



# Introducing radical democratic citizenship: from practice to theory

Andreas Zaunseder, Sophia Woodman & Akwugo Emejulu

To cite this article: Andreas Zaunseder, Sophia Woodman & Akwugo Emejulu (2022) Introducing radical democratic citizenship: from practice to theory, *Identities*, 29:1, 1-8, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2021.2013670](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2021.2013670)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2021.2013670>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 15 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 518




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Introducing radical democratic citizenship: from practice to theory

Andreas Zaunseder<sup>a</sup>, Sophia Woodman <sup>b</sup> and Akwugo Emejulu<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Centre for Citizenship, Civil Society, and Rule of Law, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland; <sup>b</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; <sup>c</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

### ABSTRACT

For our special issue, ‘Radical Democratic Citizenship: From Practice to Theory’, we examine different forms of radical theorising and politics at the grassroots. Radical democratic citizenship entails forms of struggle against gross social, economic and political miseries and injustices. This special issue explores the implications of a renewed wave of revolutionary grassroots action. ‘Radical’ indicates firstly the potential for sustained fundamental change of the economic and political landscape that, secondly, is pursued from the grassroots, and, thirdly, through an egalitarian, democratic process that are transformative in rethinking and reshaping the parameters of what democracy can and should be. We raise the question of how localised alternatives – which have been the most fertile terrain for such generation of different worlds – might be able to address wider questions of global inequality on our finite planet.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 26 November 2021; Accepted 30 November 2021

**KEYWORDS** Radical; democracy; citizenship; grassroots; commons; equality

More than fifty years ago, in a global wave of protests, ordinary people occupied workplaces, schools and public spaces, collectively calling for a transformation in politics. The new social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s – from the American Civil Rights movement, to the student movement, to the anti-war movement to the women’s liberation movement – exemplified radical forms of democratic citizenship, aiming variously to resist authoritarian and imperialist regimes, fight economic and political elites, dismantle capitalist exploitation, challenge gender norms and tackle racism and white supremacy. Despite the many differences between them, all these movements share a radical approach to citizenship through which they sought to transform their worlds. Guided by egalitarian principles, they sought to reshape and rebuild political spaces to ensure the maximum participation amongst individuals and groups previously excluded,

**CONTACT** Andreas Zaunseder  [r02az16@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:r02az16@abdn.ac.uk)  Centre for Citizenship, Civil Society, and Rule of Law, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3UB, Scotland

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

particularly on the basis of race, class and gender. Further, many of these movements sought to build fundamental alternatives to living everyday life, from making the personal political to transforming economic exchange. Thus, these movements represented a democratic, insurrectionary and prefigurative form of citizenship that sought to bring into being new political subjectivities and forms of life outside and against the existing, constituted order in new political communities. Radical democratic citizenship entails forms of struggle against gross social, economic and political miseries and injustices. Today, faced with multi-pronged catastrophes from ever-deepening economic inequality, a resurgent far right, the climate emergency and ecological degradation, the rise of authoritarian regimes across the globe and now a global pandemic, the demand for profound and far-reaching change is as pressing as it was half a century ago.

This special issue explores the implications of a renewed wave of revolutionary grassroots action in the light of those earlier insurrectionary moments – and harking back to a source of inspiration for many of them, the 1871 Paris Commune – proposing the concept of radical democratic citizenship to capture the dynamics of its practice and theory. ‘Radical’ indicates firstly the potential for sustained fundamental change of the economic and political landscape that, secondly, is pursued from the grassroots, and, thirdly, through an egalitarian, democratic process that are transformative in rethinking and reshaping the parameters of what democracy can and should be. We highlight the tensions between democracy and citizenship, which we conceptualise, following Balibar (2015), as in a relationship of antinomy or inherent contradiction, yet inextricably interconnected. This antimony arises because citizenship implies both governing, incorporating the democratic dimension, and being governed, which implies a degree of submission to collective norms and orders; while in its radical form, democracy implies that existing rules are always open to challenge. We conceive of radical democratic citizenship as a form that is inherently open to others, human and non-human, who are excluded from existing forms of democracy, an openness that extends beyond and challenges forms of enclosure and bordering, whether imposed by the state or by capital. Yet in another antinomy, protecting the space in which radical democratic citizenship can be practiced also implies defending it against those who seek to destroy or eliminate it.

