The Lisbon Agenda and ‘Neoliberal Communitarian’ Citizenship

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Abstract

This article analyses the European Union’s Lisbon Agenda and its relation to changing conceptions of European citizenship in general and social citizenship in particular. It is argued here that the emergence of a ‘neoliberal communitarian’ citizenship model in the context of the Lisbon Agenda contradicts claims made by supportive social forces that the Lisbon Agenda marks a positive turning point for EU-level social policy and social citizenship. Instead the continued asymmetries of citizenship under Lisbon, and especially under the Barroso Commission and the shift to ‘growth and jobs’ in 2005, are part and parcel of a broader gradual replacement of the traditional notions of social citizenship with private responsibilities and a socially thin ‘active citizenship’. The article goes on to relate these changes to the positions of third country nationals (TCNs), which are also affected by the new precarious and commodified citizenship model.

Introduction

At the spring 2000 European Council meeting in the Portuguese capital, EU leaders unveiled a bold strategic plan calling for a ‘radical transformation of the European economy’ to make the EU into the most ‘competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’ by 2010 (Lisbon European Council 2000). The Lisbon Agenda, as it is now commonly known, has been embraced by a relatively wide bloc of social forces as the key not only to increasing the EU’s economic competitiveness, but also as an effective route to increased social cohesion through improved social protection and a ‘modernised’ European Social Model. In essence, the articulation of these two goals is intended to settle the historically ‘conflictual and contradictory encounters’ between capital accumulation and social welfare at the EU-level (Hansen 2005: 1). Perhaps most pertinently in light of persistently high unemployment rates, the move towards economic reform and social cohesion is supposed to reciprocally lead to and in turn be bolstered by the creation of ‘more and better jobs’ within the Union.
Lisbon’s supporters, which include EU institutions, member state governments, the European business community, EU-level trade unions and a host of academics, have also argued that the agenda will bring new impetus and meaning to the idea of European citizenship. Above all, these supporters hold that Lisbon marks some sort of positive ‘turning point’ for EU-level social policy, and therefore concomitantly gives substance to EU-level social citizenship rights as well. In addition to potentially presenting a ‘Maastricht for Social Europe’, Martin Rhodes (2000: 2-7; see also Wincott 2003) claims that the Lisbon Agenda offers a policy discourse of equality and responsibility, which ‘bridges the traditional concerns of egalitarians and conservatives by embracing both the individual and collective rights and responsibilities of citizens’. Even for so-called ‘third country nationals’ (TCNs), whose labour power is essential to Lisbon’s formula for economic competitiveness, a form of ‘civic citizenship’ has been extended, promising to enhance their abilities to participate in the political process in areas where they are ‘legally resident’ (see CEC 2003c).

The purpose of this article is to critically assess the assertions made by the Lisbon Agenda’s supporters that it represents a positive turning point European citizenship in general and social citizenship in particular. As is argued here, the emergence of a ‘neoliberal communitarian’ citizenship model in the context of the Lisbon Agenda contradicts claims made by supportive social forces that the Lisbon Agenda marks a positive turning point for EU-level social policy and social citizenship. Instead the continued asymmetries of citizenship under Lisbon, and especially under the Barroso Commission and the shift to ‘growth and jobs’ in 2005, are part and parcel of a broader gradual replacement of the traditional notions of social citizenship with private responsibilities and a socially thin ‘active citizenship’. This paper then goes on to relate these changes to the positions of TCNs, which are also affected by the increasingly precarious and commodified citizenship model.

The Prodi Commission and Passive Citizenship

As the institution tasked with the primary responsibility of fulfilling the strategic goals made at Lisbon, the EU Commission under the leadership of Presidents Romano Prodi (1999-2004) and Jose Manuel Barroso (2005 – present) is a fitting place to start our analysis of the Lisbon Agenda and changing conceptions of citizenship. The Prodi Commission, for its part, consistently upholds the sense of optimism that surrounded the initial Lisbon European Council meeting. Echoing Lisbon’s bold declarations, President Prodi (2000a) goes as far as to associate the Lisbon Agenda with a coming ‘renaissance of Europe’. While unemployment, an incomplete internal market, as well as technological and skills gaps are recognised as nagging weaknesses, these are to be overcome by fostering technical innovation and
through increased resources for research and development, which will in turn be bolstered by a ‘policy environment’ that is conducive to ‘investment, innovation, and entrepreneurship’ (Lisbon European Council 2000).

