

Gendering Nation States or Gendering
City-States: Debates about the
Nature of Citizenship

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The objective of this presentation is to argue for gendering the city-state as a relevant part, and at the same time as an alternative, to gendering the nation-state. There are two dimensions to this argument; firstly, the importance of the urban in Canada and, secondly, the particular links between women and the urban as they play out in Canada. These two dimensions come together in reflecting on the appropriateness of the idea of urban citizenship and, particularly, women's urban citizenship.

This reflection is set in the context of the literature on rescaling and the politics of scale. This literature, largely initiated by geographers, is extremely useful in thinking about the transformations in the levels of political action, and the relationships between the different levels or scales, brought about by the context of globalization. The rescaling literature does not assume the waning of the nation state nor does it assume that the nation-state will retain its power and analytic centrality. The debates around rescaling call for detailed empirical analysis of specific cases and contexts; it argues for a whole set of possible scales of political action from the body to the global and it argues for the equal relevance of state action and of the action of social movements and of civil society.

It is in this context that the argument for gendering city-states can be seen both as a part of gendering the nation-state and as an alternative politics to gendering the nation-state. The specific relationship between the two possibilities will be something to be left for discussion, following the presentation of the argument for the relevance of a gendered urban citizenship in Canada.

James Holston is one of the authors who is developing the argument for urban citizenship. In his 2001 article on "Urban Citizenship and Globalization", Holston argues that one can think of urban citizenship when three conditions exist; "when the city is the

primary political community, when urban residence is the criteria of membership and the basis of political mobilisation and when rights-claims addressing urban experience and related civic performances are the substance of citizenship” (p. 326).

Before looking more specifically at the Canadian experience in light of Holston’s three conditions, it is important to underline, even if briefly, the number of international experiences of gendering urban centers. The spring/summer 2004 issue of Women and Environments on “Cities for Women” includes a number of articles on projects from South Asia, Namibia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the European Union (as well as a variety of Canadian examples) where women are organizing to create cities more suitable for women and for the full diversity of women. Italian and French cities are creating agencies and programmes organized around the idea of cities and time, both 24 hour time and life-cycle time, in which sensitivity to gendering and therefore the adaptation of programs, policies and activities to the reality of women’s lives is central.

There have been successful competitions for “best practices” in gendering cities in Latin America and, through UN Habitat, in Asia-Pacific – with cities in the Philippines being particularly noteworthy. The European Union is also extremely active bringing together cities around questions of women’s security, gender sensitive planning and gender mainstreaming. There are a growing number of examples, across the world, where the urban context is being seen as a crucial level for action in favour of women’s equality. Canada has been a participant, and indeed a major actor, in the development and promotion of these activities and, in turn, the international context continues to be a significant influence on Canadian activity. The literatures on globalization, on rescaling and on multi-level governance all underline the importance of these global

interconnections, though the ideas of policy transfers, of global links, of jumping scales. Although the specific articulation of the links between the global and the Canadian context is not the focus of this presentation, it is important to keep this context in mind and also important to remember that these global links are articulated through direct city to city links, through networks of cities or mediated through international organizations such as the United Nations or the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA). In general, they do not pass by the nation-state.

Moving to the Canadian context, and using the framework of Holston's three conditions, the argument for thinking in terms of women's urban citizenship will be developed. The first condition, according to Holston, is that the city is the primary political community. The elements in response to the construction of this condition are as follows; the demographic reality of urban dominance in Canada, the increasing specificity of urban Canada as defined by its ethno-cultural diversity, the urban milieu as offering greater liberty and opportunity for women and, finally, the importance of urban policies for the daily lives of women.

Canada is highly urbanized with a very high percentage of the total population living with a very high percentage of the total population living in the largest urban centres. The three largest centres – Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver – dominate Canadian culture and Canadian economic development. But more important than the simple weight of the urban population is the growing specificity of the metropolitan population. The changing nature of Canadian immigration is its largely non-white character. Canada is, with the exception of the Aboriginal population, a country of immigrants but what is new is that the immigration is non-white and from the economic

south. And this immigration is highly metropolitan; almost 80% of people arriving in Canada between 1991 and 1996 settled in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal (Preston). And during this same period of the five top origins of immigrants to Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, only 2 of the 15 top origins were not “visible minorities” (France and Romania were the 3rd and 5th top origins for Montreal).

