Book Review | Citizens of Nowhere: How Europe can be Saved from Itself by Lorenzo Marsili and Niccolo Milanese

In **Citizens of Nowhere: How Europe can be Saved from Itself***,* **Lorenzo Marsili** *and* **Niccolo Milanese** *offer an innovative look at citizenship, grounded in the development of a transnational civil society sphere across Europe. This is an ambitious, perceptive and clear-sighted argument for a transnational citizenship and politics, writes* **Ben Margulies***, that also details the political project required to make this a reality.*

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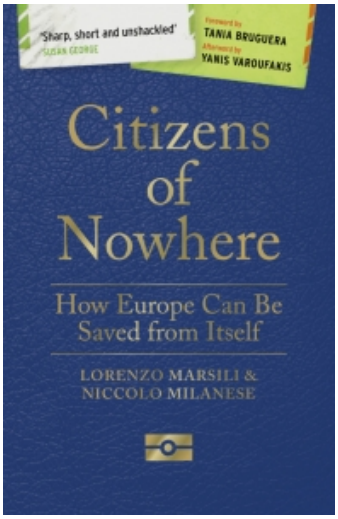
***Citizens of Nowhere: How Europe can be Saved from Itself*. Lorenzo Marsili and Niccolo Milanese. Zed Books. 2018.**



Politics is a realm of abstract nouns and concepts, and we often use or pass over these without too much interrogation. 'Citizenship' is among these terms. It is a legal status, or a vague exhortation to public-spiritedness, or a legal burden to acquire or overcome.

This is unfortunate, because the institution of citizenship is especially relevant to the dilemmas and grievances of modern politics. Citizenship is what Isaiah Berlin would characterise as a form of 'positive liberty' – a freedom *to* do something, specifically to actively participate in the acts and processes of governance. If the chief complaints of the populist age are a sense of powerlessness and neglect, then citizenship is an obvious solution.

But citizenship of what? Populists – left and especially those designated 'radical right' – typically answer with 'the people' or 'the nation'. Those populists on the radical right seek to make that citizenship meaningful by drawing thick borders around the body of citizens ('nativism') and by advocating direct democracy over the representative sort. Centre-right politicians have also embraced this framework in a bid to meet citizen dissatisfaction – this is what Theresa May meant in her 2016 party conference speech, when she said:

> But today, too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass in the street. If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means.

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May's speech provides the launchpad for *Citizens of Nowhere: How Europe Can Be Saved from Itself,* an innovative look at citizenship from authors Lorenzo Marsili and Niccolo Milanese published by Zed Books. Marsili and Milanese are London-based activists and the founders of European Alternatives, which encourages the development of a transnational civil society sphere across Europe.

Marsili and Milanese's work extrapolates from sources and arguments which have been aired elsewhere in the debate over Europe's future. Where their book shines, however, is in analysing the relationship between citizenship and governance – not just the nation state, but the means and institutions by which we are governed.

Marsili and Milanese's core argument is that citizenship is only meaningful in relation to the fact of being governed. This means that nation-state citizenship is no longer uniquely relevant, because 'the governing political elites are spread between international and non-national institutions and authorities' (83). Since citizenship is only truly valuable as a means of self-government and accountability, then national citizenship is insufficient – it cannot provide self-government in a context where much of government occurs beyond the nation state, or beyond *any* state, in the realm of the global market. Without some sort of transnational citizenship, most people lack any agency: 'the vast majority of us are ''citizens of nowhere'' to some extent, and we will remain so until we invent political forms of agency that are equal to the forces shaping our world' (4). This disempowerment also prevents us from imagining alternative futures to the neoliberal order, and this too makes us 'citizens of nowhere', as 'meaningful political citizenship requires the possibility of acting in support of what currently seems impossible' (12).

