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Citizenship Hierarchies: Talent Programs, Commodification Debates and Citizenship at the Nexus of Market and Desirability Logics

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Abstract

In recent years, an increasing number of nations have developed and institutionalized immigration programs aimed at attracting high-net-worth individuals, promising expedited residency and, in many cases, a streamlined path to citizenship. These initiatives target individuals expected to contribute economically, whether through immediate financial investments, capital transfers, or desirable professional skills deemed essential for national economic competitiveness. This article critically examines the rise of talent programs against the backdrop of scholarship studying investment-based citizenship schemes. While there is a developed literature studying investment-based citizenship programs and criticizing the imposition of neoliberal rationalities on state-induced meanings and practices of citizenship, there is less attention paid to the implications of these so-called merit-based citizenship programs. We argue that both sets of schemes follow a neoliberal market logic, prioritizing immigrants based on their perceived economic value. We explore how these programs disembody potential immigrants from their social contexts and perpetuate market-based inequalities. Thus, we propose that despite the distinctions often made between talent programs and investment schemes, both contribute to the reinforcement of a global citizenship hierarchy. Drawing on examples from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries' skilled migration initiatives, we demonstrate how these programs shape discourses of selectivity and "deservingness" for future citizenship. Through a comprehensive analysis of legal frameworks and policy databases, the study highlights the complex interplay between migration policies, commodification of citizenship, and global hierarchies. Ultimately, it calls for a deeper understanding of the continuities and transformations in citizenship logics enabled by the infusion of market dynamics into migration policies.

Keywords: High-skilled migration, selective migration, immigration policy, inequality, market logic

Introduction

In recent decades increasing numbers of countries are developing and institutionalizing immigration programs to attract high-worth individuals by advertising a faster track to residence, with many also promising or easing the path to eventual citizenship (Czaika and Parsons 2017). While timelines and conditionalities vary, all programs target potential immigrants expected to contribute economically, whether through immediate cash transfers, investments, or professional skills deemed desirable for national economic competitiveness. Increasing numbers of individuals are attracted to these programs, giving them the chance to locate to countries where they can access better work conditions or escape the political conditions in their home countries. A part of the world population, who possesses what is described as talent capital, have much more ease in deciding where to work and live, by taking into consideration variables including climate, level of democracy, working hours and conditions, and cost of living, among other things.

Although the institutionalization of talent programs is recent, the debate on high-skilled migration is not new. As early as the 1970s, the welfare consequences of high-skilled migration and the potential impact of brain drain on developing economies was on the agenda (Hamada and Bhagwati 1975). High-skilled immigration was either viewed as a public good benefiting the global economy or a negative phenomenon contributing to the inequality among states (Clemens 2013). Apart from their economic effects, scholars have also debated the implications of these programs for global migration patterns (Barbulescu 2018; Ellerman 2020; Menz 2019; Shachar 2018; Shachar and Hirschl 2013; Spiro 2018; Surak 2021). While some scholars argue that these schemes contribute to global mobility and thus increase migration opportunities, a majority agrees that selective immigration programs, whether they require capital transfers, or the possession of specific skills deemed to have the potential to make an exceptional contribution, entrench further the growing inequalities in migration opportunities (Amanta and Rodriguez 2021; Glick and Schiller 2013). This is especially the case because the proliferation of these initiatives mirrors the tightening of global borders for most of the world's population. Others investigate whether such initiatives also exacerbate inequality among nations and foster a fresh form of exploitation by drawing skilled workers from less affluent countries to wealthier ones (Skeldon 2009).

Talent programs are not the only ones offering a path to citizenship. There are also programs based on cash transfer and/or investment, which are often distinguished from those based on attracting skilled individuals, with the former considered far more dangerous for the ethos of citizenship (Barbulescu 2018; Espejo 2018; Shachar 2008, 2014). Accordingly, investment programs blatantly turn citizenship into a commodity that states can sell in expectation of higher returns. Shachar (2008, 2014), for instance, maintains that such a transformation risks eroding the political bonds and ideals of reciprocity and participation that are core to citizenship. Many suggest that these schemes are either responsible for or reflect the ongoing hollowing out of citizenship through the logic of capitalist competition (Bauböck 2019; Shachar 2018; Spiro 2018; Surak 2021). However, when it comes to talent programs, the critique of commodification of citizenship largely disappears.

In short, existing scholarship first separates these two types of programs from one another and problematizes investment programs because they change the ethos of citizenship to a market-based good that can be bought with economic capital. When it comes to skill-based programs, there is some discussion of the potential for exacerbating inequalities because of the direction of brain drain from the less developed regions to the advanced capitalist countries, the logic of these programs is usually not under investigation. Against this backdrop, the question we want to investigate is two-fold: What are the commonalities between the two sets of programs? How do these commonalities potentially contribute to new discourses with which old inequalities within and between citizenship regimes are naturalized?

