# The Multiple Realities of Cultural Citizenship Versus the Logic of Culturalization

Joke Hermes

INHOLLAND University

Joke.Hermes@INHOLLAND.nl

# The Multiple Realities of Cultural Citizenship Versus the Logic of Culturalization

'Culturalization' as a term to me sounds pretty ominous. It makes me wonder whether culture has become a primary conduit of what Foucault called 'governmentality': the channelling of action along preconceived logics. It also incites a sense of guilt. Have I, have we as cultural studies scholars become stuck in secretly or not so secretly imagining culture as a domain of freedom and liberation? Has our enthusiasm for culture as an everyday domain of negotiation about meaning and power contributed to how culture is 'used', and is it this affecting the pluriformity and multitude of spaces that everyday culture, including popular culture for mass consumption, used to be? Quite possibly there are other ways of thinking about 'culturalization', but for now I'd like to explore this double feeling. Is culture now used as a primary channel of political control, thereby emptying the domain of the political of its democratic significance? And, secondly, what does the tradition of cultural studies have to offer in these times of obvious change in terms of understanding the uses of culture for others than governments or corporate capitalists.

Citizenship, and what has come to be known as 'cultural citizenship' will be my point of entry. I'll contrast my admittedly slightly idealist notion of the value of understanding citizenship as bonding through or in popular culture to two other realities. They are the reality of living in a global world, and the everyday reality of doing so in a wealthy Western nation-state for which I will use material from audience research conducted by my INHOLLAND research group over the past 3 years.

## One: the Reality of Cultural Citizenship in Cultural Studies

Cultural citizenship has been an important theme in my own work especially because it is such an elegant notion of what popular culture achieves for us. Whereas concepts such as identity, representation and subjectivity are clearly of great use in analysing and understanding how we use the media, they don't have much to offer when it comes to questions of bonding and collectivity. My working definition of cultural citizenship points to how especially (broadly) shared popular culture offers us a sense of who we are, as well as a feeling of belonging, and what the scope of our rights and responsibilities is (Hermes, 2005: 1). It is an arena in which not just meaning, but meaningfulness, subjectivity, identity and community are struggled over and established (idem: 6). The elements of this definition derive from discussion of (cultural) citizenship in cultural studies. I am in particular a fan of the work of Toby Miller and John Hartley.

Toby Miller (1993; 1998) understands (cultural) citizenship as the disciplining of subjects in the cultural realm in capitalist social formations. Going by what he wrote a decade ago, we are long past the point at which to wonder about the culturalization of power relations – these are logics that have been in place all through modernity. He sums up his book *The well-tempered self* by stating that "culture is a significant area in the daily organisation of fealty to the cultural-capitalist state" (1993: 218). For him citizenship is a realm of subjection rather than freedom, in which disciplining and seduction both hold sway. However aware we are, in ironical or postmodern mode, that we are fooled, tied down and regulated by the different types of invitation that come our way to be included and to be belong: to be a selfless, responsible citizen or just a witness, to be a happy consumer, we also take up these invitations, enjoy them, live them. Miller concludes that: "the civic cultural subject – the citizen – is produced as a polite and obedient servant of etiquette, within limited definitions of acceptable behaviour" (1993:223).

John Hartley has a different take on (cultural) citizenship, which he calls media citizenship (1996) and in later work DIY citizenship (1999), reserving cultural citizenship for

other purposes. Media citizenship, for Hartley is grounded in his intent to undo the intellectual-made divide between "the knowledge class" and ordinary people. Intellectual and popular culture are understood as "mutual, reciprocal and interdependent sites of knowledge production"(1996:58/9). Hence Hartley's use of "reading" and "readerships" to describe media audiences as a taunt to how intellectuals like to describe themselves.

"Readerships" are the audiences, consumers, users, viewers, listeners or readers called into being by any medium, whether verbal, audio-visual or visual, journalistic or fictional; "reading" is the discursive practice of making sense of any semiotic material whatever, and would include not only decoding but also the cultural and critical work of responding, interpreting, talking about or talking back – the whole array of sense-making practices that are proper to a given medium in its situation (1996:58).

Reading, and in fact media citizenship, for Hartley is a *practice* not a subjectivity, part of the cultural repertoire of actions that people may undertake (1996: 66). Shared cultural frameworks and how they are (continuously) built and rebuilt are at stake. Rigorous investigation of what the core values in using both journalism and popular culture are, should therefore include examination of how they fascinate and bind, how media use is incremental in community-building as well as in practices of exclusion.

