

Rethinking Global Urban Justice

The University of Leeds

11-13 September 2017

Neoliberal urbanism and the (un)desired citizen-subject: Mechanisms, strategies, resistance.

Nir Cohen, Henrik Lebuhn, Oren Yiftachel

12 September

Title presentation: Unexpected citizenship of undesirable subject: Undocumented migrants in San Diego and Iowa City

This paper challenges current notions of citizenship and related discussions on neoliberalism and the effects for undocumented migrants in American cities. Neoliberal policies -- such as devolution, deregulation, privatization, and reducing welfare policies -- have implications for both political and economic transactions and existing ideas of what it means to be a citizen. The logics of individualism become normalised, granting more individual responsibility to the well-being of citizens and viewing them as consumers or clients. Such policies strongly affect undocumented immigrants, as the institutional and legal policies of neoliberalism create a particular form of membership for these 'undesirable subjects'. Scholars have increasingly shed light on the multiplicity of citizenship, moving away from the traditional citizen-noncitizen dichotomy. While these theoretical developments enhanced notions of "citizenship for noncitizens", this has predominantly been investigated as an 'informal citizenship', where noncitizens have a form of citizenship based on participation on local communities and institutions. While recent research on undocumented immigrants has typically been articulated in terms of formal exclusion on the one hand, and informal incorporation on the other, it has paid less attention to the rights that undocumented immigrants have. In this paper, I argue that despite the predominantly exclusionary legal framework of immigration under neoliberalism, there is a limited set of rights that, in combination with informal citizenship practices, offer possibilities for undocumented immigrants to claim rights. Furthermore, formality and informality should be seen as intertwined, rather than opposing each other, allowing for a more nuanced view of citizenship that highlights the complexities through which the category of undocumented immigrant is both (re)produced in practice and the forms of resistance they find within this framework. Thus, despite their formal exclusion, undocumented immigrants are never fully outside the scope of the state's formal institutions and practices, and consequently always have some rights and a place to claim rights from. This paper is based on six months of fieldwork in San Diego and Iowa City, USA. I demonstrate how the predominantly exclusionary framework of immigration law translates into daily experiences of exclusion. I demonstrate how undocumented immigrants can contest their status through formal and informal participation in the local community and how these actions can help them assert their agency and belonging. Through participation in different forms of urban governance, these 'undesirable subjects' can demonstrate both their place and role within society, thus, finding a space for claims-making. As such, they can also contest the idea that their illegality equals legal non-existence. Practices of claims-making challenge prevalent notions of what citizenship entails, expanding the lines of who deserve rights and protection, and constructs citizenship at the local, urban, level rather than relying on the exclusionary federal model of immigration laws and policies.