We first contend that the presumed distinction between programs emphasizing economic investment and those necessitating high skills is exaggerated. We argue that both investment schemes and talent programs follow a neoliberal market logic, selecting and justifying their selection of immigrants in terms of their market-based contributions to the so-called national good. When skill is essentialized, decontextualized, and deterritorialized, state discourses of desirable immigrants produce and render invisible yet another layer of market-based inequality. Defining desired skills in terms of individual merit naturalizes the political problem of the random and unequal distribution of privilege on which much of what is considered merit depends. The increased accessibility of skilled migration programs empowers further individuals, who are already likely to have privileged access to skills and training deemed desirable by markets. The problem here is not individuals' desires for and practices toward better lives, but the exacerbation of already existing inequalities through discourses of skill, merit and market definitions of individual worth. This is exactly the commonality between the two groups of programs: the ways in which they make market logics the basis of selection criteria.

Second, however, drawing on the commonalities between skilled migration and investment citizenship schemes allows us to move beyond a limitation in the existing scholarship. When scholars criticize the latter programs, they warn against the dangers of commodifying citizenship, transforming it from a shared, public good to a market good that those with sufficient wealth can obtain without meaningful ties to the national community (Shachar 2018; Surak 2021). We argue that the binary of commodified citizenship versus citizenship-as-a-public-good risks romanticizing a citizenship that never was. Looking at the commonalities between these two sets of programs allows us to capture the transformations *and* the continuities in citizenship logics that the infusion of market logics enables.

To understand these continuities, we need to pay attention to the definitions of a “worthy member”. Citizenship as an institution and discourse have always legitimized and reproduced various kinds of inequalities between people with the claim that some “deserve” rights and political membership more than others (Brubaker 1992; Işın and Wood 1999; Lieberman 1994; Lister 1997; Mann 1987; Pateman et al. 2006; Yuval Davis 1997). The policies and discourses of skill and talent continue to articulate this notion of “deserving” citizens, now ordered in terms of discourses of merit, talent, and skill. In other words, these discourses essentially resonate with already existing logics of deservingness inherent in citizenship regimes. However, what is new is that the programs transfer the discourse of “worthy member” to the global level and

provide the opportunity of transnational mobility only to those who are “worthy” and thus turning them to “worthy global citizens”. The definition of desirable citizen now goes global.

A Note on Methodology

To make these arguments, we consider examples from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries’ skilled migration programs, deemed the most successful in attracting highly skilled individuals (Czaika and Parsons 2017). Although these do not often confer an automatic transition to citizenship, they are interesting because they combine state discourses of selectivity and logic of who deserves future membership.

To compile these examples, we adopted a comprehensive three-pronged methodology. Initially, we scrutinized government immigration websites and pertinent legal documents for each country, including resources addressing common inquiries from prospective immigrants. We then leveraged the resources provided by the International Migration Institute, particularly the Determinants of International Migration policy database and its repository of pertinent legal articles for each nation (de Haas et al., 2015). Next, we utilized the information from this repository to trace back to the underlying legislation to ensure that our list of legal documents did not have crucial absences.

After reviewing the legal frameworks in place, we adopted a two-stage coding process. We first coded in a binary fashion whether countries have talent programs or not. We then focused on the characterization of talent within these programs. Whenever they were specified, we coded the requirements that the programs had for the applicants in terms of their educational and training backgrounds, their professions, and the markets for which the state actors expressed a need. As we did this we also paid specific attention to phrases used to frame what was considered a need for the country and what skills were considered desirable. Finally, we paid attention to the bureaucratic pathways available for obtaining citizenship through talent initiatives.

Our coding was inspired by the observations that the relevant scholarship makes on capitalist logics of citizenship and the competition between nation-states for what is deemed “desirable citizens”. It builds on them by taking a whole group of countries together while most of the literature theorizes on the implications of migration patterns and citizenship regimes drawing on evidence from a few well-known examples. In this way, we can identify emerging patterns among OECD countries in terms of how high-skilled individuals are defined and what is expected of them. This broader overview also allows us to more clearly identify the infusion of market logics in these definitions and their proximity to investment-based programs. In the end, we investigate how current skilled migration programs connect definitions of economic merit to political membership. We propose that this connection transforms, but also continues and entrenches citizenship regimes based on hierarchies of worth. This, we propose, challenges a strict distinction between market versus pre-market notions of citizenship.