Following Hartley, we can recognise *cultural* citizenship as the consequence of actions and debates in the range of contexts that make up the (semi) public sphere of mass media consumption. We should neither overestimate, Hartley suggests, the public sphere of political science nor underestimate the realm of popular entertainment. I would add to that, that we might want to understand the relative autonomy of these spheres or domains. Hence my suggestion that we approach the question of culturalization via the material practices or realities of cultural studies, globalization and actual everyday media use. Of course the cultural, the popular and the political are part of one another and connect in and through us. But they organize our lives in different ways in different places at different moments. They feel like separate domains. We are meanwhile getting deeper and deeper enmeshed in this mix of culture, politics and the popular. As users and critical consumers we offer feedback on product development or services rendered which weaves us into the economy. We are much more than just end-users. We are *prosumers*, part of networks that set rules which become boundaries for others, either or not via the intervention of governments. 'Citizenship' suggests a certain autonomy and individuality, in actual practice this view is hard to sustain. The voter, the bearer of rights: how often do people feel they are in charge, that it matters what they do?

## Two: The Reality of a Globalising World

I am not Dutch, I am Amsterdammer. (Moroccan-Dutch informant, 2006).

For me globalization most of all means multiculturalism. Citizenship from the perspective of globalisation is an indelible part of our daily lives. Amsterdam, in my case, is a multicultural city, I work with the most diverse student population in the Netherlands, multiculturalism is a returning theme in the projects of my team, brought up spontaneously when it is not immediately part of interview themes. More generally, globalisation is an important reason for us to discuss citizenship because it is assumed to signal the end of "national belonging" (Castles and Davidson 2000:156). Migration and the coming into being of transnational media communities, herald a new era (Turner 1994).

Myths of a unified nation, bound by heritage, a national language, family blood lines extending back into the past and intertwined with national history, will surely at some point explode. Even if lack of empirical foundation has not stopped these myths from being produced in the past. Religion provides a similar unifying myth. It bears pondering whether

national politics too upholds a myth of its own. Is it fast becoming a realm of posturing based on precious little power to steer events and developments? Corporate capitalism, flash capital, new types of monetary piracy after all influence and indeed control local economies to a large extent. Health risks too have become a transnational phenomenon, witness Beck's arguments in *The Risk society* (1992).

George Yudice suggests in his *The expediency of culture. Uses of culture in the global era* (2003) that precisely these conditions have made the progressively minded (us, I assume) turn to civil culture and cultural citizenship. He argues that "the transition of the welfare state to the neoliberal state has generated, in the process, a new dimension to citizenship rights" (2003:165). His overall argument links the coming into being of new civil rights and the recognition of group rights, to the vast changes in the influence of corporate capital, increased immigration, the revolution in electronic media (including the internet) and the post-mass market (also known as diversity or niche marketing). Quoting Young (2000) Yudice states that "cultural citizenship cannot be understood outside of what has been happening to the welfare state, the media and the market which translate the interpretations of people's needs into legal, administrative, therapeutic and imaginistic terms, thus reformulating the political reality of those interpretations"(ibid).

I think Yudice implies that we need double focus. Diversity marketing, media utopian and dystopian fantasies of the world, and corporate political action on behalf of the disenfranchised are important but they are not 'innocent'. Although diversity marketing recognizes groups of people that hitherto were invisible in media and publicity; they do only recognize those groups that can be identified as an interesting group of consumers. The gay dollar and the Hispanic middle class in the U.S. effectively deny the challenges others belonging to these groups may be faced with. Likewise, media fantasies tend to look for happy endings or comfortable solutions. Corporate political ethics that translate into important projects (support for fair trade or for women's rights) often remain no more than a marginal part of the overall pr budget. They may not even be in line with e.g. actual working conditions. In short, Yudice convincingly shows that while citizenship and especially cultural citizenship was an obvious direction to turn in the 1980s and 90s, it is not without its drawbacks. For one, cultural citizenship is a deeply implicated part of the "society of spectacle and consumable style" (Yudice 2003: 168) that we are in today. While it promises empowerment it is channelled through what Foucault called "governmentality" (Foucault 1991), perhaps even more so than identity politics. Processes of empowerment do give all kinds of groups a voice. At the same time, by construing them as Dutch Moroccans, or 'older' women, specific representations and expectations are produced and channelled, thus, in Foucauldian terms "structuring the field of action", and circumscribing their possibilities and access to other networks of power, political action or social effectivity. (Foucault 1991; see Yudice 2003: 162). Identity politics, aimed so much more directly at the sphere of politics and political rights, offered a clearer choice. Cultural citizenship, as a mechanism of inclusion through cultural forms and practices, will also include those who are not aware that they made a choice, regardless of whether they really had one or not.

