
 The Border Within: Citizenship Facilitated and Impeded

ROGER WALDINGER

*Department of Sociology**University of California, Los Angeles**waldinge@soc.ucla.edu*

Immigration is roiling American politics, with controversy continuing and no clear solution in sight. As all parties concur, the system is broken, frustrating the new, would-be, and established Americans, while yielding substantial social costs and tensions from the Mexican to the Canadian border, and just about everywhere in between. Beyond this point of agreement, however, dissonance is all that can be heard. Many voices are shouting; no one knows where to go.

Uncertainty reigns as to how best to control the borders. Meanwhile, there is another option which governments in the United States have decided to avidly pursue: namely, create differences between the people *of* the state and all other people *in* the state. Hence, expanding immigrant numbers have gone hand in hand, both with a restriction on immigrants' rights and with a growing divergence between demography and democracy. While unable to prevent unauthorized immigrants from crossing the border, governments have found it much easier to prevent the illegal immigrants residing on U.S. soil from obtaining public services. As a driver's license is too fine a privilege to be granted to the country's 12 million undocumented immigrants—let them take the bus!—an everyday illegality involved in living in the United States without authorization has become a tool for deporting the unwanted. Likewise, the divide between citizens and permanent residents, which had narrowed in the aftermath of the civil rights era, has once again begun to widen, with legally resident non-citizens no longer eligible for benefits that are now available to citizens alone, and at risk of deportation should they be convicted of a felony. Though not voiceless, non-citizens are voteless, at little cost to those Americans enjoying the vote. The damage, rather, is to the American democracy, decreasingly a government of and for the people, when barely a third of all foreign-born persons living on U.S. soil are eligible to vote.

America's resistance to integration with the world and those of its people that have

Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada, by **Irene Bloemraad**.

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006. 382pp. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780520248984.

moved to U.S. soil is often hard to see, especially by the professional students of what is called "immigration," as they tend to stand with their backs at the border's edge. From that perspective, it's clear that the immigrants are just putting into practice the program that the Americans have long endorsed: namely, that of trying to get ahead on the basis of their own effort, requesting no help from anyone else (though that pesky driver's license would be nice!). Having already broken with the stay-at-homes, the immigrants' search for a better life—whether in the form of a higher-paying job, safer neighborhood, or higher quality schools—leads them to cross ethnic boundaries, heading away from others of their own kind and toward the American mainstream, whatever that might be.

Once across the territorial frontier, the immigrants discover that they have yet another obstacle to cross, namely the barrier that precludes them from membership among the people of the state in which they now live. In general, sociologists take that boundary for granted, asking about the factors that motivate immigrants to "naturalize," assuming that the answer is to be found at the individual level. The problem, however, is that access to citizenship is carefully rationed, effectively excluding far more people from having any say than democratic theory would allow.

One might wonder why. Moreover, it wasn't always so, as in the U.S. during the *last* century of mass migration, citizenship was far easier to acquire. More importantly, perhaps, the other rich democracies aren't all like the United States. Case in point, our neighbor to the north: Canada. Though immigrant densities are even higher in Canada

than in the United States, the foreigners arriving in Canada are becoming citizens at roughly twice the rate of their counterparts who instead head for the United States. Irene Bloemraad's insightful new book explains just why the path to citizenship has become so divergent in these two adjacent countries, similar in so many fundamental respects.

Like any good comparative sociologist, Bloemraad uses the Canada/U.S. comparison to illuminate the impact of differences in underlying variables. For over a decade, the most influential writings on citizenship have asked how "civic" versus "ethnic" conceptions of nationhood can impede or facilitate immigrants' access to citizenship. While the U.S. and Canada both fall into the civic variant, policies toward citizenship differ, doing so along two dimensions. One pertains to government policy toward citizenship *per se*. The U.S. takes a *laissez-faire* approach: while legal immigrants face relatively few impediments in accessing citizenship, they have to do it on their own, with little direct or indirect encouragement from the state. In Canada, by contrast, the state actively encourages the newcomers to become Canadians. The second dimension involves government policy toward ethnic (or more precisely, home country) identity: the U.S. is again *laissez-faire*; Canadian multicultural policies facilitate the retention of, and indeed use, home-country ethnic ties.