Net Worth, Skill, and Changing Meanings of Citizenship

Much of the discussion on citizenship regimes today focuses on whether citizenship as an institution and practice has succumbed to the logics of capitalist competition. While there is enough evidence in this direction, we propose that we need to qualify arguments on how these have changed the nature of citizenship as a shared public good.

Shachar (2007, 2009) famously drew an analogy between citizenship and property regimes, contending that birthright access to citizenship as a global distributor or denier of security and opportunity resembles ancient property regimes. Accordingly, those born in affluent polities enjoy far greater general well-being, safety, freedoms, and opportunities, other things held equal, than those born in poor countries. She clarified that she used the concept of property broadly rather than deploying a narrow understanding of a market commodity traded through market transactions. Shachar (2009) argued that a narrow conception would fail to capture what citizenship means because publicly shared resources, benefits, protections, and decision-making processes are central to how it functions. In her initial framework, citizenship is still a public good and a pre-market institution that can moderate the effects of the market through the publicly shared opportunities it provides, an idea that dates back to T.H. Marshall (1992).

And it is this assumption of the pre-market logic of citizenship and its public nature to be under danger with the introduction of investment citizenship programs. To attract more foreign direct investment under conditions of intensified global competition, numerous states have moved beyond tax and tariff incentives, subsidies, inexpensive financing, access to cheap land and infrastructure, and special economic zones. They are now inventing incentives to recruit individuals with wealth from around the world. Indeed, various studies show how individuals in the Global South use their means to access more privileged citizenships, with palpable advantages, ranging from international mobility to political protection (Altan-Olcay and Balta 2016; Balta and Altan-Olcay 2016; Harpaz 2019; Harpaz and Mateos 2018). Some scholars justify these paths to naturalization for the flexibility they bring to individuals (Armstrong 2018; Joppke 2019; Magni-Berton 2018). Others highlight the unequal distribution of privilege that facilitates and is facilitated by these programs (Amante and Rodriguez 2021; Glick and Schiller 2013).

There is also discussion of the dangers of corrupting the ethos of political membership (Barbulescu 2018; Espejo 2018; Shachar 2008; 2014). Critical studies argue that schemes, which enable individuals to acquire residence and/or citizenship by making an economic investment in the host country (usually through a transfer of funds), are transforming citizenship into a market commodity (Magni-Berton 2014; Shachar 2008, 2014). This is because the instrumentalist logic behind them renders redundant the idea that citizenship should signify a meaningful bond with the nation-state (Bauböck, 2019). Several scholars use the phrases of commodity and commodification, by which they signify the transformation of citizenship into a good that states can sell to select individuals with exorbitant resources. Tanasoca (2016) argues that this process of commodification is particularly problematic because the sale of citizenship contaminates and decreases its value. Shachar (2008; 2014;

2018) further contends that commodification is especially apparent in programs with few to no residency requirements, which render obsolete the idea that citizens should have meaningful bonds with their political communities. While some scholars see investment programs as an outcome of larger transnational processes and not the cause, they still agree that there is an ongoing hollowing out of citizenship (Joppke 2010; Spiro 2008; 2018). Thus, regardless of the direction of causality, these arguments centralizing commodification underline the erosion of the political bonds that are core to the ethos of citizenship.

This discussion parallels Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) argument in *The Great Transformation* on the emergence of market economies and societies: the logic of the market has become disembodied from societies through the commodification of every aspect of the social. This, he warned, risks destroying the fabric of societies, which survive through reciprocity and redistribution – two mechanisms that contained and checked markets until the 19th century (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). Polanyi contended that commodification of labor, land, and money, which are not inherently commodities, has been facilitated mainly through state intervention. Thus, he saw the state as a facilitator of the market rather than opposed to it. This conceptualization fits well with the current reconstitution of citizenship. Market-oriented citizenship programs, institutionalized by states, risk stripping citizenship from its assumed web of social and political relations while establishing the hegemony of the market, even in the definition of an institution expected to create some semblance of equality.

Interestingly, scholars usually avoid categorizing programs that target high skills alongside investment programs, which are seen as the ultimate indication of commodification. The assumption here is that the former lack the same blatant market logic of citizenship-by-investment programs because skills are not alienable from individuals, and it is through these sought-after skills that people contribute to the public good (Shachar and Hirschl 2013; 2014). This analytical separation has been questioned, however, based on similarities in terms of discrimination, unfairness, and the undermining of political equality (Erez 2021; Lim 2017). We propose that the difference is overstated for two different reasons, revealing the commonality of market logics in both programs and continuities in the way discourses of desirable immigrants naturalize hierarchies inside citizenship regimes.

