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On *Genealogies of Citizenship* by Margaret Somers

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*Genealogies of Citizenship* conveys a powerful and disturbing message. By transmuting rights into contracts, market fundamentalism has eroded the basis of citizenship. Citizenship, as Margaret Somers understands it, is not just a legal status but something much more profound: the right to have rights. Stripped of this right, individuals fall outside the charmed circle of belonging, bereft not only of the social protections and prerogatives of real citizens but stripped of their standing as human beings deserving of dignity and respect as well. In recent American history twin processes—the hegemonic ascent of market fundamentalism and the increase in economic inequality—have pushed more and more
Americans outside the boundaries of real citizenship, spreading both misery and despair.

As she recounts this somber history of the present, Somers takes readers on a dazzling tour of the history of social science from Aristotle to Robert Putnam with special stops for Arendt’s theories of statelessness, Polanyi’s critical account of the rise of market society, and Marshall’s tripartite history of citizenship. At every station, her insights provoked, challenged, and informed me; there have been few journeys on which I have learned so much. To single out one station, I would urge everyone concerned with social theory or public policy to read her often deliciously wicked chapter on social capital. I enjoyed this trip, too, because its main theme resonated so closely with how I have written about similar topics. Indeed, put alongside her book, my interpretation of the recent history of the American welfare state, *The Price of Citizenship*, and, with Mark J. Stern, my attempt to probe the history of concept formation in the last chapter and epilogue to *One Nation Divisible*, read like empirical footnotes to her argument.1 As a historian, I could not agree more with her methodological remarks about the crucial role of history in understanding and transforming the present.

My copy of *Genealogies of Citizenship* is studded with marginal comments, exclamations, underlining and notes on ideas and passages. In this short commentary, there is no way to explore thoroughly the resonances and issues provoked by the book. Instead, I shall focus the rest of these comments on two areas: first, some of the issues and questions which I would like to discuss with Somers and, second, the implications of this book for reconstructing the intellectual basis of a progressive politics.

Here are four issues I will highlight briefly: the impact of recession, the role of marketization in poverty work, the meaning of civil society and public sphere and the link between post-war European statelessness and current social exclusion in the USA.

*Genealogies of Citizenship* was written before the tsunami of recession washed over America. As an ideational regime, market fundamentalism looked a lot more solid then than it does now. A raft of recent books and articles attack market fundamentalism, destabilizing its hegemony and legitimizing criticism. At the same time, the ‘movement from an at least partially rights-driven civil society with some degree of market embeddedness to one with full exposure to the discipline of the market’ (p. 135) has slowed, if not begun a modest change of direction.

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For all their limits, the Obama administration’s healthcare legislation, the financial regulation bill and provisions tucked into the economic stimulus are prime examples. These all are fragile, of course, subject to reversal, but they are hopeful as well, or, at least, they seemed more hopeful before the election of November 2010. In 2007, who would have predicted that within a short time the federal government would purchase a majority interest in General Motors? So my first question to Somers is whether responses to the Great Recession would modify her interpretation.

Somers writes (pp. 116–117) that ‘the tragedy for the urban poor who have little of value to exchange in today’s contractual regime is not the misery of commodification; it is that they are considered of so little value that few even want to commodify them’. Until completing some recent research, I might have let this assertion pass unquestioned. But to my surprise there are worldwide movements designed both to commodify the poor and to embrace them within the structure of markets. I call these ‘new technologies of poverty work’ and have identified four of them: rebuilding markets in inner cities (poor as consumers); microfinance (poor as entrepreneurs); asset building (poor as capitalist savers) and conditional cash transfers (poor as rational actors). It is fascinating that the second and last have been imported from developing countries—microfinance from Bangladesh and conditional cash transfers from Latin America, especially Mexico. One might say that market fundamentalism has left America so bereft of constructive strategies for dealing with poverty that it has had to turn to the developing world for ideas about social policy as well as electronics and cheap clothes.

‘Civil society’ and ‘public sphere’ wend their way through the heart of Somers’ story. For about the first two-thirds of the book, Somers, perhaps assuming readers would know what they mean, did not define either, which frustrated me. Later, especially as she discussed Solidarity in Poland, definitions began to appear. But I still remain uncertain about both boundaries and the relation of civil society to the public sphere. Sometimes the two seem almost the same, at other times they remain distinct. It is not wholly clear, moreover, whether civil society is a space or an actor or both. On page 48 it seems pretty clear that it is a space: ‘It is in civil society that social movements and other democratic forces cultivate the public narrative’. But on page 49, it seems more an actor: ‘Much of civil society’s boundary work thus entails democratizing the law’.