## Three: Everyday Realities of (Cultural) Citizenship and Audiencehood

Over the past three years we have explored citizenship from the perspective of citizens themselves with students. The material gathered in long interviews in neighbourhoods all over the western part of the Netherlands, confirms that we are, not to put too fine a point to it, in the midst of a citizenship crisis if citizenship is defined in terms of the relation between nationals and representative government. Survey results over the last couple of years have consistently shown the same thing. We are at an all time low in the trust put in government (conceived broadly). Trust in entrepreneurship and business on the other hand, has risen and

this extends to corporate capitalism despite major scandals over exorbitant sums paid to CEOs and malfeasance at the top of a.o. the Ahold corporation in the Netherlands (Enron scandal in the States, other scandals elsewhere). Liberal individualism, promoted as much by government agencies as by other social partners and mainstream media, channels public discourse about citizenship. "Democratization under liberalism", moreover, according to George Yudice, "has transformed the public sphere in which citizenship can be effectively participatory. Institutional channelling tempers activism (-)." (Yudice 2003: 76). Although Yudice's argument pertains to Brasil and the United States, it holds, for the Netherlands as well, where a 'polder model' of consultation distances individuals from policy decisions.

While liberal individualism supports a highly formal definition of citizenship, it does not bode well for more substantial forms. An individualist perspective is not amenable to recognising group allegiances or identities. On the contrary, it reverts back to traditional views of citizenship as part of a public sphere, in which one exerts rights or makes good on responsibilities. It is based on assimilation. Gender or ethnic identity belong to a private realm that has no consequences for being a citizen in the public sphere. To approach 'the multiple realities' of cultural citizenship, this crisis of citizenship needs to be discussed. While in conjunction with the reality of living in a globalised and further globalising world, it shows the incredibly narrow window of possibility that cultural citizenship is, it also provides for a stronger case in favour of the possible role of the media in strengthening cultural citizenship, as a sense of ownership and a sense of belonging. Quite rightly, overly optimist and celebratory notions of how audiencehood might empower should be criticised (an old debate in and against cultural studies) but not to the detriment of understanding how media use may also be of real value to real people.

## Intermezzo: Citizenship in Crisis and Alternative Places to Go Looking for It

In our students' interview material the hold of a traditional liberal individualism shows in the cultural means available to those they interview to discuss their feelings about their neighbourhood, the city, the city administration and government in general. Two major repertoires surface in analysis of the interviews.[1] On the one hand, there is a clearly defined citizenship repertoire. If we adhere to the rules, government agencies will treat us fairly, is its main theme. It has no political thrust. There is little sense that government is ultimately the delegated will of the people. It is an autonomous service industry that requires payment in the form of taxes and correct behaviour. In interviews for the Ministry of the Interior (Binnenlandse zaken), this was touchingly confirmed by informants telling us how 'honoured' they felt to have been approached for a citizen forum (Burgerforum kiesstelselhervorming, "Burgerschap onder een glazen stolp", Hermes and Adolfsson 2007a)

At street level, this citizenship repertoire comes with the expectation of convivial behaviour, which ranges from partaking in annual neighbourhood festivities, or being able to ask a neighbour to turn their stereo down. The city in this formal citizenship repertoire is like a village. When asked what informants themselves did for their neighbourhood or for others in their vicinity, it becomes clear that the notion of the village is a nostalgic, romanticised one that they hardly ever act upon. Although some people do engage in volunteer work, the majority of our interviewees (easily over a hundred individuals), only offer excuses for not doing anything at all. Citizenship is little more than a pleasing formula that works well as long as you don't break any laws.

---

1    See Trees Moll, 2006 for an impression of urban citizenship which is most relevant for the discussion here; Peter 't Lam, 2006, for European citizenship and Doedens , 2006, for nostalgic citizenship sentiments in small communities.

The contrasting citizenship repertoire, imagines the city as a space of freedom. No one to check on your behaviour, no social control or gossip to hinder individuals in their lifestyle of choice. Here liberal individualism is even stronger. After all, the city, from this perspective is built on a collective agreement that what we do in our private lives is our own business. Engaging in citizenship activity, is not easily part of this repertoire. Most promising, from what we could see, are corporate initiatives for volunteer work in company hours and those civil society initiatives (such as debates) that were felt to strengthen professional identities. In short, formal citizenship is hardly a lived reality despite the massive volume of public discourse that stresses citizenship. How about mediated and/or media-related cultural citizenship?