The contribution expected of potential immigrants is always coded in market terms, even if it is made more palatable in the case of skilled migration through arguments of merit, public good, necessity, and/or integration potential. Polanyi (2001 [1944]) emphasized that not only do markets come into being through deliberate and sustained government action, but they are also the sites of a “*gradual expansion*” of the market logic. We argue that immigration programs targeting high-skilled individuals both continue and intensify the market logics surrounding citizenship through deliberate and sustained government action, which is not so unlike investment-based programs. Furthermore, as we argued above, since these schemes require permanent resettlement of the labor force, their unintended consequence is to exacerbate the present hierarchies between states.

We also propose that the rationalities of skill-based market schemes reveal the limits of an argument that pits the process of commodification against the idea of citizenship as a public good for all. These programs naturalize the idea of individual merit and skills, first

by disconnecting them from their origins in multilayered social inequalities *and then* by making them the basis of the current transnational market-based allocation of citizenship. This naturalization of inequality based on discourses of merit and market worth might be relatively new. However, it is not so new in that creating hierarchies between potential members continues a time-honored state practice of defining certain groups as “desirable” citizens who are worthy of acceptance and belonging more than others.

Defining High-Skilled Migration: Points, Markets, and “Desirable” Citizens

Policymakers worldwide are busy developing programs to attract high-skilled citizens, with OECD countries as the pioneers (de Haas et al. 2015). These programs target specific groups depending on perceived skill level and category and/or professional and potential employee status, signaling who the states consider as potentially desirable residents and citizens. The more “desirable” potential citizens are those who are expected to contribute more to the economy, a potential that states often estimate in collaboration with market actors. These processes reveal how citizenship itself is becoming infused with market logics. In this section, we highlight the operation of market logics by focusing on how “worthy” members of community are defined and quantified in talent citizenship programs among the OECD countries.

Surprisingly, both popular and scholarly critiques of these programs are nowhere near as strong as those targeting investment-based programs. More mainstream writing extols such selective skill-based programs for their potential to make up for shortages in the domestic economy and/or explore the extent to which such contributions are realized over time (Clemens 2013; Czaika and Parsons 2017). More critical scholars still evaluate them differently because of the contributions that new immigrants are expected to make to the public good, an essential component of what makes citizenship what it is (Shachar and Hirschl 2014). Accordingly, investment-based migration/citizenship programs are most likely to commodify citizenship because they are based on a blatant logic of giving passports in exchange for money (Shachar 2018).

There are a few scholars who argue that the difference between the two sets of programs is overstated. Erez, for example, considers both to be normatively problematic because they are unfair, and wrongfully discriminate between potential immigrants, undermining the possibility of equal opportunity to migrate (Erez 2021). Lim (2017) similarly shows how skilled migration programs do in fact produce wrongful discrimination. Relevantly, Ypi (2018) claims that our understanding of immigration inequalities is limited if our critique merely focuses on discrimination in terms of race and “cultural identity” ignoring social class injustices. Social class position, needless to say, is likely to be a robust predictor of who can apply in either set of programs. In fact, empirical studies show how policy shifts in selective migration schemes continue historical patterns of discrimination without necessarily using racial categories (Fitzgerald et al. 2018). However, neither of these approaches puts enough emphasis on how both investment and talent programs are manifestations of the infusion of citizenship with market logics.

Among OECD countries, we can see three program categories. The largest group targets high-skilled immigrants within work visa programs that define “high skill” in terms of education, language skills, age, and profession. Some of these programs use the frame of “exceptional talent”: While not identifying exactly what “exceptional talent” is, these programs emphasize the “exceptional” contribution that the applicant is likely to make to a specific industry. Most of the countries that developed these work-visa programs in the 1960s and 1970s have not significantly updated them. This second group, mainly Baltic and Eastern European European Union (EU) member states, do not have specific programs but direct interested individuals to apply for the EU Blue Card to get a work permit. In other words, this second group regulates high-skilled migration through their EU membership. The EU Blue Card, now accepted in 25 member states, was introduced in 2009 as part of the European Council Directive to focus on highly qualified employment and to make Europe an attractive host region for qualified workers from non-EU countries (Přivara et al. 2020). Once again, the logic is one that assumes that the EU is in competition with other countries in terms of attracting skilled labor. The third group (Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Japan, New Zealand, Turkey, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States) implements the most elaborate migration schemes, which target what programs often call exceptional skills and/or talent. These latter are more recent schemes, which define sought-after skills in a quantified and seemingly depoliticized manner and through the involvement of market indicators. It is to these we turn now to explain the infusion of market logics.