Bloemraad ingeniously fills up this two by two space by focusing on the same two, relatively low-skilled groups in both countries—Portuguese and Vietnamese; whether moving to Canada or the United States, the Portuguese arrived as labor migrants and the Vietnamese as refugees, officially so recognized in both countries. This turns out to be the perfect choice of groups: though relatively invisible in the greater U.S. scene, the Portuguese are the ideal stand-in for the classic labor migrants, whether the Italians of yore or the Mexicans of today. As officially recognized refugees, by contrast, the Vietnamese are the exception, receiving government support in the U.S. that comes close to the situation encountered in Canada, though without the multicultural apparatus. Thus, the comparison among Vietnamese communities across borders lets Bloemraad trace the impact of differences in multiculturalism; south of the border, the comparison between the

Vietnamese and the Portuguese illuminates the effect of government support.

Using a variety of sources and methodologies, but principally relying on in-depth interviews among immigrants, ethnic leaders, and officials in Boston and Toronto, Bloemraad shows how much policies and institutions matter. In Boston, the Portuguese are indeed invisible, with low levels of citizenship, surprisingly few ethnic organizations of any type, and almost no representation among elected officials, no matter how modest. Their local Vietnamese counterparts have not fared much better in electoral politics, but organizational density is far greater. Both groups find it hard to fit their imported, home country identities within the ethnoracial pentagon that defines American political life. In Toronto, the Portuguese seem to enjoy the best of both worlds, with a high level of organizational density and considerable success at electoral politics, thanks, in part, to the ethnic organizations that launched numerous political careers. Both Vietnamese and Portuguese Torontonians report that support and recognition of their home country identities has made them more eager to be Canadians, in both the formal and larger sense.

A summary of this sort can't do full justice to this sophisticated, well-written, engaging book, which has already become required reading in both my undergraduate and graduate classes. But like any work of importance, *Becoming a Citizen* is likely to leave the reader wanting some further debate with the author. Bloemraad's take-home message emphasizes the positive role of multiculturalism in facilitating citizenship and encouraging common membership in a multicultural society. Maybe, but for my taste, the case has not been clinched. As noted above, multiculturalism is only *one* of the two axes of variation along which this book is organized; government support of citizenship *per se* is the other dimension and conceptually, the two are distinct. In this respect, the set-up is not quite perfect: in particular, the comparison of Portuguese across borders is muddied by the fact that it involves differences along both multicultural *and* support dimensions. For that reason, among others, I'm not convinced that it's multiculturalism, rather than government facilitation of citizenship, that explains the Canadian success story; even if

multiculturalism is the decisive element, the available evidence doesn't tell me just how much more important it is. Bloemraad also concludes that the United States should shift toward the multicultural variant pursued by its neighbor to the north, in effect, manipulating the book's independent variable so as to hasten the immigrants' full, political incorporation. But one wonders whether citizenship policy is quite as malleable, and as independent from immigration policy, as this conclusion would seem to imply. After all, the immigrants who arrive in Canada are indeed the Canadian state's chosen people; given the government's careful sifting and selecting, doesn't it follow that the Canadian state will work hard to get the immigrants to

commit, as part of an effort to get maximal reward for its investment? South of the border, by contrast, immigration is a society dominated process, leading to a situation in which the economy has developed a need for foreigners whom the people of the United States don't really want. With all energy focused on a thus far hopeless effort at exclusion, are policies that would provide political and material support for inclusionary citizenship truly an option?

The criticisms notwithstanding, *Becoming a Citizen* is an impressive achievement, belonging on the shelf of all serious migration scholars. Based on this reading, they can also look forward to learning what Irene Bloemraad will do next.

Delivered by Ingenta to :
UCLA Law Library
Fri, 24 Oct 2008 04:07:50