In a market-dominated society, Somers sees civil society drifting towards and partially captured by the market. Yet, in the USA, the drift has been towards the transformation of civil society—or a large and important part thereof—into an agent of the state. American governments do not run many programmes themselves. They franchise them to the private sector, both for-profit and not-for-profit. While this is an old practice, it accelerated during and after the
1960s. The result is that today most not-for-profits could not exist without public money. At the same time, they have used market-based models to reorganize how they operate and to increase their efficiency. Do these trends suggest a modification of Somers’ views of civil society’s trajectory?

Finally, there is the parallel between stateless refugees from post-war Europe and US victims of market fundamentalism’s erosion of social protections, symbolized by the human casualties of Hurricane Katrina. Somers’ evocation of the human misery that resulted from the ineptitude and lack of humanity which confronted them is haunting. Recent sickening revelations of white vigilantes shooting African-Americans only make the situation worse than outsiders realized at the time. African-American victims of Katrina left to fester in public stadiums, die unassisted, murdered or evacuated to distant cities without any choice lost their right to have rights. This loss is what links them to stateless post-war European refugees shunted from one unwelcoming country to another. Both, she claims, had been robbed of their humanity. The Katrina victims ‘were no longer in any meaningful sense citizens; they were now, in effect, stateless people . . . they have become the socially and morally excluded—invisible, dispensable, and forgotten. Human beings treated this way become surplus, not worthy of social or moral recognition by others’ (p. 114). There are two issues here. First, were they truly stripped of citizenship, as stateless as the refugees? I am not willing to dismiss formal citizenship as easily as Somers does here. They still had rights and entitlements: Medicaid, food stamps, Medicare if 65 or over, housing assistance. They had not, like current and ex-felons—the most dispossessed class in the USA—lost the right to vote, even though for many it proved difficult to exercise. I do not want to minimize their suffering or whitewash their treatment, but they were, it seems to me, in a fundamentally different position than the European stateless. The second issue concerns the claim that they lost their humanity. This line of reasoning, followed to its end, sits uneasily beside what might be called subaltern history, perhaps the dominant trend in writing about the poor around the world, which stresses the initiative and agency shown by people in even the most difficult and seemingly hopeless situations. The claim that they lost their humanity and ended up stripped of moral recognition, a charge repeated throughout Genealogies of Citizenship, leads where I do not think Somers wants to go.

Components of an intellectual agenda for progressive politics appear throughout Genealogies of Citizenship. Progressives need to reclaim the narrative of modern history from the political right. As befits an era of market fundamentalism, the belief in governmental inefficiency and incompetence pervades historical writing about cities and social institutions and has even begun its assault on the New Deal. Warnings about moral hazard support attempts to attenuate social protections. The anthropomorphic fiction that markets are natural and best
left unimpeded smoldered at the core of national economic policy during the long decades of inequality’s ascendance. The thesis of historical inevitability—the way things are may be nasty, but, hey, there are no real alternatives—staves off challenges to the status quo. Somers historicizes these claims, pointing to the ubiquity of alternatives and the contingency of concepts. Her history of social science de-naturalizes the intellectual basis of market fundamentalism. In the last several decades, nearly all the conceptions with which we interpret the world around us—family, work, race, city, even nationality—have been smashed. As a consequence, we confront fundamentally new circumstances with anachronistic ideas. Somers’ call for a ‘historical sociology of concept formation’ (p. 266) never has been more urgent.

A new narrative must extend Somers’ contribution with a forthright challenge to the canard that government is the problem, not the solution. No idea so effectively inhibits progressive change. Fortunately, historical evidence with which to counter the current, popular denigration of government is abundant. Without glossing over failures, an alternative narrative about the role of government in American history waits to be told.

An intellectual agenda for progressive politics also needs to locate sites of resistance. At various point, Somers hints that the triumph of market fundamentalism remains less than complete. Pockets of resistance still can be found. These need to be identified, protected, and expanded. For instance, Social Security remains the most effective anti-poverty programme in American history; academic tenure resists the complete takeover of universities by the market and the state; birthright citizenship blocks the final transformation of citizenship into a contract rather than a right.

There also are sites of resistance created and maintained by excluded and marginalized populations struggling to survive. When they face expulsion from the welfare state, when they are cut loose, dismissed, turned out on their own, they turn to informal social protections, building their own shadow welfare state.

An essential component of a reconstructed narrative of modern history, this shadow welfare state of informal social protections awaits its historian.

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2This is the thesis of Katz and Stern (2006, ch. 4 and epilogue).


