions of citizenship: the development of the international system of sovereign states since the Treaty of Westphalia and the emergence of state-centered nationalism. The latter builds on the legitimation of political rule through popular sovereignty and provides an answer to the question who is the sovereign people by conceiving of such peoples as national communities of shared history and culture. The combination of the idea of external sovereignty with that of sovereign peoples as nations had led to an impoverished conception of citizenship as membership in a nation-state, according to which citizenship means membership in a nation-state and in one such state only. In my work I explore modes of overlapping and nested citizenship that challenge this norm of singular and exclusive political belonging.

What I have called 'transnational citizenship' is the most important phenomenon of overlapping affiliation. In contrast with most current literature on migrant transnationalism, I conceive of transnational citizenship not merely as migrants' activities towards their countries of origin, but as a triangular relation that involves migrants and political institutions in both sending and receiving states. I am most interested in the change of norms determining the rights, duties and statuses of migrants in this context. This includes migrants' rights as permanent residents, access to citizenship via naturalisation, descent or birth in the territory, multiple nationality, external citizenship and voting rights for non-citizen residents as well as for non-resident citizens.

I study these developments both comparatively and from a normative perspective. Recently, I have coordinated an empirical project comparing the legal rules and policies of citizenship acquisition and loss in the member states of the European Union. The results will be published in three volumes by Amsterdam University Press in fall 2006. Since 2004, I have also coordinated a thematic cluster on citizenship in the EU-funded IMISCOE (International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe) network of excellence.

Transnational citizenship claims can emerge in two contexts: when people move across borders or when borders move across people. The break-up of multinational states and the formation of new nation-states have left minorities stranded on the "wrong side" of a border. Ethnonational minorities and their external kin-states often develop diasporic identities and aspirations to external citizenship rights or formal status that may conflict with simultaneous claims for autonomy and power-sharing in the country where they live. I have recently become interested in comparing transnational citizenship for migrants and for ethnonational minorities with external kin-states.

In contrast with these overlapping affiliations to independent states, nested citizenship emerges from the formation of political communities below or above states. Nested citizenship is a basic feature of all federal states, where it tends to generate little conflict if the federation itself is regarded as a nation that is subdivided into regional constituent entities. Nested citizenship becomes, however, essentially contested in multinational democracies with national or indigenous minorities, such as Canada, Belgium, India, Spain or the UK. In these countries nation-building projects are interlocking in the sense that majorities identify the larger polity as a nation that includes minorities as equal citizens, while minorities regard it as a multinational confederation that is composed of distinct nations. My interest is in comparing federal arrangements that attempt to reconcile such asymmetric identities and in balancing the claims of such polities to territorial integrity with self-government rights of minorities. My general argument is that reconciling these claims requires deriving self-determination rights from a more fundamental right to self-government, so that secession would be seen as legitimate only when it responds to a persistent violation of minority self-government and power-sharing in a multinational state. I have also written several essays comparing territorial with non-territorial forms of self-government. The latter idea was first developed systematically by Austrian socialists, in the context of the late Habsburg empire, who suggested that linguistic communities should elect their own parliaments that would have full control over all cultural and educational institutions and would provide benefits to their members independent of where in the state these reside. My argument is that territorially concentrated minorities have stronger autonomy claims that require devolved powers of regional government and cannot be accommodated by cultural rights attached to membership. Moreover, promoting cultural autonomy may lead to illiberal forms of segregation between ethnic communities that live geographically interspersed.

My critique of self-determination and non-territorial autonomy is based on a broader critique of liberal theories of cultural nationalism for which nations are valuable because they provide individuals with a comprehensive background culture that is important for their well-being or autonomy. In my view, what is specific about nations is their claim to represent distinct political communities rather than cultural ones. A theory of democratic citizenship has to show how conflicting claims of national self-government can be accommodated in a way that pays equal respect to individuals with different affiliations. The agenda of multiculturalism, which responds to the broader phenomenon of ethnocultural and religious diversity in modern societies, should not be mixed up with the specific challenges of nested citizenship within multinational polities.

My studies of nested citizenship have also included the local and supranational levels. My argument is that local self-government creates an important and neglected space for citizenship that should be widened. One illustration for this is the growing number of states that have adopted a franchise for non-citizen residents in municipalities. I interpret this as a manifestation of autonomy in determining membership at the local level, where citizenship is acquired automatically through residence rather than through birth or naturalization, as at the state level.

The European Union is so far the only experiment in creating a supranational polity with its own citizenship status. I have explored the potential and limitations of this peculiar type of citizenship and have argued for a pluralistic rather than strictly federal conception of European unity.