Here, we draw on Balibar’s (2015) contrast between ‘insurrectionary’ and ‘constituted’ citizenship as a fruitful avenue for this rethinking. The ‘constituted’ form can be summed up as citizenship as entitlement, tied to a bourgeois concept of the state that essentially blocks political emancipation and profound democratic change at the grassroots level, while also bounding membership based on state borders. In this constituted form, citizenship prevails over democracy, blocking its openness in terms of rules and

membership. By contrast, 'insurrectionary citizenship' aims to capture self-government, disobedience, critique, and resistance from outside the established order, often in clear opposition to statist forms of citizenship. It represents collective and sustained forms of what Isin (2009) terms 'activist citizenship', but grounds these in collective forms of life that are not seeking to re-enter the mainstream from the margins, but to delineate and create a different world (Stack and Gordon 2007). Protecting the space to create such alternatives may involve outright 'secession' of a territory, or a similar move in a less explicit form that has the same logic of disengagement (Ross and Collective 2018). By bringing together these three terms, Radical Democratic Citizenship, we aim to understand conditions in theory and practice for this insurrectionary form to enact and prefigure the emergence of real alternatives to the status quo, envisioning and creating a politics outside the dominant capitalist and state-oriented conditions of possibility.

Focussing on the grassroots in this special issue, we find a variety of fruitful collective initiatives and movements, creating alternative spaces and ways of living, rejections of economic and political apparatuses and the logics of capitalism, white supremacy and the nation state. Situating enquiry at the grassroots helps us to discern a lively arena of politics that experiment and remix the meaning of democracy. In contrast to those theorists who argue for the importance of procedure for democratic deliberation, Graeber posits that democracy is most possible in conditions of uncertainty and experimentation (Graeber 2014). As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, radical democratic citizenship is expressed through the transformation of apparently 'ordinary' modes of life (Neveu 2015), such as work, festivities, health, education, play and community care. Indeed, dealing collectively with the mundane realities of daily life can be at the heart of the practice of radical democracy (Magnusson, this issue). The articles in this special issue show how, by transforming and politicising the ordinary, such a citizenship can generate new forms of subjectivity, and reemphasize that spaces at the margins can be generative for such subjectivities (Turner 2016). Our enquiries raise important questions as to whether the politics of these insurrectionary forms can be sustained over time and institutionalised in ways that keep open the productive tensions at the heart of radical democratic citizenship, allowing scope for challenge, dissensus and the emergence of new political claims (Coles 2006). And finally, we raise the question of how localised alternatives – which have been the most fertile terrain for such generation of different worlds – might be able to address wider questions of global inequality on our finite planet.

As several articles in the special issue show, radical democratic citizenship is not necessarily oriented towards the state. Radical work at the grassroots often means the rejection of the state as a possible vehicle for securing equality and justice. In this way, radical democratic citizenship situates itself outside and against the logics of inclusion/exclusion with

which citizenship studies has often been concerned. Here, a central theme is how communities in struggle refuse dominant forms of politics by establishing autonomous spaces and even 'zones to defend' (Ross and Collective 2018). In their examination of the political praxis of women of colour activists in Amsterdam and London, Emejulu and van der Scheer show how in liminal spaces, under the state radar, activists practice a politics of hope and of refusal of racialised political norms. Emejulu and van der Scheer insightfully illustrate what Simpson (2014, 2016) calls the revolutionary and collective act of becoming that underlies this politics of refusal and the strategies of dissent, mobilising and organising that go hand in hand with it. We learn how refusal is not anti-politics but the creation of alternative spaces and doing things differently – both grounded in radical equality.

Refusal of the state form is an explicit part of the project of political transformation being undertaken in the Kurdish-controlled areas within the 'Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' known collectively as Rojava, as Dirik's article describes. In the radical democracy practiced in these areas, deliberation within the local community is the principal means of making decisions. Crucial in this shift to new forms of power are processes of popular education as 'consciousness raising' aimed at unlearning the routines of state-oriented, patriarchal forms of domination, and reviving, creating and disseminating knowledges from below, Dirik shows. One manifestation is the use of local languages in broadcasting and communication, languages that were previously suppressed by the Syrian state in the name of Arab nationalism.