Citizens of Nowhere offers a detailed exposition of how a focus on the national impedes effective political campaigning and organisation. On the one hand, fantasies of seceding from the global market and creating an autarkic nationalist bastion cannot work. A nation state could withdraw from common monetary, commercial or juridical agreements:

> But given that each state would remain subject to some of the governance authorities and would need to trade with others, cooperate militarily, rely on international law and so on, the harm to which they would subject themselves by leaving some elements of the international system would surely undermine internal support for pulling out totally. (82)

At the same time, existing transnational institutions are designed to exclude democratic participation and contestation. The end result is a nationally focused politics which obscures the common economic condition of those exploited under neoliberalism, and the common political condition of 'being governed', citing Michel Foucault (148).

The book also contains a number of interesting passages on the various threats to and manipulations of citizenship. Massili and Milanese devote a chapter to how citizenship has been devalued by its sale to wealthy investors, and by the willingness of states to strip nationality from citizens on national security grounds (creating 'disposable citizens'). States also claim – as May did – that citizenship cannot exist unless borders are closed and harshly policed to keep outsiders from accessing its privileges. Citizenship becomes not a right to *do* anything for oneself, but to exclude and punish others – because that is all that citizens under neoliberalism are really allowed to do. 'Sovereignty is configured as the power to decide who loses their rights' (148).

What really shines through in the text is the idea that citizenship *cannot* be fully national, because it rests ultimately on a fundamental conception of human equality. Massili and Milanese link the concept back to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), the first French human-rights legislation. The authors observe that this declaration spoke not of French rights, but universal rights, and that the revolutionary regime freely granted citizenship to noted foreign liberals until 1793 (137–39). Thus, migrants are citizens because all human beings are.

The authors' solution to the gap between citizens and the transnational system that rules them is to create a 'transnational' party. This party, like the neoliberal elite, would be 'promiscuous' in its activities – it would act at all levels of governance (national and supranational), and in both governmental and non-governmental spheres. 'The party would be placed simultaneously beyond and between formal institutions of state and politics', and 'would care for all the ways in which politics is conducted outside the institutions' (194). It would transcend 'inter-national' approaches that take nation states as the main actors in supranational politics, and it would create the subject, the *demos,* necessary for such a transnational democratic politics ('for a democracy, you do not need a people, you need parties!' (190)).

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Of course, everyone wants an open, liberal party rooted in a vibrant grassroots activism. Every political activist – or, at least, those who tend to call themselves progressive – wants their party to be 'a space of coordination and collaboration' with a mission to 'multiply civic energy by creating connections' (199), rather than a top-down structure reminiscent of Robert Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy'. In practice, the literature doesn't give Massili and Milanese much cause for hope – typically, left-wing parties that grow from or in tandem with social movements, like Podemos (Spain), Syriza (Greece) or the Workers' Party (Brazil), find that, once in power, they tend to draw the social movement activists into office and focus on electoral concerns. The grassroots tend to wither as a result. One of Podemos's early notables complained in *Jacobin* recently about how the party had few militants and an insular, elitist leadership.

Citizens of Nowhere has a few flaws. The discussion of neoliberalism, though necessary, is something of a potted history. The authors also have a tendency to speak of neoliberalism as if it were a unitary actor, manipulating national differences in order to befuddle and frustrate the common people. Though neoliberal elites are certainly capable of a bit of national chauvinism, this rhetoric incorrectly implies that neoliberal elites act in concert, which Brexit surely disproved. It also implies that neoliberal politicians and economists are not themselves socialised to nationalism, embodying the contradictions between the national and the international in themselves. Again, the desire from a post-Brexit 'global Britain' would seem to illustrate this point.

Though the authors' overview of history and contemporary politics is a bit uninspired, *Citizens of Nowhere* is nevertheless an ambitious and perceptive book. It advances an innovative and clear-sighted argument for a transnational citizenship and politics, and a detailed political project for making that citizenship a reality. The question at hand is whether that project can outpace the nationalist, nativist turn of our contemporary politics.

This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was originally published by the LSE Review of Books blog.

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