The notion of cultural citizenship follows on the poststructuralist turn in media audience studies. Rather than discuss attitudes, personality traits or media effects, "new audience studies" (Morley 1980, 1988; Ang 1985; Radway [1984] 1987) move towards an interest in the underlying cultural knowledges and resources of media audiences. A combination of ethnographic research and discourse analysis became a new way to approach media use. While individuals appear to accord idiosyncratic meanings to what they read, watch or listen to, in their reports they make use of a limited number of terms. They share cultural repertoires to express how practices of media use have meaning for them; they take their cues for practical orientation from others who share their enthusiasm, indignation or background, thus forming communities.

In audience research over the years, I have found many indications of the value of media use for a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. For instance interviews about women's magazines, showed a shared investment in imagining a perfect self (as a wise person, able to advise others; or as a practical genius who can remove stains from any fabric), or an investment in holding on to imagined families (Hermes 1995). Thriller readers find many uses for their reading preference. A particularly interesting one in this respect was a shared investment among readers of women's thrillers (often portraying feminist heroines and storylines) in holding on to traditional notions of gender by producing a conservative feminism – depoliticised, domesticated – a call for good manners and respectful behaviour. Such middle-classness for all is no less than a political contract that is hardly visible from the outside.

This is cultural citizenship because underlying practices of use and interpretative repertoires imply political contracts and often contain agendas. Clearly then, cultural citizenship is certainly not necessarily progressive, nor something to romanticise. Likewise in a small football project, I found traces of 'racist discomfort': for lack of better terms questions of multiculturalism on the fields and in top football (soccer) were addressed in outdated categories of race. Sometimes positively, as in praise for the athletic capabilities of African players, sometimes negatively as in criticism that 'they' play by instinct rather than strategy (Hermes 2005). Interviews about multicultural humour likewise were not much fun: humour tends to strengthen exactly those group boundaries that are not easily discussed.

When combined with work we did on citizenship over the past three years, Yudice's view of citizenship offers fairly little to be optimistic about. In general, for 'ordinary people' citizenship only has meaning via repertoires that exclude them from a political outlook. A public sphere dominated by a host of professional organisations prevent them from the possibility of critically intervening in politics or challenging the state apparatus. Although they recognise themselves as 'citizens', the underlying dynamic is that of relatively powerless individuals versus the anonymous machinery of the state, to which politics can hardly make a difference. Under conditions of globalization, progressive intellectuals have turned to 'cultural' citizenship to recover a sense of control in the form of rights and obligations on the part of all of us for whom a 'natural' sense of belonging is problematic. Regardless whether

we are women, gay or of a minority ethnicity. Yudice quotes Elizabeth Jelin to argue that "the concept of citizenship in a democratic culture must take into consideration symbolic aspects such as collective identity and not just a rationalized rights discourse" (2003:76). When we do so, we find that such identities can be found at many layers but that they require an intervention of some kind to become visible as the material realities that they are.

## Encouraging Cultural Citizenship: a Plea for Civic Research

There is one remaining question to gauge the strength or power of the logic of culturalization: is it possible to invite, or even manipulate media audiences into cultural citizenship? And if so: how? This past year we were involved in the evaluation of a reality soap produced with financial backing of the city of Amsterdam. *West Side* (AT5 2006) is meant to encourage Amsterdammers to discuss issues to do with multiculturalism and to thus lessen tension between ethnic groups in the city. A television series used to political ends. *West Side* was made by the local public television station AT5. It was not presented as a public relations initiative for or by the city. Understanding that an invocation to co-exist peacefully would not convert a large audience, *West Side* is made as a raw reality soap, pitting 4 families from different ethnic backgrounds (Moroccan, Turkish, white-Dutch and Surinamese-Dutch) against each other. Although they are allowed to find one another by the end of the first season, lifelike problems and suspicions are given free space.

Did *West Side* work? It was, overall, a modest success. It did not find a large audience but it was sold to the national networks (NPS/VARA). Although it certainly had quality, viewers we showed episodes to were taken aback at the sharp portrayal of ethnic stereotypes. This did indeed incite them to talk about multiculturalism, but, in the interviews conducted by our students often in ways that strengthened their pre-existing notions and ideas. We did not see a new community come into being around the serial, either in the interviews, or on *West Side*'s website. The politics of hardening multicultural oppositions between groups certainly require more than a cultural approach from above.

