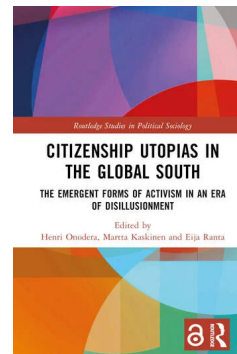


Citizenship Utopias in the Global South

Henri Onodera, MarttaKaskinen, and
EijaRanta (eds.)

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Abstract: This review critically engages with *Citizenship Utopias in the Global South: The Emergent Forms of Activism in an Era of Disillusionment*, edited by Henri Onodera, MarttaKaskinen, and EijaRanta. The volume offers a timely and rich exploration of grassroots activism across Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the face of democratic erosion and postcolonial state fragility. The editors and contributors reposition citizenship as a dynamic process of claim-making and dissent, particularly in contexts marked by civic disillusionment.

Organised into three thematic sections - activism in times of disillusionment, decolonising the state, and reimagining citizenships - the volume blends empirical depth with theoretical innovation. Drawing from ethnographic research and activist collaborations, the chapters analyse diverse movements, from student protests and anti-racism campaigns to feminist and LGBTQ+ organising. This review evaluates the book's contributions to critical development studies, political sociology, and decolonial theory, highlighting its strengths in methodological pluralism, intellectual humility, and epistemic decentralisation. It also addresses minor limitations, including thematic dispersion and the need for deeper transnational institutional analysis. Ultimately, the volume affirms the political salience of imagination and dignity in struggles for more inclusive and pluralistic futures across the Global South.

1. Introduction

In a political climate marked by democratic recession, persistent inequalities, and the entrenchment of authoritarian populism, *Citizenship Utopias in the Global South* emerges as both a timely and necessary scholarly intervention. Edited by Henri Onodera,

MarttaKaskinen, and EijaRanta, this volume investigates the reimaginings of citizenship from below – where formal rights have often failed to deliver substantive equality, dignity, or recognition.

Rather than framing citizenship purely as a legal status, the contributors

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foreground its performative, everyday, and aspirational dimensions. These are the “citizenship utopias” – envisioned and enacted alternatives to the existing socio-political orders in contexts ranging from Tunisia to Chile, India to South Africa. These utopias, however modest or ephemeral, constitute the political imagination of marginalised communities responding to systemic exclusion.

2. Disillusionment and the Persistence of Hope

The book opens with a powerful introduction that captures the contradictory dynamics of the contemporary moment. While the last decade has witnessed widespread civic mobilisation – from the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter and feminist movements – the simultaneous rise of exclusionary nationalisms and democratic erosion has generated a profound disillusionment. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and exacerbated longstanding inequities, particularly in the Global South.

Against this backdrop, the editors argue that utopia must be rethought not as a grand systemic overhaul but as a critical method for imagining possible futures. Drawing on thinkers such as Ruth Levitas and Ernst Bloch, they frame “citizenship utopias” as grounded, situated, and pragmatic – emerging in existing systems’ cracks, not in opposition to all order but in search of more just ones. Citizenship here is understood less as a status conferred by the state and more as a claim made by those historically excluded from its promises.

3. Structure and Contributions

The book is divided into three thematic parts, each focusing on different scales and registers of civic engagement:

1. Activism in Times of Disillusionment
2. Decolonising the State
3. Re-imagining Citizenships

Each part brings empirical and theoretical depth to specific struggles while also offering insights into broader dynamics of resistance, imagination, and political transformation.

Part I: Activism in Times of Disillusionment

This section highlights the tension between civic disillusionment and creative forms of engagement.

- **Yahia Benyamina’s** chapter on Algeria presents a generation of youth who, faced with the futility and danger of formal political activism, retreat into voluntary groups and informal solidarities. These may lack radical posturing but foster meaningful collective practices and mutual support.
- **Angela Chukunzira**, reflecting on activism during the pandemic in Johannesburg, provides a rare insider account of how digital technologies became vital tools in the absence of state action. Her piece foregrounds the concept of “wired citizenship” and demonstrates the political possibilities of online spaces for community survival.
- **Geoffrey Pleyers** expands the lens in Chapter 5, situating Chile’s

2019 uprising within global protest ecologies. He categorises contemporary movements by their hybrid forms: expressive, intersectional, reticular, and often ambivalent toward institutional politics. His analysis offers a sober reminder that social change is neither linear nor guaranteed but filled with reversals and contradictions.