Quantifying Citizenship

Indeed, several countries with specific talent programs use points-based calculations to measure skill and likely economic contribution. Examples abound. Canada’s points-based program is often seen as a pioneer that others have copied since the 1970s (Shachar and Hirschl 2013). The program which has had minimum requirements for education, language skills, and professional experience to pass a threshold since inception, assigns points based on age, education, work experience, valid job offers, English and/or French language skills, and adaptability, meaning estimations of how well the candidate is likely to acclimatize to Canada (Koslowski, 2013). Since 2015, it has been refashioned as the Express Entry system, responding to critiques of backlogs and the program’s inflexibility regarding ever-changing economic circumstances. In this new system, applicants are awarded up to 1,200 points in terms of their “human capital” qualifications, the relative weight of each being determined by the Comprehensive Ranking System. The applicants who do not pass the threshold are immediately removed from the system, and the qualified candidates are ranked every two weeks, with the highest-ranking candidates invited to the various programs available (Hiebert 2019).

The UK’s Global Talent program targets immigrants who can show they have exceptional talent or promise in science, engineering, humanities, medicine, digital technology, or arts and culture. The UK also has a skilled worker route to settlement based on a points-scheme, in which an applicant applying for entry clearance or permission to stay must be awarded 70 points (Government of UK n.d.). Similarly, Australia’s Global Talent visa is publicized as a permanent visa for people with an internationally recognized record of exceptional achievement in a profession, sport, art, or academia and research. The program particularly

targets the health, information, and education sectors (Australian Government Home Affairs 2020). Applicants need to reach a minimum of 70 points, while the eligibility criteria include educational background, special skills and achievements, work experience, language skills, and age. Another program that uses points is the Highly Skilled Professional Visa in Japan. It targets advanced academic research activities, advanced specialized or technical activities, and business management activities. Like in Australia, the applicant needs to reach at least 70 points based on their education, professional background, past earnings, and age to qualify for the program (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015).

Overall, apart from minute differences in point allocations, these programs share similar eligibility criteria for defining and quantifying “worthy” skills. The points often depend on a combination of the applicant’s highest educational qualification, language skills, profession (and/or whether these match the host country’s skills shortages), income, wealth, employment opportunities (some require specific job offers), and age. The applicants need to have accumulated sizable resources, work experience, education, specific skills and achievements, and often they are expected to be young enough to be economically active. These requirements purposefully target people who are less likely to need state welfare support (de Jong and de Valk 2020) and more likely to contribute to the host country’s political, social, and economic well-being, as defined by the states.

In other words, the programs seek individuals who can give to the host country more than they will receive, thereby turning citizenship into a form of job application in which productivity becomes the key. This is the first way in which these programs are connected to the more blatant money exchange criticized in investment schemes: both operate with definitions of skill and merit and associated rankings of the potential immigrant based on “market-value”, whether immediate or over time.

State-Capital Nexus and Commodification of Citizenship

This commodification of citizenship happens at the *state-capital nexus*, the state working as the institutional ensemble that specifies the general conditions for capital accumulation and market competitiveness (Van Apeldoorn et. al. 2012). These programs reflect the nature of the (capitalist) state as the regulator of movement in and out of the territorial boundaries, a function that has intensified in recent decades. States are now more concerned with attracting mobile money, in the form of foreign direct investment or foreign portfolio investment. They are similarly concerned with migration policies, that is cross-border movement of people: one rationale here is to increase economic competitiveness by attracting high-skilled workers.

Reflecting these logics, states set the criteria for talent programs often through some form of market research or collaboration. Those programs that rely on state-based criteria often have public commissions tasked with conducting research, and regularly identifying and updating needs. Such programs do not require job offers but assume that successful applicants will be employable because of their qualifications (Koslowski, 2013). Ireland, for example, has a Critical Skills Employment Permit, designed to attract particularly information and communication technology professionals, professional engineers, and technologists, and to encourage them to become permanent residents. The eligible occupations are determined

from the analyses of a committee called the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, which evaluates labor market requirements for strategically important skills. The dominant feature of such programs is that they often assign the greatest value to skills necessary for science, technology, engineering and mathematics related jobs (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, n.d.).