Used differently, I do however think that serial drama could work. As part of a what we have called a 'civic research' project,[2] we are currently experimenting with another form of using media drama. Our sense is that the media can offer the ingredients for strong bonding, and for audience groups to find their way to a stronger political awareness (ie of how their views and lifestyles matter to society at large). Audience research in which audience members participate on an equal basis, may help bring such awareness about. Like civic journalism, civic research builds on the knowledges and (critical, emotional, social) intelligence of all involved. In this vein, we started work on a 'telenovela' to be aired on the web site of Marokko.nl, a lively internet community aimed at and moderated by Moroccan Dutch, including a wide group of different backgrounds. Marokko.nl is starting a news site. It will contain news that is specifically of interest to the Dutch Moroccan community. In two ways this site will try to make news come alive for young users. Students have been invited to make news items as peer-to-peer form. The second initiative is our suggestion to start making a telenovela that builds onto the stories on one of the rubrics of the web community: the story corner. High melodrama in feuilleton mode abounds. It is written mostly by young women but also by men. This group of writers has been approached to help develop and write an internet soap that links via its characters and storylines to actual news items, as in the South-American telenovela. Whether the result will be as exhilarating as the process of developing storylines

---

2    By 'civic research we mean 'new forms of action and peer-to-peer research that engage informants
     as co-researchers, i.e. as research subjects rather than objects' in Hermes, Joke (2006) 'Hidden
     debates', in *Javnost/The Public*, 2006, p. 19.

and characters (we all agreed Faycal was a name for a slightly overweight sorry character), and whether it'll strengthen a form of 'bottom up' cultural citizenship remains to be seen.

We have called what we are doing 'civic' research. It is aimed at understanding the relative (un)importance of the cultural while giving it its due. It wants to understand the value of authentic feeling, of how and when a sense of realness and connection come about. Citizenship in all its guises has been compromised: by globalisation, by the fact that citizenship rights did not produce a vast middle class, by culturalization in the form of consumerism and the politics of style and spectacle and by culturalization in the form of a shift in politics to issues of morality. John Major's Citizen's Charter in the 1990s contained a strong notion of the contract between government and nationals. It never caught on, while Major's later Back to Basics campaign did. That was based on moral injunctions. A similar injunction to behave has been part of Dutch governments since the late 1990s. The shift to individualism, became a shift to individual responsibility to be well-behaved. The village fantasy version of citizenship has turned into a how-to-become-middle-class morality play. Culture of coure is the conduit of choice for such a realignment. Recent shows such as *American Princess*, *America's next top model* and *Ladette to Lady* that are all about self-discipline, travelled widely and were remade amongst others into  local Dutch versions.

But that does not mean that culturalization is all there is, or that popular culture or television for that matter are not offering a multitude of options to watch as per usual. Without claiming that pluriformity equals liberation, it is important to understand that popular culture works via an invitational logic. Aesthetics rather than ethics are its force, and aesthetics remain a powerful political field. Bonding via popular culture is a bottom up process, while morality in this day and age, is at the very least perceived as a top down regulatory force which is backed up by governmental macho talk.

That means I don't think we need to give up on culture, or on cultural citizenship. I don't think cultural citizenship is equal to the other citizenships, but it is their prerequisite. If and when we want to intervene critically, bring people together or create vital communities, culture offers means to build bridges and bond that other types of social action do not. Popular culture does this even better than traditional culture or the arts, but all, in their own way can be and are part of cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship exists as a material practice: it comes into being in real life at particular junctions in people's biographies. Cultural citizenship to me is a 'reality'. Empirical philosopher Annemarie Mol (2002) has defined 'reality' as a shared decision to understand and act in the world.  I found that that means there are at least three realities involved in how I understand the logic of culturalization and cultural citizenship as part of that: my own intellectual history; the situatedness of that intellectual history, part as it is of my life (the concentric circles of which start from Amsterdam); but also how I partake of the realities of others in audience research. Co-creation, community building, these seem to me the appropriate ethnographic tools to pursue 'civic research' of the near future.

Plus ça change, plus c'est le même chose we have never been naive in cultural studies. Culture has always been a conduit for governmentality, even if 'hegemony' was the preferred term. Recent discussion of that concept in *Theory, Culture & Society* [May 2007, 24(3)] makes clear that although the terrain is shifting towards a new materialism in which affect and emotion are given more space and indeed credence, questions of power and everyday initiatives to redefine definitions and agendas interwoven with the broad domain of culture continue to go on. Politics meanwhile is doing a good job of emptying out its own meaningfulness for citizenship. Cultural studies could do less than to continue to provide an open stage for discussion of inequality, power, bonding, commitment and rights. That is the best way that I would know of to include the different realities at stake and to recognize the pressures and forces, whether historical, ideological or political that co-shape those realities.