

# Institutional underpinnings, global reach, and the future of ordinal citizenship

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I had the opportunity to attend Marion Fourcade's highly stimulating 2019 BJS lecture on the transformations of liberal citizenship in the digital age. Between then and its printing in these pages (Fourcade, 2021), a big chunk of our lives indeed moved online. The Coronavirus pandemic has not only accelerated the great digital drive but also laid bare the vulnerabilities of core citizenship institutions such as education, health, work, and democracy. If technological systems are "sticky" (Castaldi et al. 2018), we should expect that the current shift to digital existence and its challenges are likely to be a long haul.

In *Ordinal Citizenship* Fourcade offers us the conceptual tools necessary to grasp these transformations and their economic, social, political, and psychological consequences for the ordinary citizen. Reading it in juxtaposition with the broader trajectory of citizenship in the last half century, I find myself greatly affined with her conceptual analysis and reflections, although with different observations on the broader institutional context, comparative reach, and possibilities of ordinal digitality. My comments are written to elicit further clarity and discussion of these points.

## 1 | PROLIFERATION OF SOCIAL CITIZENSHIPS

Fourcade's starting point, as it is for many of us who write on citizenship, is TH Marshall, and particularly social citizenship. For Marshall, social entitlements and welfare rights constituted the "inevitable capstone" of citizenship development necessary in order to prevent the social and economic exclusions that earlier provisions of civil and political rights, of their own volition, could not. This consequently would ensure social cohesion and solidarity, as well as a productive economy and market. Although Marshall saw social citizenship as a means for full inclusion in society, he regarded formal equality of citizenship and class-based inequalities as compatible; thus, he is often described as a liberal egalitarian.

Fourcade references the liberal theory as an umbrella framework in anchoring her arguments (e.g., Somers, 2008). I find it instructive to keep in mind the partly overlapping, partly conflicting trajectory of political

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liberal and economic (neo)liberal forces that shaped citizenship rights in the postwar world order (Soysal, 2012a, 2012b). Citizenship's journey and achievements have been uneven. In the expanding postwar international rights regime, both social rights of the individual and civil rights and civic freedoms came to be codified as universalistic human rights. The core pillar of the international social rights regime, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), came into effect legally from the mid-1970s on, as neoliberal economic policies were beginning to make their way in western societies, albeit differentially, and thus challenging the postwar gains of the welfare state. Between 1976 and 2005, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the ICESCR's sister treaty, fitted in with broader democratization trends and boosted the institutionalization of civil and political rights worldwide, while socioeconomic rights were incorporated into country constitutions, mainly in "aspirational" terms (Cole, 2013). Faced with a particularly aggressive global neoliberal capitalism and its ensuing crises, the meaningful and substantive implementation of social rights faltered, more in some regimes than others, and more in some rights than others.

Still, the talk of citizenship has flourished and gained new significance; new rights have been formulated, covering more social groups and more aspects of people's social lives. Citizenship has moved beyond the grasp of the state and come to implicate the relationship of the individual not only with the state, but also with corporations, bioscience, medicine, religion, the ecosystem, and even the cosmos. This is partly to do with the state devolving itself of some of its responsibilities (but not necessarily its regulatory role) to the "market," as Fourcade suggests. But I would also stress that the global frameworks of human rights, with their universalistic (and individualistic) language of equal treatment, have greatly facilitated the expanded citizenship talks and claims. If we add human rights as a term to the *ngram* graph Fourcade (2021, p. 43) provided, it dwarfs all the citizenship categories shown.

Fourcade's ordinal citizenship captures the grammar of these new citizenship entry points as they encounter the digital technologies which are energetically transforming social and economic domains. Ordinal citizenship approximates one aspect of the Marshallian ideal of citizenship: it incorporates more and more individuals into the corpus of citizenry. But it fails on all others: far from circumventing inequalities and ensuring solidarity, it paves the way for new status boundaries, social divisions, and moral effects (more on this below).

## 2 | CONTEXTUALIZING ORDINAL CITIZENSHIP

Fourcade locates ordinal citizenship in the unfolding of two processes: financialization and digitization. These two forces move in tandem, penetrating, and refashioning an array of social domains and transforming social policy into financial interest and data. The ubiquitous credit system brings these developments into the stark light, as elaborated here and in her earlier work with Kieran Healy (2017). Individuals are drawn into this world of transactional relationships and data algorithms: their behaviors are tracked and aggregated to be commodified by the market and regulated by biopolitics. The digitally mediated and entrepreneurial self, the ordinal citizen, is born.

