

CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF MASS MIGRATION

Implications for Theory and Practice

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Civic Education in the Age of Mass Migration: Implications for Theory and Practice opens with a discussion of a key tension between civic education and citizenship as a legal construct. While civic education focuses on membership, or belonging within a community, the process of legally creating citizens requires drawing lines to exclude those who do not belong. The construction of citizens necessitates the creation of non-citizens. Further, the boundaries of citizenship that cleave *de jure* citizens (those with formal legal status) from *de facto* citizens (members of society based on their social, political, and economic connections) have historically aligned with, reinforced, and formalized the exclusion of marginalized and oppressed groups. In this, her latest book on civic education in the United States, Angela Banks argues that “citizenship boundaries in the United States have been, and continue to be, structured in ways that violate the egalitarian norm with regard to race, class, and gender” (p. 13). Despite this, civic education usually frames citizenship as purely inclusive, an approach that is both limiting and problematic.

The book begins with an overview of the history and development of the main strands of civic education, including a discussion of why civic education must interrogate the boundaries of citizenship in order to more effectively meet its purpose. In chapter 2, Banks provides a detailed legal background of access to formal citizenship, including its past and present boundaries. In the third chapter, Banks offers an alternative approach to distributing citizenship—arguing that citizenship based on community participation and connection is more appropriate for democratic membership. In the final chapter of the book, Banks provides specific resources and activities for teachers looking to engage their students in exploring and re-imagining the boundaries of citizenship.

Banks’ dual expertise as a legal scholar and educator is evident in this work. Her discussion of complex legal terrain is both lucid and succinct, making it accessible to an audience that is likely unfamiliar with legalese. She carefully guides readers through key legal cases that have shaped citizenship boundaries as they exist today, revealing how citizenship status has been used as a formal tool of exclusion, the resistance movements and legal challenges that have sought to expand the privileges bestowed by citizenship, and ultimately, that the boundaries of citizenship are neither natural nor immutable. By deconstructing the historical evolution of citizenship, Banks demonstrates that “the current regulation of citizenship is not the only possibility” (p. 56) and lays the groundwork for the challenge she will issue to educators later in the book.

In particular, Banks is concerned with the “immigrant labor paradox”, or “the untenable tension between being a democratic society that is structured around the availability of low-wage foreign workers and excluding unauthorized migrants from *de jure* membership in the United States” (p. xviii). Starting in the 1920s, temporary labor programs allowed US employers to hire low-wage foreign labor but denied these workers a path to permanent citizenship. Though these workers play an essential role in US economic growth, as nonimmigrants their legal status depends on the needs of American employers. Perceived as threats to American society, low-wage workers are ineligible for naturalization, despite long-term residence in the US. As such, they remain suspended in conditions of precarity. Their lack of formal membership challenges democratic legitimacy by undermining key principles of participation and inclusion—without legal citizenship and the corresponding rights to vote, to run for election, or to financially support election campaigns, they are excluded from participating in the shaping of the government that affects many of their fundamental interests.¹

In chapter 3, Banks introduces readers to the *jus nexi* approach to citizenship that “focuses on the social fact of membership or the actual ties an individual has to the society” (p. 19), arguing that the *jus nexi principle*—which elevates connections within a society over legal ties—“is a fundamental principle underlying membership within democratic societies; however it has been inconsistently applied” (p. 48). Focusing on two immigration reforms in particular, including “registry,” a process that has been applied multiple times since 1929, to legalize the status of immigrants who entered the US before a specified date, Banks demonstrates that the *jus nexi* principle is already at play in the allocation of US citizenship, but that it has historically been deprioritized as a secondary approach to determining the boundaries of citizenship.

Enacting the *jus nexi* principle uniformly would allow for the recognition of immigrant workers’ economic participation, connections to the US communities in which they live and work, and their rights to have a say in the government that impacts their lives.

In chapter 4, we return to the implications for civic education. American civic education has changed over the decades, but Banks argues that its dominant modes share a “presumption of citizenship status” and failure to critically examine the diversity of immigration status (p. 4). If the purpose of civic education is to prepare students for responsible participation in society (p. xviii), then civic education that is oriented around formal citizenship falls short on two counts: first, by focusing only on *de jure* citizens, it ignores “the vast and varied ways individuals participate in societies... and the deep connections that individuals have to society across membership categories” (p. xxi). Second, in the absence of interrogation, the existing boundaries of citizenship are implicitly justified. By assuming citizenship status and its normative value, educators fail to illuminate the diverse manifestations of social membership, unwittingly elevate some forms of membership over others, and miss a critical opportunity to help students analyze, challenge, and reform systems of oppression.

Alternatives exist—both for a more principled reimagining of citizenship (as Banks has demonstrated in her discussion of *jus nexi*-based citizenship) and a more effective and comprehensive civic education. Banks advocates for a civic education that centers belonging instead of legal status and allows students “the opportunity to experiment with different membership criteria that better allow the state to achieve its

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purpose” (p. 38). In this final chapter, she offers teachers five distinct units that focus on specific historical moments to raise questions about the boundaries of citizenship, including the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, the DREAMer Movement, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on essential labor. Primary resources are accompanied with discussion questions and suggested activities, aimed at increasing students’ understanding of both the inclusionary and exclusionary aspects of citizenship.

While I find Banks’ argument for a *jus nexi* based approach to citizenship reasonable and aligned with the arguments of political theorists like Joseph Carens and Ayelet Shachar, the biggest contribution of this book is its consideration of the educational implications of a narrow focus on legal citizenship and the responsibility of educators to expand conceptions of rightful membership. The domains of political theory and philosophy tend not to intersect with education, and translating these ideas into curricular objectives and resources requires a unique interdisciplinary expertise. In this way, too, Banks is engaged in an act of challenging and re-envisioning boundaries.

As someone who has spent the majority of my adult life outside of my country of citizenship, and as a doctoral student interested in the ethics of citizenship and cosmopolitanism, I am a sympathetic audience. Banks’ critiques of citizenship and civic education resonate with me. Yet, I wonder how her work will be received by a broader audience especially now, when “(w)hole new classes of ‘felonies’ have been created which apply only to immigrants, deportation has become a punishment for even minor offenses, and policies aimed at trying to end unauthorized immigration have been made more punitive rather than more rational and practical” (Ewing, Martínez, & Rumbaut, 2015, p. 1). We may be in the age of mass migration, but it is also an age of unprecedented criminalization of, and resistance to, immigration. Though Banks does not explicitly address this, her inclusion of pedagogical recommendations—such as self-affirmation strategies to reduce cognitive dissonance— seem to be an acknowledgment of the opposition that teachers may face in enacting this curriculum.

Ironically, perhaps it is this very resistance that magnifies the contribution of a resource like this. There is no doubt that migration will continue—human beings have always moved, individually and as whole communities, to survive, to colonize, to explore, and to start anew. In the face of heightened hostility toward migrants, and ever harsher measures of control and cruelty, bell hooks’ final words in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) are instructive:

“The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p. 207).”

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Notes

- 1. As Masha Gessen (Coaston, 2022) notes, “(n)obody is more governed than immigrants, and nobody has less say in government.”

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