In contrast to how women of colour in London and Amsterdam create spaces of care by disengaging as much as possible from the state, where an insurrectionary movement occupies a territory, as in Rojava, defence becomes essential to establishing a new political order outside the ambit of existing state forms. In such circumstances, protecting communities from state violence is a prerequisite for the possibility of radical democratic citizenship. In a similar vein, Kunnath's article examines radical democracy within the institutions of local 'people's government' known as Janathana Sarkar in parts of India where Maoist insurgents are challenging the overwhelming violence of caste and class systems of domination backed by state security forces and vigilantes. In such a context, building forms of governance in which equality can be practiced requires not only the defence of communities, sometimes by force of arms, but also the active mobilisation and engagement of the poor. Dalits, Adivasis and women are central actors in developing these new democratic forms of local government, which mediate disputes, provide education and implement norms of gender equality, for example.

Deliberation around the stuff of daily life is another theme that is central to radical democratic citizenship. In the context of both Jantana Sarkar and Rojava, this means addressing instances of gender violence and making women's liberation and inclusion central to processes of governance. The importance of grounding radical democracy in the mundane is a central argument of Magnusson's essay. He argues that the focus on the spectacular manifestations of political upheaval as sites for radical democratic practice has obscured the extent to which the routines of an 'open city' can act as a laboratory in which radical democratic citizenship becomes possible through working out the problems of the everyday. He situates his enquiry in contrast to the dominant focus on the nation-state as a locus of democracy, which, as he points out, is premised on exclusionary principles. The neighbourhoods and spaces of the city contain a potential for radical democracy that can be open both in the sense of being inclusive as well as connected to other places and initiatives, echoing the principle of internationalism of the Paris Commune of 1871 (Ross 2015).

Such an openness to others is also a key feature of radical democratic citizenship, noted in many of the articles in this special issue. In a contribution exploring how very young children assert a right to play in public space – as well as how that right is routinely constrained – Konstantioni points out the intergenerational 'solidarity work' that becomes crucial to children's agency. In challenging the everyday exclusions from public space faced by young children and their parents, she argues for an intersectional approach that is sensitive to the varied ways such exclusions may be experienced depending on race, gender and class. Konstantioni's focus on young children, who may even be pre-verbal but clearly enjoy and engage with play in different spaces differently, draws attention to ways the equality embedded in the concept of radical democratic citizenship may require forms of democracy that are not explicitly deliberative, but involve recognition of being in common that embrace openness through an attentive practice.

This is a theme that is inherent in the concept of 'festive commoning' proposed by Woodman and Zauneder in their article. They explore this idea through an enquiry into alternative festive gatherings in Scotland that illustrate dynamics of the festive as potentially a form of commons 'against and beyond' capitalist relations, linked to a long radical tradition. Autonomous festivities have consistently faced threats of enclosure and outright suppression from the state, capital and conservative religious authorities, sometimes due to their connection to political action, but also because they (re)claim space and time from the dominant capitalist order. Woodman and Zauneder point to a number of features that connect festive commoning to radical democratic citizenship: openness to the other, both human and non-human beings and nature; practices of care and nurturance; and the formation of collectives that produce solidarity and collective joy. These features represent

alternatives to the dominant logics of commodification of festive life, while also creating a medium for dissemination of radical and grassroots knowledge, skills and history, embedded in a profound ecological sensibility through the practice of commoning.

Reclaiming time and space from the state and capital is also a theme in the 'radical' worker cooperatives that are the subject of Zaunseider's contribution to the special issue. Based on a study of such cooperatives in Scotland, he shows how their adoption of an equal pay structure, collective ownership, and a flat hierarchy has an inherently democratising function. Attention to the humanness of work, to equality at work, and this specific form of workplace democracy is profoundly at odds with the dominant logics of production in capitalism, and thus is constantly under threat as these cooperatives have to operate in a marketplace where efficiency and competitiveness are prioritised above the values they hold. In his contribution, Zaunseider carves out how the labour of workers in co-operatives assumes a political character. He connects this with prefiguring an alternative way of organising work as well as practicing an immanent critique of the capitalist organisation of labour (Winn 2015; Shukaitis 2010; Sandoval 2016). On the basis of these workers' co-operatives he makes a case for this 'political doing' as an integral part of radical democratic citizenship.