Value propositions, on reading Somers

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Reading Margaret Somers’ Genealogies of Citizenship invites one to think expansively, to make connections, sometimes irreverent ones, among various literatures and historical sources. It is, after all, a book about histories, networks and narratives, all at once (p. 209): in addition to being a powerful theoretical argument against the market fundamentalisms that have defined the recent past, an indictment of the poverty of citizenship theory in the face of Hurricane Katrina and other democratic disasters, and a trenchant re-reading of some of the classics of political philosophy, Genealogies of Citizenship is also, I would argue, a book about value. How do we value civic participation after market dominance? Are there alternative values, alternative metrics as well as alternative sources, and can they be leveraged—or, something other than leveraged, something that would not in itself participate in the metaphors and calculative practicalities of capitalist market devices—for a new vision and praxis of justice?

Although the book is not in dialogue with the emerging field of the social studies of finance or the ‘new’ economic anthropology and sociology—those areas of inquiry variously engaged with the reassessment of markets as calculative and qualitative apparatuses—it is similarly preoccupied with a re-appreciation of embeddedness, and in particular, a rediscovery of Polanyi. Somers’ call for a historical sociology of concept formation could start to move in a manner similar to Michel Callon’s assertion that the economy is embedded in economics, the economic phenomena performed and encompassed by the concepts of social science disciplines and their materialization in the world through practice. Caliskan and Callon differentiate this process of economization from marketization, a subspecies of economization realized through market devices that render things calculable and commensurable in terms of price. Caliskan and Callon place the emphasis on the material and technical apparatuses that go into the creation of markets as well as the areas of expertise essential to their description and performative efficacy (Caliskan and Callon, 2010). What is important here for Somers’ project is the ramification of the historical sociology of concepts in material practices and market devices, reformatting social worlds in the process—giving us both the statelessness of citizens post-Katrina, and the fantastic chimera of
‘social capital’—to fully appreciate the chimerical quality: pause, and say the phrase to yourself again.

If there is one thing I found missing from this work—and this is by no means to find fault, and could even be my own inadequacy as a reader, as this is one of those books that one could continuously mine for new insights—it is attention to the material and technical devices that substantiate the value of market fundamentalisms for so many people in our times. It is not just social construction nor merely ideology, but the rendering-as-workable of a world in terms of marketization. It is also important to look out for the possible unintended effects as well as, following Hirschman (1997), the intended but unrealized effects of this rendering. As the anthropologists and sociologists of finance have argued (see Maurer, 2005), sometimes the social can explain away too much: the path dependence of formulas, techniques and programmes—the instruments of marketization—that proceed as their own agents and that, as such, may not always do exactly what their masters want.

In this short comment, I limit myself to two additional points. The first has to do with history, citizenship and a figure who could have been added to Somers’ triumvirate of Arendt, Marshall and Polanyi: J. G. A. Pocock. The second has to do with how we can make propositions about Somers’ triad of state-market-civil society. In particular, I linger over how Somers uses these triads of thinkers and of domains to plan a programme for unprivatizing civil society, in order to allow for a non-state centered political action. The most challenging part of the book is, in my opinion, its plan for action, its alternative value proposition, for ‘artifice’, as she puts it (following Arendt) and against ‘givenness’ or ‘naturalism’ (p. 130).

Pocock, a historian of the era ‘before’ political economy in Restoration England, usefully reminds us of the distinction between the civic humanism of the landed elite and the civil humanism of the rising merchant class. For the former, their property conferred the leisure necessary for the contemplative life, which would in turn permit the judiciousness required for politics. The latter, because their wealth was gained through commerce rather than inheritance, were afforded the means to cultivate their desires and produce a civilized, ‘cultured’ society (Pocock, 1985).

In the conflicts leading up to the Restoration, Pocock observed, the civic humanists could challenge the civil humanists by invoking virtue politics: the tradition of fairness and justice stretching back to the Greeks, of which they claimed to be the inheritors and guardians. Permitting the interests of merchants to impinge upon politics would encourage corruption, they claimed. Landed property alone conferred autonomy, the civic humanists believed, the autonomy to make good decisions separate from one’s own interest in individual gain. The civil humanists, in contrast, could challenge the civic humanists through their claims to being the spokesmen for ‘society’, for civilization, for the cultivated
man who ‘makes himself’ through his aspirations and efforts. Pocock argues that the financial revolution and the new mobility of property in fact created ‘society’ by compelling commercial folks—those trading in public debt rather than ‘real’ merchants trading in things—to focus on objects outside themselves, and thus to externalize their relationality to themselves and others. In such an externalization, those trading could then reflect back on themselves and their peers as an objective entity—a new collectivity called ‘society’ that would realize its interests through the market. Furthermore, that economic ‘interest’ could counterbalance their more destructive passions, such as, say, the love of glory, and lead them towards the cultivation of manners through la doux commerce (Hirschman, 1997).