I am in agreement with this analysis. Lost in its framing however are the broader institutional and cultural roots of the proactive and agentic individual implicated in ordinal citizenship. I have alluded to these broader foundations in the previous section, and they have been long established in the literature, but let me recap here.

The second half of the 20th century, and in particular its last decades, saw the rise of the empowered and right-bearing individual, who came to be institutionalized and standardized through the interacting dynamics between national and transnational courts (e.g., the European Court of Justice), instruments of international organizations (e.g., the International Conventions on Human Rights, the UN's Human Development Index), the expansion of education, and particularly higher education worldwide and the growth of scientific and professional authority and expertise (Drori et al. 2003; Frank & Meyer, 2020; Joppke, 2010; Soysal, 1994). The legal and cultural elaboration of universalistic personhood disembeds the individual from ascriptively defined categories of the gender, race, ethnicity, and nation—collective categories that underlined earlier models of citizenship (Soysal, 1994). Relatedly, the individual is bestowed with agency and "actorhood": the rational and purposeful individual authorized to act on their identities and claims, requiring ever expanding organization of social life around them (Frank

& Meyer, 2002; Jepperson & Meyer, 2000). The emergent citizenship model celebrates this “thick” version of the individual, responsible not only for their own well-being but also that of society in ever expanding domains. Standardized models and recipes for this individual are widespread in (social) sciences and education; school children the world over are taught how to enact it as future citizens (Lerch et al. 2016; Soysal & Wong, 2007). The metaphor of “Light Citizenship” (Joppke, 2010) appears incongruous.

Fourcade’s (2016) deliberation of the ordinalization of things is solidaristic with broader institutionalist accounts, however, the script of ordinal citizenship itself as narrated in the current piece is markedly overpowered by financial and technological imperatives. She makes a crucial point: digital technologies and their application enable new (and effective) ways of datafication, classification, and ordering of every human experience in every life domain—they are not simply the infrastructure of ordinal citizenship but also progressively elaborate stratified hierarchies of agency and value. As such, the nexus of the institutional constructions of agentic empowerment together with the stratificational potential of digital ordinality should yield better conceptual and empirical purchase when studying the evolving order of citizenship.

And, yet bringing to the fore the broader institutional foundations and their globalization is important both to grasp the reach of this citizenship regime beyond its liberal strongholds and to contemplate its fault lines. The liberal and then, neoliberal shaping of the postwar world order, which fueled the “amplification of ordinality” (Fourcade, 2016, p. 182), has come under increasing attack by outbursts of populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism. These currents may undercut the global authority of science and the university that sustains the global knowledge economy (Frank & Meyer, 2020, Schofer et al., 2020), and consequently reshape the course of some of the citizenship trends Fourcade observes here.

### 3 | ENACTING AND “FEELING” ORDINALIZATION

Ordinal citizenship and its technologies, argues Fourcade, rely on the perpetual inclusion of individuals from different backgrounds, while, in the guise of meritocracy, entrapping them in a race of performance and demonstration of worth. This should propel more “self” and more aspirations and expressions of the self. To the extent that the script of the agentic individual is widely held, however, we should expect this self and its projections to be highly standardized.

Let me discuss this by bringing in the field of higher education as an example. As a foundational societal institution, the university underlies the scientific theorization and cultural models of self agency, which are embedded in its organization of knowledge and broader functions (Frank & Meyer, 2020). World university rankings, now a ubiquitous feature of the higher education field, carry these generalized models to the global level. University rankings are algorithms that are premised on the ideal image of university, against which the performance of universities (on the spectrum of “excellence”) is measured. As such they diffuse templates and expectations of not only universities but also its students as purposeful, capable and proactive actors. As widely researched, this generates aspirations and relatedly isomorphic organizational effects: positioning themselves globally, universities adopt similar missions, administrative structures, and professional identities (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018; Espeland & Sauder, 2012; Krucken & Meier, 2006). How about students?