These chapters collectively show how disillusionment does not preclude action. On the contrary, it often catalyses imaginative strategies for survival and resistance.

Part II: Decolonising the State

The second part engages more explicitly with institutional reform, state contestation, and the limits of liberal multiculturalism.

- **Sarah Radcliffe's** study of Cotacachi county in Ecuador examines how the Indigenous-led implementation of *buenvivir* – rooted in the Quechua philosophy of *sumakkawsay* – challenged colonial hierarchies through participatory governance and interculturalism. She presents Cotacachi as a site of “everyday citizenship,” where the state becomes a terrain of both contestation and co-creation.
- **Rodríguez Malagón and Ranta** turn to Cuba, where official narratives of racial equality have masked persistent discrimination against Afro-Cuban populations. Through a Black feminist lens, they document how grassroots movements contest the myth of

a raceless society and demand recognition within – and against – the socialist utopian horizon.

- **Tony Nyundu and Hamed Hosseini**, in their study of the Fees Must Fall (FMF) movement in South Africa, show how student protests confronted not only the neo liberalisation of higher education but also racial and class exclusions deeply embedded in the post-apartheid state. Their detailed thematic analysis based on interviews with 21 student activists underscores the movement's internal complexities – particularly around race, gender, and political alignment.
- **Henri Onodera and Reem Garfi** explore racial justice movements in Tunisia, highlighting the tenuous relationship between legal reforms and cultural attitudes. Even after anti-racism laws were passed post-revolution, Black Tunisians – including migrants – continued to face systemic marginalisation. Yet activists persisted, challenging normative assumptions about national identity and belonging.

This section complicates simplistic binaries of state vs. movement. It shows how activists both contest and engage state structures, working within and beyond formal mechanisms to articulate pluralistic and decolonised visions of citizenship.

Part III: Re-Imagining Citizenships

The final section turns to the affective and imaginative dimensions of civic identity.

- **Karim Zakhour's** chapter on interior Tunisia is an exemplary piece of ethnographic analysis. Drawing from fieldwork in Gafsa and Kasserine, he unpacks how young men in marginalised regions construct their understanding of citizenship through narratives of state corruption. Rather than withdrawing, they remain civically engaged through a language of critique and desire – what Lauren Berlant would call “clusters of promises” tied to a still-imagined future.
- **Karim Maïche**, writing on Algeria's Hirak movement, focuses on autonomous trade unionists whose “acts of citizenship” subvert state-sponsored performances of national unity. He emphasizes the performativity of protest, where citizenship is claimed in the streets rather than bestowed by the state.
- **Le and Nicolaisen's** analysis of Vietnam explores the pedagogy of the state – how moral conduct, national loyalty, and digital surveillance define acceptable forms of civic expression. In contrast to mass protest, resistance here emerges quietly, through small acts of care and subversion among marginalised groups during the pandemic.
- Finally, **Banhishikha Ghosh** offers a complex and timely account of queer activism in India. She illustrates how some members of gender non-conforming communities have found partial recognition within Hindu nationalist circles – a troubling but important example

of how utopian aspirations can be co-opted or constrained by illiberal forces.

4. Conclusion

The book refuses to romanticise activism – it does not view social movements through a nostalgic or idealist lens. Instead, it presents them as fraught, contingent, and deeply shaped by historical and structural inequalities. Moreover, the focus on the Global South is not merely symbolic – the editors and contributors insist on theorising from the South, resisting the cognitive dominance of Euro-American scholarship.

The ethnographic richness of many chapters – particularly those on Tunisia, Ecuador, and South Africa – lends the volume an immediacy and authenticity often missing in comparative political theory. Contributors engage seriously with activists' voices without flattening them into archetypes or instruments of theory.

However, the diversity of cases and methodologies does pose a challenge to coherence. Readers seeking a unified theoretical framework or consistent methodological approach may find the book diffuse. While the editors' introduction attempts to offer conceptual cohesion through the lens of “citizenship utopias,” some chapters remain more descriptive than analytical.

Another limitation is the relative lack of engagement with transnational institutions. While digital activism and global solidarity networks are noted, a sequel could include a systematic analysis of how international law, funding, and discourse shape local movements.