It is this distinction between the civic humanists’ virtue and the civil humanists’ manners that I find instructive for the predicament that Somers helps us to identify. To what extent do critical contemporary efforts to ‘resocialize the economy’ in the name of critique or in the name of actual practice (through initiatives like the founding of cooperative societies, or Corporate Social Responsibility programmes) attempt to ‘cultivate’ the market? Formal efforts to secure workers’ rights, fair trade or economic justice partake not of the manners of the civil humanists but of the virtues of the civic humanists through that invocation of justice as a value in itself. Yet the analytical impulse to re-embed—followed by the political impulse to resocialize, outside the state—indexes the value of society, culture, difference and the tradition of civil humanism. This is a history lesson that reveals the limits of contemporary critique. From this same history lesson, Pocock provocatively inferred that there was not one transition from feudalism to liberalism or capitalism. Rather, there were two post-feudal positions in a dialectical tension that, I would argue, has not been resolved. We have never been modern (Latour, 1993) to be sure. Yet the full appreciation of this fact complicates any analytical or activist programme for embeddedness.

Somers’ commitment to a thoroughly relational perspective provides a tow-line here, if we view her state-market-civil society triad according to an alternative rubric, a different value proposition, so to speak. As I read the text, I became fascinated with the moments in which parts of the triad seemed to collapse into one another: big-government market fundamentalism, for example, welding state and market. Looking at the contemporary USA suggests new formations: President Barack Obama’s proposals for an infrastructure bank and public–private partnerships (P3s) come to mind (see Likosky, 2010): we no longer have (simply) the crony capitalism of Vice President Dick Cheney’s energy commission, but the P3s that open up US public infrastructure to private and foreign investment. Like the ‘social capital’ beast, these are peculiar hybrids.
Rather than seeing state-market-civil societies as ‘in relation’ to one another, therefore, could we instead foreground the networks between them which contingently stabilize them in particular moments but allow them to interpenetrate in others? Tracking their transformations into one another requires an analysis that moves in time alongside its objects. Such an analytical posture reveals that what was in one instance part of the market domain has become, in the next, part of the state domain, or the civil society domain, or part of some hybrid. Not completely, not without remainder, always partially. . . . But these transformations allow for the next moment of further transformation, a process unfolding in time in which the constellation of the triad itself each time contains the entailments of its own earlier incarnations.

This is a pragmatist framework, loosely derived from C. S. Peirce and his own writings on triads. But I think it is useful here in affording greater attention to people’s (and things’) agencies in unfolding and ramifying, transforming networks. Each moment consists of people doing and saying things together with things operating along their own path-dependencies but also through accidents, misfires and workarounds—alternative pathways that crop up from time to time. Such assemblages of agencies in one moment in time might configure themselves as ‘civil society’, to be used as a resource for other congeries of agencies as ‘state’ in another moment, and so on.

In this vein, Polanyi’s caution that ‘the end of market society means in no way the absence of markets’ was apt: the market, among other things, activates certain elements of contemporary political culture, and full, modern citizenship, that one would not want to atrophy ‘after’ market dominance, if such an ‘after’ can be imagined. Indeed, it may be better to think about a contemporaneity to market alternatives—the non-market inside the market, or the anti-market working together with, and against, the market as a regulatory modality. (As always, I am indebted on this score to Gibson-Graham, 2006.) Putting the market in its place still assumes a place for markets. What place shall it be, and what markets will they be?

Polanyi further reminded us that the ‘self-regulating market’ was in fact planned, the outcome of certain social actors’ prescriptions. Meanwhile ‘planning’, the social response to the market, was not—it emerged spontaneously as the self-regulating market’s excesses compelled a response and as society had to step in to save the market from itself. (Witness, in this respect, the response to the early twenty-first century global financial crisis.) Is the challenge, then, to create ‘artifice’ without planning to do so?

Maybe, instead, the point is to engage in multiple, plural unfoldings: not throwing any babies away with any bathwater but participating in alternative value propositions whose outcomes are always uncertain, unscripted in advance, or at least being open to those possibilities inherent in any practice.
We are all economists in the wild and our knowledge practices have performative overflow that we cannot predict. The basic feminist point is that we cannot imagine the beings we will have become through the realization of such alternative value propositions, and so we cannot know, now, today, exactly what we should be doing. This does not mean doing nothing. It means doing everything. Lots and lots of experiments, lots and lots of engagements and a recognition with Arendt and our other intellectual ancestors that we are all human/social/material in ramifying networks and narratives of our making but not our choosing. Gabriel Tarde called it ‘carding chaos into the world’ (Latour and Lepinay, 2009). Somers inspires us to think and act towards just such chaos.

