


# Book Review: Citizenship in Question: Evidentiary Birthright and Statelessness by Benjamin N. Lawrance & Jacqueline Stevens

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**Lawrance, Benjamin N. and Jacqueline Stevens, eds. *Citizenship in Question: Evidentiary Birthright and Statelessness*. Duke University Press Books, 2017. 312 pages. Paperback, \$29.95.**

The problems of citizenship, birthright, emigration, and statelessness have become predominant in the last few years. As Syrians flocked to Europe, the European nations dealt with questions of what it means to be a national in each country, as well as decided on just who they wanted to allow to enter and who they felt they could reject. Also, America itself had to deal with questions of national identity, refugees, and citizenship as it struggled with refugees and immigration. It perhaps goes without saying that the presidential election of 2016 brought questions of immigration and national identity to the fore, and with this the questions surrounding DACA and transient undocumented populations certainly gained the interest of the general public and the interest of those in academia.

Indeed, the problems of recent events are not new, and many authors took to writing books on citizenship. Many of these works dealt with civics in America and abroad; even Oxford University Press in 2008 published one of its *A Very Short Introduction* series on citizenship for both the student of civics and the general readership. Also, many monographs also document the legalities of citizenship and statelessness; many of these are conglomerate collections of essays, such as Brad Blitz and Maureen Lynch's seminal *Statelessness and Citizenship: A Comparative Study on the Benefits of Nationality*, published in 2011. Yet, for all the great insights that many of these works give students of political science, civics, and history, they all seem to have one fatal flaw: they assume that the legality of citizenship is hard fast and always based on empirical, provable evidence. Hence, in 2017, and with perfect timing, Benjamin Lawrance and Jacqueline Stevens edited and published a volume that does quite the opposite of all previous volumes: they begin with the premise that citizenship is, at its most fundamental, arbitrary.

Benjamin Lawrance is the Hon. Barber B. Conable Jr. Endowed Professor of International Studies and Professor of History and Anthropology at Rochester Institute of Technology. Jacqueline Stevens is Professor of Political Science and the founding director of the Deportation Research Clinic in the Buffett Institute for Global Studies at Northwestern University. Together, they have edited and published perhaps the most seminal work on this subject to date.

The collection of skilled writers set out to prove that the laws that govern citizenship are fluid and subjectively applied. Lawrance and Stevens adroitly set up the work in three parts: the first covers international and regional protocols, the second deals with official acts deciding citizenship, and the third observes citizenship in jurisprudence. The essays are also not myopic in their scope; where many works will focus on the United States or on Europe alone, these essays cover the Americas, Europe, China, Taiwan, and African nations. It becomes readily apparent, as the reader continues through each essay, that the theme of the work is to prove that indeed citizenship is arbitrary. Even *jus soli* laws that are meant to ensure that people are not born stateless depend on the willingness of a marginalized population to register a birth or for nations to recognize that birth based on the time that undocumented parents reside in the country (pp. 40-

41). They prove that these problems are not just issues prevalent in smaller, poorer countries, but that the EU and the United States are also guilty of such arbitrary applications of *jus soli*.

*Citizenship in Question* also proves that the mere stamping of a passport contains diplomatic significance—that the “stamping [of] an identity or travel document affirms the sovereign status of the stamping authority while it also recognizes the legitimacy of the government that issued the document in the first place” (p. 95). If the mere act of stamping such a document implies such diplomatic recognition, then the travel between two countries where the questions of suzerainty and sovereignty are blurred (in this work’s case, between China and Taiwan) is complicated by the fact that the travel documents no longer function as they were intended. Even these travel documents that are necessary for travel between Taiwan and China, for example, “reproduce a powerful sense of uncertainty that reverberates across multiple scales of individuals, immigrant communities, state actors, and the nation-state itself” (p. 97).

While the book is written decidedly for academics with, at times, an overuse of haughty argot, the content of the work is imperative. Margaret Stock’s chapter “American Birthright Rules” should be required reading for all who are interested in American politics and civics, while all social scientists in Europe should become acquainted with Jacqueline Bhabha’s chapter, “The Politics of Evidence: Roma Citizenship Deficits in Europe.” In fact, the monograph stretches across disciplines in such a way that anyone in the humanities, social sciences, or government studies will find this book valuable. Therefore, I would not shy from declaring that this is perhaps one of the most creative and important books written for academia as a whole in many years.

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