The views of the Prodi Commission are underscored by what can best be described as a conflicting dualism, as an attempt is made to find a balance between a starkly neoliberal form of citizenship with references to social rights that have a less than direct association with the Keynesian National Welfare State (KNWS) and ‘Social Europe’ as envisioned by former Commission President Jacques Delors. A neoliberal conception of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship is demonstrated in the (recurring) assertions that ‘a job is often the best protection against exclusion’ (CEC 2002: 12). This portrayal of citizenship limits citizen rights to job training and skills development/lifelong learning, whilst also increasing citizen responsibilities, as the attainment of employment leads to greater social cohesion and protection. However, even the Commission’s acceptance of a need for greater labour market flexibility, is tempered with a social rights discourse. President Prodi (2000b) makes this clear in arguing that ‘[t]he labour market needs to flexible certainly: but people need to be able to plan their lives, and should not be the victims of shock redundancy’. There is clearly an element of social rights that calls for a social dimension for the EU’s Lisbon Agenda, which will ‘ensure adequate social protection for those who cannot [work]’ (CEC 2003b) and that faces up to the fact that ‘you can't have a fair society without fair pay’ (Prodi 2001).

Although President Prodi (2001a) exclaims that he wants ‘the future of Europe to be firmly in the hands of its citizens’ and that the EU ‘must explore ways of getting the citizens genuinely involved in EU policymaking’, the citizen is generally not conceived as an active actor when it comes to the socio-economic transformation under Lisbon. Instead the Commission describes how the EU and its member states are responsible for Lisbon Agenda reforms that work towards ‘giving people new skills for the new economy’ (Prodi 200b; my emphasis) and that ‘bring our fellow citizens greater prosperity’ (Prodi 2003; my emphasis). The notion that the EU’s young citizens ‘must be taught how to thrive in a world becoming increasingly complex and subject to change’ (CEC 2000b: 16) and that the EU itself ‘must encourage risk-taking and the spirit of enterprise’ (Ibid) lends itself to a passive rights-based conception of citizenship. Hence, the EU’s tasks of socioeconomic transformation, according to the Prodi Commission, are placed solely into the hands of the EU’s political society, as citizens become the beneficiaries of the leadership role taken by the EU institutions and member state governments.
The Barroso Commission, Active Citizenship and the Shift to ‘Growth and Jobs’

In early 2005 the newly appointed Barroso Commission, acting in unison with member states in the conclusions made at the Spring European Council in Brussels, presented a plan to ‘re-launch’ the Lisbon Agenda in a streamlined form that focuses on raising employment and economic growth in the EU. This need for revision was attributed to everything from the September 11th terrorist attacks in the US to the dot com bubble burst, eastward enlargement to a general economic downturn in the Eurozone. Whatever the case, the aura of optimism surrounding Lisbon under the Prodi Commission seemed a distant memory with the arrival of Barroso. Although the Barroso Commission insisted that this re-launch did not mean that the EU was abandoning its commitment to social cohesion and the ESM, the plan proved to be highly controversial for the EU’s social NGOs and think tanks, and seemed to confirm their suspicions of the newly-appointed Commission, especially President Barroso, as too ‘business friendly’ and bent of shifting the EU to the right (Irish Times 2004).

The shift in focus to growth and jobs brings with it a change in the citizenship ideas of the Commission. What comes across in quite stark terms in the High Level Group’s mid-term review of the Lisbon Agenda is a criticism of the EU’s passive conception of the citizen’s role under the Prodi Commission. In formulating a shift to focus on growth and jobs, the High Level Group states quite clearly, and in somewhat paternalistic terms, that the EU’s citizens’ role needs to be re-thought with Lisbon’s re-launch:

The need for reform has to be explained especially to citizens who are not always aware of the urgency and scale of the situation. ‘Competitiveness’ is not just some dry economic indicator that is often unintelligible to the man in the street; rather, it provides a diagnosis of the state of economic health of a country or a region. In the present circumstances, the clear message must be: if we want to preserve and improve our social model we have to adapt it: it is not too late to change. In any event the status quo is not an option. Engaging and involving citizens in the process has two mutually reinforcing attractions: it in effect seeks public support by giving people elements for debate and it leverages that support to put pressure on governments to pursue these goals (High Level Group 2004: 44).

The High Level Group suggests that the EU must encourage all its citizens to ‘take action’ in order to ‘to deliver on the Lisbon goals of growth and employment’, and that a ‘broader and deeper engagement’ with EU citizens must take place to create support the new streamlined Lisbon Agenda (Ibid: 6).
The Commission for its part recognises that the EU has ‘failed to mobilise support around the idea of what Europe can be’ (Barroso 2005b), and addresses these criticisms in its documents and speeches related to the shift to growth and jobs. There is therefore a constant effort on behalf of the Commission to make the citizen an active actor in the Lisbon Agenda reforms. The Barroso Commission goes to great lengths to demonstrate its commitment to citizen involvement, arguing that '[t]he Lisbon reforms are [...] as much about people as about economics’ (Barroso 2005a), and as a result hinge on active popular support:

We have to mobilise support for change. Establishing broad and effective ownership of the Lisbon goals is the best way to ensure words are turned into results. Everyone with a stake in Lisbon’s success and at every level must be involved in delivering these reforms (CEC 2005a: 5).