References
The ‘triadic’ model of society in Somers’ *Genealogies of Citizenship*

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1. Introduction

The standard criticism on the left of neoliberalism, whose ideological core is what Somers aptly calls ‘market fundamentalism’, is that it harms the economic interests of most people and is bad for the overall functioning of the economy. On the one hand, market fundamentalism leads to a rejection of the affirmative state and thus the massive under-provision of a wide range of public goods; on the other hand, weakly regulated markets generate sharp increases in inequality, environmental destruction, risky speculative behaviour and economic volatility. In the end, the argument goes, market fundamentalism is both bad for the well-being of most people and bad for the capitalist economy itself.

That is the standard criticism. Margaret Somers adds a critical additional argument: market fundamentalism is deeply corrosive of the foundations of citizenship. The argument is subtle and powerful. Citizenship, she argues, is not simply a question of formal rights inscribed in the legal rules of the state. Effective citizenship also depends upon a process of social inclusion as a member of a social and political community, for without such inclusion there can be no robust mechanism for translating formal rights on paper into substantive rights in practice. The core of her argument, then, revolves around an investigation of the conditions for sustaining such inclusive social membership, and the key to understanding this problem, she argues, is understanding the relationships among the state, the market and civil society. The basic punchline of the analysis is that market fundamentalism weakens civil society by undermining reciprocities and solidarities, contractualizing human relations and making social inclusion dependent upon successful participation in market transactions. The result is a transformation of citizenship itself, from an unconditional status of membership to a contingent accomplishment. Increasingly, a significant proportion of people who are formal citizens in the USA become effectively stateless persons, equivalent in Somers’ analysis to the stateless refugees after World War II.

These are compelling arguments which I find interesting and broadly persuasive. There are, however, a number of theoretical issues in the conceptual framework used in the analysis that I think are underdeveloped or, in some cases,
unsatisfactory. In particular, I want to interrogate what Somers refers to as the _triadic model_ of state/market/civil society for understanding the effects of market fundamentalism. In my own work on what I call ‘real utopias’ (see Wright, E. O. (2010) _Envisioning Real Utopias_, New York and London, Verso) I have adopted a very similar triadic model of the macro-settings of social practice, but there are some differences in the way I have formulated these categories and their interconnections and the way Somers approaches them. Some of these differences may be more differences in rhetoric than in substance, but nevertheless I think it would be useful in engaging Somers’ arguments to bring into focus these differences and explore their possible ramifications. I will also, at the end of these comments, say something more narrowly about the specific analysis Somers proposes concerning the effects of market fundamentalism on racial inequality.

2. The triadic model

Somers proposes that we analyse the complex processes through which citizenship is constructed with a model that differentiates three spheres of social practices—the state, the market and civil society.¹ These domains are not hermetically sealed, autonomous domains, but rather interact in systematic ways. In particular, she is concerned with the ways in which the market potentially undermines the reciprocities in civil society and how the state, if it engages in a range of social protections and market regulations, can help sustain a vibrant civil society. She writes:

[A] healthy civil society is not autonomous of markets and states. Indeed the contrary is true; civil society’s very capacity for resistance against external market incursions requires support from the state in the form of market regulations, social insurance policies, public services, redistributive tax schemes and legal mechanisms to institutionalize and enforce the rights to livelihood. (p. 31)

I want to comment on four features of her elaboration of this model:

(1) The nature of the spatial metaphor used to think about the three spheres.

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¹A brief terminological note: there are many different words one can use to label what is being differentiated by terms such as state, market, civil society. Sometimes these are called spheres, other times domains or sectors or sites. The stuff that makes up these spheres is sometimes referred to as social interactions, social relations or social practices. Somers sometimes refers to the sites as ‘assemblages of institutions’. I do not think that there is much at stake in these terminological conventions, and I will not worry about this in my remarks. I will refer to them as _spheres of social practices_, but they could just as easily be called domains of institutions or social relations.
(2) The choice of the word ‘market’ to identify one of the spheres, rather than—for example—capitalism.

(3) The way of conceptualizing the power relations linking these spheres required for a vibrant civil society.

(4) The relationship between democracy and the triadic model of state, market and civil society.

2.1 Spatial metaphors

Spatial metaphors are common in sociology and are always tricky. Somers frequently describes civil society as being ‘between’ the state and the market. She writes, for example, that ‘[c]ivil society… must thrive as the social site between the market and the state, albeit fully independent of

![Spatial representations of state, market and civil society interactions.](http://ser.oxfordjournals.org/)

**Figure 1** Spatial representations of state, market and civil society interactions.
neither’ (p. 31). Perhaps I am being too literal-minded here—this is one of the ways metaphors can be tricky—but it seems that in a full-fledged triadic model, each of the spheres is in a sense between the other two, and, even more significantly, each shapes the interactions of the other two. Three contrasting visual representations of the relationship between state, civil society and the market are presented in Figure 1 above.