Radical democratic citizenship focusses first and foremost on doing, acting, performing, practicing, enacting, engaging, rather than the dualism of rights and duties within a fictitious political community such as the nation state. This 'doing' at the grassroots level fosters a revolutionary characteristic – and potential. Making change can be an act that at the same time brings about a beginning, something new in the Arendtian sense (Arendt 1958), or safeguards what is just in a democratic, egalitarian and non-authoritarian way. To grasp this dynamic, we need to 'stop thinking of revolution as a thing', as David Graeber asserts, and see it as a form of doing (2014, 45), not the one delineated short period of toppling an entire regime. Direct democracy and equality has never happened all of a sudden without precursor collectivities that have nurtured solidarity and interlinkages, whether politicised or not. Building on the existence of these collectivities, alternatives can be established, practiced, discussed, and developed.

Focussing on the grassroots in this special issue, we find fruitful collective initiatives and movements of various forms of resistance, creating and prefiguring alternative spaces and ways of living, rejections of economic and political apparatuses and logics of capitalism and the nation state. Whilst we must be careful to avoid fetishising grassroots work and ignoring the very real conflicts and power imbalances between actors on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status, the grassroots nevertheless can be a space – or rather a series of spaces – that can be conducive to radical democracy.

These enquiries into the practice of radical democratic citizenship raise intriguing questions about the relationship between an open, questioning conception of equality (one in which the rules of democratic practice are always open to challenge) and the centring of social reproduction in politics, with its attention to the quotidian needs of human and non-human beings for acknowledgement, care, love and joy (Battistoni 2017). There can be no liveable future on our planet without putting such needs at the centre of politics, so radical democratic citizenship is surely part of the answer to the question of the moment: 'What is to be done?' Complex and difficult questions for such forms of citizenship are raised where communities seek to broaden the scope of such a politics, defending themselves from the routine violence that they face in regimes of domination based on race, gender, caste and class. Such issues merit further enquiry, and we present this special issue as an opening for addressing such questions.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the contributors for their invaluable contributions to this special issue and the wonderful collaboration in the process of putting it together.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### ORCID

Sophia Woodman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7099-2717>

### References

- Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Balibar, E. 2015. *Citizenship*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Battistoni, A. 2017. "Living, Not Just Surviving." *Jacobin*, August 15. <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/living-not-just-surviving/>
- Coles, R. 2006. "Of Tensions and Tricksters: Grassroots Democracy between Theory and Practice." *Perspectives on Politics* 4: 03. doi:10.1017/S153759270606035X.
- Graeber, D. 2014. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Isin, E. F. 2009. "Citizenship in Flux: The Figure of the Activist Citizen." *Subjectivity* 29: 367–388. doi:10.1057/sub.2009.25.
- Neveu, C. 2015. "Of Ordinarity and Citizenship Processes." *Citizenship Studies* 19 (2): 141–154. doi:10.1080/13621025.2015.1005944.
- Ross, K. 2015. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London: Verso.



- Ross, K., and M. T. Collective. 2018. *The Zad and NoTAV: Territorial Struggles and the Making of a New Political Intelligence*. English language ed. London: Verso, the imprint of New Left Books.
- Shukaitis, S. 2010. "Sisyphus and the Labour of Imagination: Autonomy, Cultural Production, and the Antinomies of Worker Self-management." *Affinities* 4 (1): 57–82.
- Simpson, A. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Simpson, A. 2016. "Consent's Revenge." *Cultural Anthropology* 31 (3): 326–333. doi:10.14506/ca31.3.02.
- Sandoval, M. 2016. "What would Rosa do? Co-operatives and radical politics." *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 63. <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14860>
- Stack, T., and A. Gordon. 2007. "Citizenship beyond the State: Thinking with Early Modern Citizenship in the Contemporary World." *Citizenship Studies* 11 (2): 117–133. doi:10.1080/13621020701262438.
- Turner, J. 2016. "(En)gendering the Political: Citizenship from Marginal Spaces." *Citizenship Studies* 20 (2): 141–155. doi:10.1080/1362102520151132569.
- Winn, J. 2015. "The Co-operative University: Labour, Property and Pedagogy." *Power and Education* 7 (1): 39–55. doi:10.1177/1757743814567386.