The sense of urgency for reform associated with the shift to growth and jobs thus brings with it a more active conception of citizenship, as the Commission adopts the idea that success in instituting substantial change requires that citizens have a ‘stake in the success of these reforms’ (Barroso 2005a), and that Lisbon ‘gives a real sense of ownership’ (Barroso 2005c). The failure of Lisbon to this point is at least partly attributed to passive role for citizens envisioned by the Prodi Commission, and in making the case for reform to focus on growth and jobs the Barroso Commission follows the High Level Group in calling for a more active citizen that takes an active role in the urgently-needed reforms.

Overall we find that the shift to growth and jobs entails not only a more active role for the citizen, but also limits social rights to skills and education related to making citizens more ‘employable’. As a result, the Barroso Commission advocates a ‘new deal’ between citizens and governments focusing on re-defining ‘social inclusion systems’ away from the socialization of risk associated with the welfare state, towards an individualized system whereby the individual’s pursuit of employment (through upgraded skills and life-long learning) leads to greater social cohesion and provides the material basis for continued social expenditures. The EU is thus tasked with the responsibility of providing an adequate supply of jobs to its citizens, and ‘maintaining a worker’s ability to find a job’ (Špidla 2005). Citizen rights become limited to the right to obtain more skills and better education, so that ‘workers and enterprises’ alike ‘become more adaptable and labour markets more flexible’ (Barroso 2005d). The active and responsible citizen is thus indispensable in the reforms associated with more growth and jobs:

The impact of changes can be limited by sustained investment in developing workers’ skills, thereby enabling them to cope with change: a
well-trained worker is better able to find a new job in the wake of unavoidable restructuring (Špidla 2005).

The Lisbon Agenda and Citizenship: Neoliberal Communitarianism

How do we then go on to make sense of the Lisbon Agenda and its relation to citizenship, especially since the shift to ‘jobs and growth’ under the Barroso Commission? In many ways, it appears as though the European Union is navigating towards what can best be described as a ‘neoliberal communitarian’ citizenship model. ‘Neoliberal communitarianism’ (an arguably more accurate term for the ‘Third Way’) implies a fusion of neoliberalism with a communitarian element that attempts to counteract the most harmful effects of neoliberal restructuring not by re-invigorating the Keynesian welfare state but through attempting to ‘activate the state’ in strengthening (private) community networks (Bieling 2003: 53).

As a model of citizenship, neoliberal communitarianism signifies a movement away from the social rights of citizenship (considered to hamper global competitiveness), towards an emphasis on providing opportunities for skill upgrading and life-long learning so that citizens will be ‘willing to accept more public duties and social responsibilities’ (Bieling 2003: 65; emphasis in original). The citizens’ role is thus contained within the mantra of ‘no rights without responsibilities’ forming the basis of its citizenship conception, as opposed to “unconditional’ social citizenship entitlements’ of social democracy which advocate ‘positive welfare intervention by a ‘social investment state’(Ryner 2002: 15). Making the argument that ‘the relationship between individual rights and responsibilities was thrown out of balance from the late 1960s onwards’, advocates of neoliberal communitarianism suggest that a situation of ‘moral hazard’ has arisen amongst EU citizens, and that problems of social instability can be solved by fostering a society which gives more responsibilities and duties to individual citizens (Bieling 2003: 63, 65).

Neoliberal communitarians thus propose an active form of citizenship in which “flexibility’ and ‘adaptability’ on the part of the workforce have [...] come to be seen as the panacea for Europe’s unemployment problem’ (van Apeldoorn 2003: 114). EU citizens are expected to take responsibility to adapt by upgrading their skills through life-long learning, changing their attitudes to become less ‘risk-adverse’ and more ‘entrepreneurial’. The overall goal of neoliberal communitarian citizenship is to ensure that citizens, for the cause of global competitiveness, become less reliant on the state for welfare protection and more ‘employable’ in order to adapt to ‘more flexible labour markets’ and ‘flexible working conditions’ (Bieling 2003: 65, 67). Also significant to the Lisbon goal of creating more and better jobs in the EU, the neoliberal communitarian citizenship model is underlined by a particular view of unemployment, one that views unemployment as ‘a moral problem of the individual
who is unemployed’ (Ryner 2002: 10), and argues that it is the ‘personal responsibility of individuals to make sure they qualify for employment (whatever the changes in the structure of the labour market)’ (Overbeek 2003: 27). This view contrasts with a more social democratic (and Keynesian) view of unemployment as a societal problem that can be managed through economic intervention (Ibid 2003; see also Albo 1994).