I think the third of these spatial representations best captures the array of dynamics in play. The first representation is not fully triadic—it is dyadic with an intermediary domain. In the second representation, the state is as much between civil society and the market as civil society is between the market and the state, but the representation does not really capture the full sense in which these spheres interact. The third representation tries to capture the nature of these interactions. Here is how to read the picture: In diagram A, the state affects the form of interaction of civil society and the market, or to use another expression, the state mediates the relationship between civil society and the market. This is the causal nexus on which Somers’ analysis has concentrated. In a regime of market fundamentalism, the substantial withdrawal of the affirmative state means that its role in shaping the relationship between the market and civil society becomes quite weak, and thus the interaction of civil society and the market becomes largely an unmediated, direct relation. There are, however, two other mediating processes in the full triadic model: in diagram B, civil society mediates the relationship between the state and the market. The existence of a strong, vibrant civil society with engaged social movements and robust unions shapes the ways in which the state can regulate market processes and the way market processes might affect the state. And finally in diagram C, the market mediates the interactions of state and civil society. This is one way of understanding the consequences of the centralized statist economies of the Soviet era: markets in capitalist democracies act as a buffer between the state and civil society, weakening the capacity of the state to penetrate civil society; the absence of markets is one of the conditions that lead to the pervasive subordination of civil society to the state.

The simple idea of civil society being ‘between’ the state and the market does not at all invoke this more complex array of interactions. Of course, it is sometimes useful to have an oversimplified partial representation of a more complex model for particular heuristic purposes. But in this case, the first spatial representation is misleading for the specific cluster of issues explored in Somers’ book—how the triumph of market fundamentalism threatens the foundations of citizenship within civil society. If the key idea concerns the failure of the state to buffer the impact of the market on civil society, then it would be better to refer to the state as being ‘in between’ civil society and the market—
as in diagram A in the third representation—rather than to refer to civil society as being in between the state and the market.

2.2 The market or capitalism?

The second issue I would like to raise concerns the identification of the economic component of the triad as ‘the market’ rather than ‘capitalism’. This may be mostly a terminological issue, since when Somers talks about markets she is referring to the historical case of capitalist markets, not markets more generally. Nevertheless, the generic use of the term ‘markets’ does tend to deflect attention from the specifically capitalist character of the social relations and practices within these market systems, and sometimes this leads to the suggestion that the threat to civil society comes from all practices associated with markets as such.

An example of this use of the term ‘market’ occurs in Somers’ discussion of the problem of state regulation of economic processes:

[T]hrough market-driven governance and the conquest of regulative agencies, business is able to undo those existing regulative practices instantiated by the social state and rewrite them to support market principles—i.e. using incentives to reduce carbon dioxide voluntarily rather than regulating it directly. (p. 38)

In this formulation, the use of incentives as a tool of state regulation is identified—and indicted—as a ‘market principle’. The specific example cited is ‘using incentives to reduce carbon dioxide voluntarily rather than regulating it directly’. There are, of course, reasons to be skeptical about carbon trading proposals, and the defence of these proposals is often framed in terms of the way they simulate market principles. Nevertheless, a ‘market’ in carbon emissions is nothing at all like a capitalist market and, if implemented vigorously, could have profoundly non-capitalist effects and be every bit as effective in reducing greenhouse gases as direct regulation. A ‘market’ in emissions only exists because the state creates a threshold of emissions for calibrating which firms have emissions credits and which have deficits. If the threshold is low enough, it would generate great pressure on companies to reduce emissions. An effective carbon trading system requires just as much monitoring of industry by the state as does direct regulation, since without effective monitoring it is impossible to detect cheating. Cheating would lead to fines in both a regime of carbon trading and a regime of direct emission control. One possible advantage in a trading system is that it also creates incentives for successful traders to report cheating. A carbon trading system also has the potential advantage of making possible smoother transitions form one technology to another. All of these properties depend upon the fundamentally statist character of the market in question: it is created by the state, monitored by the state,
tightened or loosened by the state. Of course, everything rides on the question of how tough the thresholds are and how serious the monitoring is. Carbon trading could be completely bogus, with violations ignored and thresholds weak. But the same can happen with direct regulation as well. These are pragmatic issues dependent on political balances of forces. In all likelihood in the American context, because of the power of corporations, carbon trading would be organized in a way to generate weak regulation. But the indictment here should be about the weakness of the standards embodied in the proposals and the absence of adequate monitoring and enforcement of the rules of the carbon 'market', rather than the fact that the mechanism of regulation involves incentives. The use of the generic term ‘markets’ to describe the economic sphere, rather than ‘capitalism’ or ‘capitalist markets’, tends to encourage this kind of slippage.