In other cases, the programs devise more explicit collaboration procedures with businesses and labor unions to identify desirable professions and determine what counts as high skills (Koslowski, 2013; Menz 2009). In the UK, a job offer from a licensed sponsor at or above the minimum required skill level gives the applicant 50 points, revealing the exorbitant influence of market signals in points calculations. Alternatively, a job offer or a sponsor can be part of the eligibility requirements (Government of UK n.d.). For example, in Spain's highly qualified professional (HQP) program for residence permits, the candidate needs a job offer from a company (European Commission n.d.). Similarly, in Norway, an applicant needs a firm full-time job offer as a skilled worker, while an applicant to the Netherlands should have an employment contract with a "trusted employer" or research institution, as listed in the Public Register of Recognized Sponsors (Business.gov.nl. n.d.). Furthermore, a growing number requires that the potential job comes with a salary equal to or higher than the national average. The prevalent logic here is that immigrants who have a job when they arrive are less likely to be a burden on the state and more likely to contribute to the collective good by paying income taxes while working in areas with skills shortages. Although de Lange (2021) argues that this tool of the "trusted sponsor/employer" privatizes the selection of migrant workers, ultimately the decision maker is still the government. What collaboration schemes with market actors do, however, is technicalize and naturalize a set of political decisions about who is worthy of being accepted in the polity by reframing market logics and company demands as national interest. In fact, the recent changes in Canada's program are extolled for allowing greater involvement from the private sector (Hiebert 2019).

Ultimately, the programs reinforce the idea that there are certain individuals whose skills are good for the economy and, ergo, the country, and that this potential good should be determined at the intersection of market demands, corporate priorities, and the state's interpretation of what it means to be internationally competitive (Sandoz 2019). This is yet the second way in which market logics operate in both sets of programs: through the involvement of business interests in the definition of what/who is "beneficial" to the "national good". These programs are often advertised by the governments that enact them as a strategy of global competition in enticing the world's best and brightest. Often policy makers argue that not enacting such schemes would leave a country behind in this competition.

Reframing skilled migration in terms of the intensification of market logics through government action allows us to see how these two sets of programs are similar. Immigration programs targeting high-skilled individuals continue and intensify the market logics surrounding citizenship, formalizing extremely unequal immigration chances, and turning citizenship (whether immediately or later) into a privilege that needs to be "earned" in some way (Joppke 2021). In other words, just as Polanyi argued, deliberate government action turns immigration policies and debates about who "deserves" to belong into a site for the gradual expansion of market logic – a market in which states compete for talent.

The Overlap of National and Individual Worth

High-skilled migration programs crystallize, perpetuate, and intensify historical citizenship regimes of inequality, legitimizing the privileges of certain groups, now based on seemingly technocratic ideas of skill, merit, and societal contribution. In fact, the multiple migration narratives states deploy to justify their political decisions reveals the stark contrast between migrants, considered as security threats or objects of humanitarian responsibility, and “desirable” immigrants, who can help prevent looming economic crises and overcome labor shortages in high-skilled jobs, becomes clearer (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017). These programs reframe the logic of migration in terms of admitting immigrants who can be entrepreneurial individuals, who, through self-investment, have already improved their own conditions of being and living, and are therefore worthy of accessing the nation state (Ellerman 2020). Ellerman (2020: 2516) calls this “human-capital citizenship,” which requires from prospective citizens the skills associated with high-status and highly paid positions in the global knowledge economy, “render[ing] the link between membership and its benefits conditional and tenuous, transforming rights into earned privileges”.

Indeed, the majority of skilled migration programs are marketed to domestic audiences with the promise that skilled migrants will contribute to economic growth, create jobs, and make up for skill shortages in certain sectors (Czaika 2018). For example, Spain’s Entrepreneurial Support Act claims to “promote economic growth and employment creation” (Parain Migrantes 2019), deemed necessary for the country’s long-term prosperity in a competitive global economy. Similar arguments are made for the EU Blue Card: businesses require economic migrants to fulfil their recruitment needs (the skilled labor needs argument); the EU is no longer producing enough workers to meet business needs (the demographic argument); and the current high-skilled regime loses high-skilled workers to Canada and the United States rather than the EU (the competition argument) (Commission 2007; Guild, 2007: 3). In other words, the Blue Card is justified in terms of creating a competitive edge for EU members over powerful states outside the Eurozone while also ensuring a level-playing field within it (Cerna 2014: 77).

Another element in these discourses is fear and the alleviation of fear. On the one hand, there is the fear of migration: that newcomers take away jobs from those already on the inside, threaten the so-called national culture, be a fiscal burden, etc. (Hermann and Neumann 2018; Anderson 2013). On the other hand, many programs promise these newcomers will help create new jobs rather than cause oversupply in the labor market. Through these discursive frames states respond to *and* utilize fear in a temporally specific manner, offering skilled migrants as a resolution to pending crises. For instance, in February 2021, during the height of the pandemic, UK officials proposed extending the deadlines for the Global Talent Program to encourage “vital research that contributes to challenges like Covid-19 and economic recovery” (Laboratory News, 2021). In contrast, when it was first launched in 2020, it was framed as preventing the economic challenges that Brexit might unleash. The strategy seems to have paid off: UK official statistics show that skilled work visas account for 60% of work-related visas granted and saw the largest increase in visa numbers in 2021. The new skilled worker routes introduced in late 2020 (Skilled work,

Skilled worker health and care, and intra-company transfer) accounted for 55,053 or 32% of the total work-related visas granted (Government of UK 2021).