These empirical realities contradict strongly the notion that the Lisbon Agenda marks a turn towards ‘social Europe’ and EU-level social rights. This is not to argue that the Lisbon Agenda brings nothing new in terms of citizenship, but rather suggests that significant transformations have taken place, albeit in a completely different direction than the one initially predicted by pro-Lisbon forces. Conversely, attempts are made to intensify neoliberal aspects of the Lisbon Agenda through arguing social welfare/inclusion are entirely contingent upon the more economic growth and jobs. Accordingly, de-commodification usually associated with the Keynesian national welfare state (the traditional compromise marking relations between capital and labour) is drawn into and ultimately subordinated to the imperatives of neoliberal economic restructuring.

Third Country Nationals and Civic Citizenship

Of course European citizens are not the only ones affected by the Lisbon Agenda and the emergence of a ‘neoliberal communitarian’ citizenship model. Long and short-term residents as well as newly arriving migrants (referred to collectively as ‘third country nationals’) are also directly implicated in the EU’s push for socio-economic restructuring, as their labour power is said to be a direct contributor to achieving Lisbon’s economic and social goals. More specifically, the demographic challenges that European societies are currently undergoing are to be offset by increasing (certain types of) migration and integrating existing immigration populations into labour markets, thereby helping to boost the EU’s employment rate from the around 60% to reach Lisbon’s target rate of 70%. This will, it is hoped, help to socially integrate these populations while at the same time bolstering economic growth and social protection schemes that are sustainable for the EU’s aging population.

In order to facilitate integration into labour markets and societies more generally, the EU has introduced the concept of ‘civic citizenship’ for legally residing TCNs. As the Commission (2003c:23) makes clear, civic citizenship entails ‘guaranteeing certain

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1 These include mostly skilled ‘knowledge workers’, in the sectors of information and communications technology (ICT).
core rights and obligations to immigrants which they would acquire gradually over a period of years, so that they are treated in the same way as nationals of their host state, even if they are not naturalised’. Civic citizenship thus points to the emergence of supranational EU-level rights and responsibilities for TCNs, a group that has hitherto been largely deprived of such. It evokes an active form of citizenship; one in which the successful integration of immigrant populations is contingent upon their active participation in political processes. The underlying social purpose of civic citizenship for TCNs is to foster a sense of belonging to the EU in general and ownership of the Lisbon Agenda goals in particular for EU residents not covered by formal European citizenship (CEC 2005b).

The issue of what rights and responsibilities TCNs should have in the EU has been a subject of intense political and academic debate since the introduction of formal EU citizenship in the Maastricht Treaty (1992). In this sense, civic citizenship is somewhat groundbreaking since it marks an initial EU response to this increasing salient issue. Nevertheless when we examine the actual proposed content of civic citizenship, we find severe limitations. The development of civic citizenship under the Lisbon Agenda is part and parcel of the move towards a neoliberal communitarian EU citizenship model: for TCNs, as for EU citizens, employment alone is regarded as the ultimate guarantor of social cohesion. In this civic citizenship model, labour market integration for TCNs is to be aided by the attainment of certain civil rights, meanwhile traditional social rights associated with the Keynesian welfare state are left out of the picture. In this way civic citizenship for TCNs mirrors the EU’s own citizenship category, with modest provisions for civil rights and little to nothing in the form of meaningful social rights at the supranational level.

**Conclusion**

French philosopher Étienne Balibar has argued that one of the main obstacles (or as Balibar would have it, ‘impossibilities’) preventing the realization of a democratic and legitimate European Union has been the lack of an ‘extension of social rights and [...] possibilities for intervention in the regulation of the economy’ at the European level. The supranational category of European citizenship, as many others have pointed out, has helped little to overcome these obstacles, ineffectively addressing and in many ways exacerbating the very issues of EU-legitimacy it was set up to solve (Scott-Smith 2003). Now with the Lisbon Agenda, and the move towards a neoliberal communitarian citizenship model, the prospects for a more democratic and legitimate EU (for citizens and millions of TCNs) seems as distant as ever. EU efforts to intensify neoliberal socio-economic restructuring on the one hand, and ‘re-connect’ with its citizens on the other are exposing a myriad of contradictions that put into question the very future of the Union.
The ultimate expression of a deeply engrained legitimacy crisis for the EU was exposed with the resounding rejections of the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands in the spring of 2005. The rejections occurred hand in hand with increasing scepticism towards the Lisbon Agenda itself; since the shift to a streamlined Lisbon Agenda under the Barroso Commission a host of once supportive groups and individuals (both political and from civil society) have began to distance themselves from or even are speaking out against the strategy. Whether or not these moments of resistance will lead to a watershed in the EU political project remains to be seen, as this will hinge on the creation of an alternative democratic vision for Europe; one that offers a meaningful form of citizenship for both citizens and TCNs. This endeavour would of course start by recognizing the centrality of social rights to social cohesion and protection.

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