2.3 Power

The principle way that Somers formulates power relations across these spheres is with the expression ‘balance of power’. Here are two illustrative quotes:

My central claim is that ideal-typical democratic and socially inclusive citizenship regimes rests on a delicate balance of power among state, market and citizens in civil society... Disproportionate market power disrupts this carefully constructed balance.... (p. 1)

By disrupting what would otherwise be only a dyad of state and market, civil society is thus central to the balance of power in the triadic configuration of state, civil society, and market. (p. 31)

The idea of a balance of power is reinforced with an image of civil society providing a defensive bulwark to block external threats. On the first page of the book where she states in a distilled form the central thesis, Somers writes:

Whether these conflicts result in regimes of relatively democratic socially inclusive citizenship rights or regimes of social exclusion and statelessness largely depends on the ability of civil society, the public sphere, and the social state to exert countervailing force against the corrosive effects of market-driven governance. My central claim is that ideal-typical democratic and socially inclusive citizenship regimes rests on a delicate balance of power among state, market and citizens in civil society... Disproportionate market power disrupts this carefully constructed balance. (p. 1, italics added)

And a few pages later:

[S]ocially inclusive democratic citizenship regimes... can thrive only to the extent that egalitarian and solidaristic principles, practices, and
institutions of civil society and the public commons are able to act with equal force against the exclusionary threats of market-driven politics. To accomplish this, the expansionary threats of both state and market must be impeded. (p. 8, italics added)

Now, it is perfectly sensible to see power as, in part, a question of defending particular institutions from threats. But I do not think this is the best way to understand the forms of variation in the power relations among the state, civil society and the capitalist market necessary for the full achievement of citizenship in the T. H. Marshall sense of political, economic and social citizenship. Instead of seeing the issue as how to achieve a balance of power between civil society, the capitalist market, and the state, I think the central problem is how to subordinate both state power and capitalist market power to power rooted in civil society. Full social citizenship, including the enforceable right to a decent livelihood, full inclusion in the social life of a society and meaningful political equality, requires that both the (capitalist) market and the state are subordinated to civil society, not merely that the three spheres interact with equal force.

In one or two places in the text Somers does seem to move towards this position. For example, on page 42 she writes:

In direct contrast to a market fundamentalist one, a democratic citizenship regime requires a recalibrated balance of power in which the state, market, and civil society all coexist in a pluralist universe, each able to sustain its own discursive logic. The one twist is that the discourses and practices of civil society must be a little ‘more equal’ than those of the market and the state... the citizenship ethic must have normative influence over both market contractualism and state bureaucratization and militarization.

‘A little more equal’, however, does not seem to me strong enough: a democratic citizenship regime requires, I believe, the systematic subordination of both the state and the market to civil society.

2.4 Democracy

This brings us to the problem of democracy. The contrast between a vision of a dominant civil society within the triad rather than a triad of equal balancing power is closely connected to the status of the concept of ‘democracy’ in the analysis of citizenship. Genealogies of Citizenship contains very little explicit discussion of democracy. Occasionally the word appears as an adjective—as in the expression ‘democratic citizenship regime’ in the quote just cited. And in a few places Somers refers to ‘democratic pressures’ on the state, for example:
Under pluralist socially inclusive citizenship the state has to obstruct the market’s potential for undue influence in governance and its illegitimate incursions into civil society. To do so it must exercise power as a countervailing force to the market. To make this kind of power productive, not merely coercive, it must be subject to the democratic pressures of civil society and the public sphere. Democratic pressures on the state must be guided by the ‘civil power’ of solidarity, equality, and rights. (p. 43)

In this formulation, democratic ‘pressures’ are counterposed to the ‘market’s potential for undue influence in governance’. Pressure on the state is the language usually used for the action of lobbyists and other organized ‘special interests’. The underlying assumption seems to be that the state cannot really be a democratic state in the sense of a state which is broadly controlled through democratic processes, so the most we can hope for is an external pressure on its actions. The stronger idea of democracy as rule by the people in which political power is exercised through mechanisms of popular participation and the parameters of state actions are controlled by citizens is not directly explored. Instead, throughout the book the analysis of power and institutions is framed in the language of republicanism, not the language of democracy and popular empowerment.

These are, of course, extremely difficult issues to sort out. Nevertheless, if we are really committed to the comprehensive egalitarian, inclusive ideal of citizenship defended in Genealogies of Citizenship, then I think the normative model should have at its core radical democracy. And this, I would argue, implies that both the state and the capitalist market (or the capitalist economy) must be subordinated to power rooted in civil society.