Some programs display this rationality even more blatantly. For example, the law underlying Turkey's Turquoise Card specifies that international applicants should "contribute [to] the recognition or publicity of Turkey or its culture internationally, acting in favor of the matters concerning Turkey's national interests" (Turkish Labor law 2017). The UK's Global Talent program, previously known as the Exceptional Talent program, seeks applicants who combine "exceptional talent" or "exceptional promise," and have demonstrated that they are "leaders in their fields" (Parain Migrantes 2019; Prime Minister's Office 2021). Australia's Global Talent Visa Program uses words like "prominent in your field," "acclaimed as exceptional in any country," and with a "record of sustained achievement unlikely to diminish in the future." Ultimately, the official webpage notes that applicants "must contribute to the nation as a whole" (Australian Government Home Affairs n.d.).

In short, these programs targeting "extraordinary" talent all emphasize the promise of incomparable contributions to the country's competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy. These statements explicitly indicate that one must have "exceptional" skills, talents, and merit, defined in terms of international recognition, awards, monetary worth, etc. To gain access to the country, the applicant must offer something rare in the service of the host nation. The emphasis is always on a "desirable" member whose benefit to the country exceeds their potential cost.

Debating Merit

Perhaps we should also dig into these definitions of skill. According to Sandel (2020), seeing merit as a natural basis for wealth distribution is an outcome of liberal-technocratic discourses justifying free-market policies, operating in tandem with the idea that the prosperous earn their success through talent and hard work. This "hollow political project that reflects an impoverished conception of citizenship and freedom" creates a society of winners and losers, a factor he argues explains the rise in populist nationalisms, xenophobia, etc. (Sandel 2020). In a way, he is reissuing Polanyi's warning about the reign of market logics and the double movement this is bound to create.

The critique also shows how assuming inequality is the inevitable outcome of merit-based differences conceals the fact that what we consider to be merit is contextually dependent. It emphasizes the problems of disembedding talent and skill from the random and unequal circumstances in which they are distributed or are recognized as such (Sandel 2020). This is not to say that all exceptional skills and talent are due to privilege, but it is problematic to assume that individual merit can be completely dissociated from entrenched mechanisms of inequality (Kunz 2016; Sandoz 2019).

These accounts apply well to the problems of current skill-based migration. The systematization and seemingly technical nature of these programs should not hide that it is the state (along with powerful non-state actors) that first defines merit, then institutionalizes it, before naturalizing inequalities through the policies it enacts. Under global competition for

the best and the brightest, the privileged worldwide now have easier and less questioned paths to citizenship regimes because discourses of merit define them as “better” than other would-be migrants. This disembedding also reflects the neoliberal turn in citizenship discourses. Just as with the “desirable” citizen of the neoliberal state, the desirable immigrant is sufficiently self-responsible, rational, and entrepreneurial to serve the country’s economic interests rather than become a burden (Altan-Olcay 2011). When access to an OECD country and a relatively seamless path to residence and citizenship are tied to officially designated definitions of merit, we see the transnationalization of these processes.

We should push this argument further to reveal historical continuities in immigration policies and citizenship regimes. Fraser (2014) warns that the preoccupation with the corrosive effects of commodification *upon* communities carries the inherent danger of ignoring inequalities *within* communities. Posing markets against a seemingly benign society ignores how community-based protections have simultaneously almost always ensured the persistence of hierarchies and dominations (Fraser 2014). In this case as well, these discursive strategies are neither new nor completely the product of market logic. Immigration policies continue to be selective even when they no longer blatantly use racial and ethnic categories (FitzGerald et al. 2018). In these programs, the justification is to be found in individual merit expected to serve the nation. While this might seem an amoral idea, it perpetuates gendered, classed, and racialized inequalities despite claims to do otherwise (Boucher 2020; Lim 2017; Liu-Farrer et al. 2021).