This highly metropolitan immigration needs to be seen within the context of the overall pattern of urban growth in Canada, marked by the decline in population for many areas outside the largest cities and the increasing concentration of employment within the larger cities. New immigrants have gone to where the jobs are and to where there are substantial immigrant communities for support, for employment possibilities and for cultural contacts.

Urban centers have been particularly attractive to women, both as places of greater employment possibilities and as places of greater liberty. The conditions of urban life exert therefore an important influence on women’s daily lives – in terms of housing, security, employment, transportation and urban services to mention only a few of the sectors that structure urban life.

Do these dimensions add up to the city being the primary political community? And is this to be judged by people’s own articulation about their primary political community or by an analysis of the importance of different dimensions. The problem with looking at people’s expressed views is that the political structures in Canada render almost invisible the municipal layer of politics and therefore of political identity. What can be argued is that the city is an important political community for women.

Moving on to the second condition established by Holston; urban residence as a criteria for membership and as the basis of political mobilisation, there is some interesting data on the greater acceptance of diversity by women in Canada that bears on the issue of political mobilisation. The Centre for Research and Information on Canada has done analyses of the acceptance of diversity, and the perception of discrimination, that indicates the substantial differences between men and women and the much greater acceptance of diversity and recognition of structural discrimination by women. Women are therefore more attuned to the current character of metropolitan life in Canada and the characteristics that increasingly define the Canadian condition.

Finally, the third condition for urban citizenship is that the substance of citizenship concerns rights-claims that relate to urban experience and civic performance. This relates back to the earlier point about the importance of urban policies to the daily lives of women. Without arguing that federal and provincial policies and decisions do not influence daily conditions of urban life, it is possible to indicate the importance of local policies. Municipal policies are extremely important for the spatialization of activities (either through zoning, planning or the direct provision and locating of services) and therefore the ways in which homes, jobs, urban services and public spaces are connected. The connections can be physical, through transportation links, or virtual, through electronic and telephone links. Given women's greater domestic responsibilities, the links between different urban activities are more important for women. And given their lesser wealth, public policies are more important. Public transportation is particularly important but also policies relating to street lighting and pedestrian traffic also relate importantly to women's lives and policies relating to women's urban safety.

A great deal has been written on women's urban safety and will not be discussed in detail here, but clearly questions of the creation of public space and, even more generally, of planning for safe cities impact in important ways of women's feelings of security in moving about urban space throughout both the daily time cycle and the life cycle.

The Working Group on Women's Access to Municipal Services in Ottawa (for description, see Women and Environments 62/63, pp 49-50) illustrates the importance of municipal services for women's lives and for their sense of inclusion and belonging. The material from the focus groups organized for their project showed both how inclusive public services could form the basis for a sense of participation and a sense of belonging and also how this was time for demands for improvements to public services based on claims to equality on the grounds of greater, ethno-cultural identity, age, immigration status, language, ability and the intersections of these. The varied dimensions of urban services and the ways these come together to compose women's urban experience were central to the network of rights and responsibilities that are the substance of citizenship.

There is therefore a basis for considering women's urban citizenship in Canada. It builds on women's greater economic opportunities in cities; on their greater liberty in cities, on Canada's urbanness and on the social differentiation between the increasingly diverse metropolitan areas and the non-metropolitan Canada, on the greater recognition by women of structural discrimination combined with their greater support for diversity and, finally, on the variety of urban policies where gender has been recognized as relevant. This existing basis is also an argument for increasing the gendering of city-states as, if cities are to become stronger political entities in Canada, the importance of

their policies and therefore the opportunities for policies increasing women's quality will increase.

To conclude with questions of political strategy and to return to the initial question, are gendering city-states and gendering nation-states parts of the same process or alternative, and perhaps contradictory, political strategies? Formulating this question is hopefully a way of inviting discussion.

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