In June 2014, a new Canadian Citizenship Act deliberately made Canadian citizenship harder to get and easier to lose. It cemented earlier changes, such as longer mandatory residence times, stricter language rules, expanded citizenship testing, and most controversially the possibility of revoking Canadian citizenship of those with dual nationality if convicted of treason, espionage, or terrorism (Winter 2015). This last provision is currently being repealed. All these new rules of membership in the Canadian polity raise an issue that is at the core of political sociology: the ubiquitous power of the state.

Interestingly few political sociologists have engaged the change in Canadian citizenship rules. On the one hand, this is surprising because the Canadian sociology of immigration and interethnic relations is extensive, diverse, and vibrant. On the other hand, as Irene Bloemraad (2014) reminds us, “scholars of social movements and politics rarely interrogate the hard ‘outside’ boundaries of citizenship faced by would-be migrants or non-citizen residents” (p. 751). Indeed, even internationally, sociologists have long been criticized for practicing methodological nationalism and failing to theorize the role of the state in regulating immigration and emigration. Take, for example, T.H. Marshall’s ([1949] 1973) essay *Citizenship and Social Class*, which is certainly one of the most cited sociological works in the field. Marshall ([1949] 1973) analyzes the successive vertical extension of civil, political, and social rights (to white working-class men in Great Britain), but ignores citizenship’s horizontal limitations. The theorization of citizenship as a process of increasing (read: deepening) social inclusion is
fruitful because it reveals that, from a sociological understanding, substantive citizenship rights imply more than formal status (e.g., Rocher 2015). However, we must not forget that internal inclusion is often premised by external exclusion. State-controlled conditions of entry (and exit) afford newcomers with a status that intersects with other markers of “difference” such as gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class.

Drawing upon Max Weber’s concept of social closure, sociologists have long studied the processes of relative group closure and the selective conditions of admission. But they have rarely applied this to society and the nation-state as such. A famous exception is Rogers Brubaker’s study *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (1992). Brubaker (1992) theorizes citizenship as an instrument of social closure that enables modern states to regulate conditions of entry; these conditions are shaped by ideals and traditions of elite-driven “idioms of nationhood.” The nation-state becomes a giant status group à la Weber (i.e., infused with economic, political, and social honor) where relative openness or closure of citizenship to newcomers is determined by (conflicting) interests and ideals of those in power within.

More recently, another political sociologist, Christian Joppke (2010), has left his mark on the field by making a strong claim that increasingly “de-ethnicized” citizenship rules across Western liberal-democratic states are converging. For Joppke (2010), citizenship is first and foremost a status of membership in a state, which trumps all other dimensions—such as equal rights and identity—by “providing elementary security and protection” (p. 3). This fundamental characteristic of citizenship is at stake in Canada’s aforementioned experiment with citizenship revocation for dual nationals. But then, Joppke (2010) also holds that citizenship in the twenty-first century is becoming increasingly “light” with a thinner national identity bestowed upon it and fewer rights tied exclusively to status. Is the conditional membership of dual nationals in the Canadian context related to the “inevitable” lightening of citizenship?

At the international level, the literature on citizenship is thus well and alive, and contributions by political sociologists figure prominently in it. There is, however, an important gap: most of the recent accounts of citizenship are top-down and state centered; authors study laws, norms, and institutions and/or trace macro-sociological processes. Put differently, the emphasis is on structure with very little space for individual agency. This brings us back to the relevance of Canadian contributions to the field. Political sociology in a country that obtains 67 percent of its annual population growth through immigration cannot afford to neglect the conditions of entry and exit to/from the polity, whether temporary or permanent. Nor should it ignore the agency of those affected by immigration and citizenship rules. On the one hand, there are those whose job it is to develop and implement those policies. Opening up the black box of “the state,” Vic Satzewich (2015) uncovers the structure and agency at work when
Canadian visa officers decide who gets in. On the other hand, there are those who are at the receiving end of those decisions. Daiva Stasiulis and Abigail Bakan (2005), for example, study the lived experiences of female migrant workers in Canada. Their analysis teases out the contradictions between formal citizenship rights and unequal working conditions. This relates to the production of “noncitizenship” and the resistance to it by individuals holding a precarious migratory status. Luin Goldring and Patricia Landolt (2013) argue that “citizenship status does not necessarily correspond to citizenship practice, nor does citizenship resolve inequality” (p. 3). Indeed, claims for equality by marginalized groups—whether or not holding formal citizenship status—have been interpreted as “acts of citizenship” (Isin and Nielsen 2008), directly or indirectly underlining the fact that “second class” citizenship is normatively unacceptable.

In sum, actor-centered approaches help us to shed new light on the state-society relationship in Canada and to avoid treating “the state” and “the society” as monolithic entities. As my fellow contributors to this special section underline, politics should be understood in a broader sense, as encompassing the society, institutions, and contexts in which they work. Behind policies and politics are specific actors that aim to exercise power. This exercise has consequences not merely upon society at large, but it targets (explicitly) or hits (involuntarily) some individuals more than others. The exercise of power also generates resistance by individuals who then may or may not decide to act collectively and thereby instigate change.

Actor-centered analyses also generate insights that are crucial for successful policy making. To come back to the observation at the beginning of this text: Much of Canada’s recent citizenship legislation was driven by the allegation that immigrants increasingly enter Canada with the intent to secure citizenship and to use the Canadian passport for travel related to terrorism and/or as a “security policy” for the purpose of health care or escaping a war zone. These “citizens of convenience” allegedly abuse Canadian generosity and lack meaningful ties with the country. The term was coined in the course of the debate following the costly evacuation of Canadian nationals from the war in Lebanon in 2006. It evokes the image of transnational citizens, mostly nonwhite, non-Christian who lack meaningful ties with Canada. But does this image accurately reflect reality?

We know that states have always been strategic and selective in handing out citizenship status. However, we know fairly little about the motives, strategies, and loyalties at stake when individuals become members of the polity. Who are Canada’s so-called citizens of convenience? How do they circumvent the power of the state? Do utilitarian motives prevail after citizenship uptake? To what extent do welcoming naturalization rules and practices make a difference? Or, asking even more generally, what does “strategic citizenship” mean in a world where the accident of birth (to certain parents, on a certain territory) provide individuals either with
a valuable bundle of rights, benefits, and opportunities or with greatly diminished life opportunities (Shachar 2009)?

Answering these questions becomes even more pressing as the magnitude of the actual migrant and refugee “crisis” in Syria and its neighboring countries will also affect the way that Canada is (re)defining citizenship. At the international level, much of the change in recent citizenship politics has been brought about “from below”—states merely reacting to changing patterns and behaviors of migration, thereby creating new forms of resistance. These new forms of individual agency must lead political sociologists to a novel way of understanding state-society relations.

To formulate it differently, many of the newcomers to Canada will maintain connections to friends and family “back home” and elsewhere. How would a political sociology look like that seriously engaged with the transnationalization of exercising power and resisting it? From the perspective outlined here, political sociology is not dead. On the contrary, its field of operation is becoming broader by the minute. We just have to adjust our theoretical and methodological tools to the fact that in the future, political sociologists will be analyzing states-societies relations from above, as well as from below.

References


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