This is the historical continuity in the logics of inequality, which cannot be easily captured with a binary that emphasizes commodification of citizenship versus its absence. The biggest achievement of the modern nation-state has been to convince large groups of people that citizenship bestows equal status and rights on all holders. And yet, critical scholarship contends that citizenship rules have always differentiated between classes, races, genders, ethnicities, etc. and legitimized inequalities on the basis that some are “naturally” more entitled to rights and political membership (Brubaker 1992; Işın and Wood 1999; Lieberman 1994; Lister 1997; Mann 1987; Pateman et al. 2006; Yuval Davis 1997; Karcı Korfalı and Şenol Sert 2019). While the inequalities on which citizenship regimes rest and reproduce have been diverse, what has been constant is the power of a political elite with definitive ideas about who a “desirable citizen” is and its disproportionate worth as opposed to “the masses”. Notwithstanding the ways in which these discourses have been a source of struggle for excluded groups (Cooper 2018; Lister 2007), for the political elite, citizenship has historically been a project of exclusion and inequality under the guise of political equality (Kochenov 2020).

Citizenship as an institution has always created hierarchies between different social groups, based on criteria that some seek to remove from political discussion. Global talent and high-skilled migration programs do something similar by justifying the selective bestowal of citizenship based on merit and contribution to the national economy. Joppke (2021) argues that all forms of “earned citizenship”, which are gaining dominance as a path to citizenship worldwide, conceive of citizenship as a privilege based on merit rather than a right. He proposes that schemes of earned citizenship combine elements of both neoliberalism and nationalism because they make citizenship contingent on the individual’s demonstrated

capacity and potential contribution to the collective. This combination is indeed a marker of continuity in the idea of citizen worth, defined in terms of service to the nation, however this service may be articulated. These programs define certain groups as “desirable” potential citizens by naturalizing the idea of individual skills, first disconnecting them from their origins in multilayered inequalities in societies *and then* making them the basis of the current transnational market-based allocation of citizenship.

Conclusion

This article has engaged with the critical literature on neoliberal transformations in selective immigration schemes and the citizenship regimes they imply. Through the case of skilled migration schemes, we reconsidered how citizenship is transformed into something that can be granted in return for highly sought-after skills, expected to bring economic returns for the host country. Our aim has been to contribute to relevant discussions by challenging the assumed differences in the literature between investment citizenship programs and programs to attract high-skilled immigrants to become potential citizens and the assumption that the infusion of market logics is a rupture from a citizenship defined in pre-market terms.

While there is indeed a difference between the more blatant exchange logic of investment programs and skilled migration programs, we argue that the difference should not be overstated to the point that it becomes impossible to recognize significant commonalities. In skilled migration, potential immigrants must prove that they have a particular skill, deemed desirable by the host state. The applicants are expected to take care of themselves and not become a fiscal burden; to contribute to national productivity by alleviating labor shortages in desired economic fields; *and* to bring certain specialized skills to avert crises and/or to produce unprecedented prestige. Broadly, these economic projections are often translated into a language of the public good, contribution to the national interest, and so on. As the national good is defined in market terms, the identification of who is worthy of admission in both programs is also defined in market logics. As a result, the programs introduce a framing of citizenship, not as a right but as a privilege available to those who can fulfill a contractual relationship defined by the state (and the market). These programs reproduce citizenship logics of hierarchy through definitions of worth tied to narrow notions of market value. The translation of economic worth into national interest by way of discourses of skill and merit reflects the hegemonization of market logics.

However, there is more to this process than at first glance. While there is, indeed, a new level of infusion of market logics in citizenship regimes, there is also a significant continuity in state attempts to naturalize existing inequalities through discussions of “worth”. This complicates the commodity-non-commodity binary much of the critical literature on investment citizenship centralizes. The appearance of a detached, disinterested systematization of what “counts” towards the potential immigrant’s “worth” both streamlines and attempts to remove from political discussion who is considered a more valuable addition to the nation-state. And this is exactly the continuity. Even though merit is seen as an individual characteristic that is irrelevant to ethical discussions of egalitarianism, the concept of highly skilled becomes another practice of creating unequal categories out of social groups, only

some of which are deemed worthy of easier access to the nation-state. The variations in the logic of serving the public good as a condition of being welcome have always organized hierarchies within citizenship regimes. This time it is skills, defined in terms of individual merit, that are centralized, valorized, and disembedded from the contextual inequalities that often make them possible.

As a result, market logics both transform and deepen existing inequalities embedded in citizenship regimes. We propose that it is important to capture these nuances to understand the hollowness of contemporary justifications used for welcoming (some) immigrants and not others. Furthermore, in this way, we can highlight how these programs reproduce and deepen not only existing hierarchical discourses of citizenship now disguised in seemingly technical terms of skill, but we might also be able to delve more productively into the narrowing possibilities available to most populations around the world for escaping the inequalities into which they are born.

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