In my comparative research on higher education students we find pertinent evidence. We conducted a large-scale survey of students enrolled in tertiary education in China, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom, which comprised experimental and more standard survey questions on the agentic individual among others.<sup>1</sup> Our analyses revealed remarkable similarity on average among all student groups in their self-projections: about 80% of students in each group identified themselves as achievement oriented, independent-minded, and creative—dimensions often identified and prescribed as agentic actorhood (Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2020).<sup>2</sup> We found the same for self-efficacy (one’s belief that they can achieve their goals, whatever difficulties they may encounter or have). The multi-sited nature of the data makes these findings compelling: young, educated people in East Asia and Europe articulate highly standardized selves and capabilities.

How do these agentically configured selves “feel” when they are measured? When the ratings and scores and outcomes they determine do not match the empowered selves they enact? Fourcade emphasizes the moralizing effects of ordinalization. The “apparently objective” measuring and benchmarking tools of digital technologies invite moral desert, self-blame, and personal concern and anxiety, she argues. But how universal are such feelings? How do individuals in differing societal, political, and possibly generational (Katz, 2018) contexts understand, feel and position themselves vis-à-vis ordinal technologies? What is the subjective experience of the ordinary Chinese citizens of China's unfolding social credit system, for example?

A rare ethnographic study conducted in Shanghai by Xin Yuan Wang (2019) found indifference and even positive perception toward the introduction of the social credit system. Wang's research participants were aware of the pervasiveness of the personal data to be collected and processed by the system and its potential personal consequences. However, rather than perceiving it as a state mechanism for surveillance and control—confinement of own agency, they saw it as a means for managing personal insecurity and uncertainty and trusting others—an expression of projected agency. Wang (2019) sees continuity between the underlying logic of the “western” origin credit system and the “Chinese folk religion,” which upholds “personal responsibility and judgement by one's own deeds.” This might add further moral weight to “credit worthiness,” summoning feelings. But it is also possible that individuals' enactment of own agency might interpret the correlate feelings, particularly as they “experience” the social credit system as a personal solution to the current crisis of public trust in China (e.g., fear of personal fraud and scams, and mistrust of food and pharmaceutical industries).<sup>3</sup>

How individuals enact and feel ordinal citizenship is an important question of which we do not yet have profound understanding and empirical bearing: more research, comparative and bringing in insights from cognitive sociology and sociology of emotions, needs to be done.

## 4 | THE POWER OF ORDINAL DIGITALITY

For the majority of the global population, (legal) citizenship status is distributed by accident of birth, which Schachar (2009) famously described as “birth lottery.” *Jus sanguini* and *jus soli* are two modes of this lottery, through which states regulate access to their territory (stamped with passports and ID cards) and determine who belongs to the collective body of the citizenry and has its associated privileges.

Ordinal citizenship, as discussed by Fourcade, requires no membership pass; detached from tribal conventions of blood and soil and their moral burden, it is open to everyone, and enrolment is voluntary.<sup>4</sup> It envisions active, participatory, and productive individuals, digitally measured and scored. As such ordinal citizenship comes close to an online version of *jus domicile*, as it is increasingly implemented, for example, in points-based immigration schemes.

Yet, like other citizenship forms, ordinal citizenship is not free from “moral injunctions” either; not only by the state but also by the market (Fourcade, 2021, p. 10). Algorithmically assigned scores and ratings on the basis of everyday online behavior determine one's financial and social fitness and thus status and market value. Using biometric algorithms, but also a vector of other digitally available data, states separate the risky from the non-risky, the trustworthy from the non-trustworthy and “native” from “foreigner,” reasserting their authority over the allocation of identities, benefits and resources. Despite the expanded inclusive nature of its membership status (due to eliminating the inherently discriminatory criteria of access), ordinal citizenship nevertheless generates classifications and divisions.

An important point emerges. Does ordinal digitality forge new social divisions and stratifications, or do they align with and reinforce already established ones? Do we find new patterns of inclusion and exclusion or does ordinal citizenship simply capture existing inequalities and amplify them? Fourcade is not completely clear on this. If new strata are emerging, they possibly cut across other existing ones.<sup>5</sup> We presumably need new symbolic and

material indicators, with online and offline dimensions, across multiple domains, to observe and measure such social strata; the challenge is paramount.

Another point. TH Marshall had anchored his ideal of citizenship in a world of well-defined class structures, distinct nation-states, and stable labor market and welfare institutions. The ordinal citizens' world could not be more different. If inequalities are increasingly shaped online and if socio-technical systems "think" without national constraints, should we not consider their impact and possibilities on a global scale? If states are no longer the only distributors of rights and identities, citizenship struggles need to adjust.

And, here comes the uphill battle. Fourcade points out to two obstacles. First, the digital algorithms that decide ordinal citizens' status are opaque, but because they are statistically produced, they appear objective, making their contestation difficult. Second, the collectives that algorithms aggregate are based on bits and pieces of the individual and her activities in different domains of social life; they do not afford basis for meaningful solidarities and mobilization. I would add a third one. If ordinal citizenship exists only with continual feed of individual data into the digital ecosystem, both opting in and opting out is linked with status differentials and disadvantage. These differentials and stratification lines would cut through and across national boundaries, rearranging the conventional bases of identity and solidarity.

Thus, "data politics," the access, ownership, legitimization and control of data, becomes the focal point of digital contentions (Ruppert et al., 2017). Data collection, profiling, decision making, and surveillance practices operated by the market and state have come under greater scrutiny. The General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union, which came into effect in 2018, has introduced new individual rights to data privacy, anonymity, and transparency (including information about the criteria that algorithms use in decisions and their consequences [Susarla, 2019]), with ramifications beyond EU territory. New tech companies have emerged, promising more decentralized and individual control over data collection and share, and more trustworthy global digital futures.<sup>6</sup>

All these interventions do two things at once. On the one hand, they stimulate the right-bearing and digitally empowered individual actor, on the other hand, they charge them with the responsibility of actively engaging with and curating the digital platforms in order to self-protect. They also possibly further the understanding that once fairly and correctly applied digital systems can recognize the "true" self and direct her to appropriate interests, tastes and resources. This is what underlies ordinal citizenship and it is the one Fourcade warns us against.

I take Fourcade's perceptive intervention as a reminder that we cannot understand digital systems and their consequences for citizenship independently of their broader political, economic, social, and cultural constituents. Ultimately citizenship struggles depend on the *will* to forge identities and solidarities around which claims for legal, symbolic, and material equality are mobilized. Digital technologies might provide the infrastructure for novel forms of solidarities and mobilizations by "global e-citizens," and in the future "cloud communities" in cyberspace might be where meaningful membership and belonging are exercised, as envisioned by Orgad (2018)—an alternative vision to that proposed by Google (Fourcade, 2021, p. 27). As the coronavirus pandemic locked our lives online, protestors the world over took to the streets to join the Black Lives Matter movement to demand justice in the United States and at home. For the time being, this still gives us the best hope and means for the "life of an equal being."

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The survey, with a sample size of 8,500, implemented a structured sampling approach, based on university ranking and size, and in China additionally stratified by provinces.
- <sup>2</sup> Knowledge economies anticipate such traits to impact success in education, labor markets, and overall life goals; as such they are on the prescription menu of all sorts of international organizations.

- <sup>3</sup> McDonnell et al. (2017) argue that resonance happens not because of familiarity or habituality of “cultural objects and modes of action” (e.g., the credit system); rather they are “experienced” by actors as resonant because they offer solutions at times of high uncertainty.
- <sup>4</sup> Except, Fourcade notes, when it is organized as a state project, as in China's social credit system. However, even then there is (theoretically) an voluntary element as the social credit score is based on an ecosystem of public but also private databases, such as Tencent's Tencent Credit and Alibaba's Sesame Credit (sign-in and opt-out being based on consent). There are reports that Tencent and Alibaba (who hold the largest customer database among their peers) are so far refusing to pool their data with Baihang, the government-backed personal credit scoring system (*Financial Times*). Alibaba and Tencent refuse to hand loans data to Beijing. September 19, 2019 <https://www.ft.com/content/93451b98-da12-11e9-8f9b-77216ebe1f17>.
- <sup>5</sup> In other work, Fourcade (2016, p. 186) mentions “subprime borrowers” as one such stratum, “possibly anchoring new forms of mobilization and consciousness”.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, Hu-Manity (<https://hu-manity.co>) and Inrupt (<https://inrupt.com>), the latter by no other than Tim Berners Lee, the founder of world wide web.

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