Here is how I formulate this issue in my book Envisioning Real Utopias (New York and London, Verso, 2010). I argue that three forms of power are always implicated in the organization of economic practices—that is, in the allocation of economic resources to different purposes and the control over production and distribution. I refer to these as state power, economic power and social power, but in the context of the language of Somers’ analysis they could be called state power, market power and civil power. State power is based on the control over rule-making and rule-enforcing over territory. Economic power is based on ownership of economic assets of various sorts. Social power (or civil power) is based on the capacity for collective, cooperative action. Using an agent-centred language of power, you can get people to do things by forcing them, bribing them or persuading them.

Social power is grounded in civil society. It gains coherence through the formation of associations. Among these are unions, social movements and political parties. The word we conventionally use to identify the subordination of state
power to social power (or equivalently, the subordination of the state to civil society) is ‘democracy’. Rule by the people does not mean rule by every person taken serially one by one, but rule by the collective organization of people through associations. The word which best identifies the subordination of economic power to social power is ‘socialism’. This is what it means, I would argue, to take the ’social’ in ‘socialism’ seriously. But what this really means is extending democracy to the economy. Again, this is equivalent to subordinating the economy (capitalism) to civil society. There are, needless to say, no guarantees in such a process that the actual outcome will be inclusionary and egalitarian. As is routinely pointed out, civil society has a dark side of exclusions based on all sorts of particularistic identities. Nevertheless, I would argue the optimal configuration of power in the institutional triad state, market and civil society for struggling for democratic egalitarian normative principles is one in which state power and market power are democratically subordinated through the exercise of social power.

3. A note on race and class

One of the central empirical themes of Genealogies of Citizenship concerns the impact of market fundamentalism on racial inequality in the USA. Somers’ basic thesis is that not only has market fundamentalism had the general effect of eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship, but it has had an especially destructive impact on racial inequalities, intensifying in a variety of ways the ‘afflictions of racism’. Here are some illustrative citations:

Yet since the 1970s it [market fundamentalism] has served to radically exacerbate the exclusions of race and class by first delegitimating affirmative action and then grafting the impersonal cruelties of a ‘color blind’ market onto these preexisting ‘primordially’ defined differences. (p. 5)

[W]ith the casualties of market fundamentalism increasing… civil society becomes more exclusionary on traditional ascriptive grounds. (p. 41)

[Market fundamentalization and the contractualization of citizenship] have radically worsened the conditions of African-Americans. (p. 73)

Blacks now hold less that one-tenth of the wealth of the white population and are disproportionately represented among the poor and working poor. (p. 100)

Market fundamentalism thus grafted its universalistic discourse onto the substance of a society that was still deeply segregated and rent with
historically inflicted inequalities. In effect, the discursive triumph of market fundamentalism has the effect of freezing in place the identity based inequalities and historical exclusions, and then worsening them through deepening market based inequalities. (pp. 104–105)

In reality, however, two different systems of inequalities and exclusion—one based on immutable particularistic and arbitrary race based attributes, the other based on market-driven class inequalities—have been grafted together to create a previously unmatched level of almost total exclusion from civil society, an exclusion that is much greater than the sum of its parts as it amounts to nothing less than nonrecognition. (pp. 105–106)

But market fundamentalism and the contractualization of citizenship have radically worsened and transformed the afflictions of racism. (p. 114)

I want to examine these statements carefully in terms of their specific empirical content. This may be unfair. Hyperbole is a rhetorical device in certain intellectual contexts, and it is basically unfair to judge such polemics by the same criteria one would use in a less polemical setting. This is what is sometimes called a ‘cheap shot’: taking a rhetorical flourish at face value and criticizing it for empirical inaccuracy. Nevertheless, I think there may be some value in looking at these empirical claims carefully because this could help sharpen our understanding of precisely how market fundamentalism shapes the interactions of race and class.

Figure 2  Implied trajectory of ‘afflictions of racism’ 1950–2010.
Let us begin with the last quote above: ‘But market fundamentalism and the contractualization of citizenship have radically worsened and transformed the afflictions of racism’. Taken literally, this implies a trajectory of ‘afflictions of racism’ as illustrated below (Figure 2).

The vertical scale in this diagram, obviously, has no natural metric and is meant to be some gestural idea of the cumulative intensity of the different concrete forms that ‘afflictions’ of racism might take. The point is simply to indicate the hypothesized directions of change in the historical period under study. The claim that the afflictions have dramatically worsened in the era of market fundamentalism means that somewhere around the early 1980s these afflictions began to increase. The statement does not imply that they have become as bad as they were in the era of Jim Crow, so I have drawn the rising curve lower than the curve before the 1960s.

Now, the empirical question is whether there are indicators of real-life conditions of African-Americans which support this trajectory. There is one indicator that definitely rises sharply from around 1980: incarceration rates have risen for both whites and blacks since the 1970s, but more sharply for blacks. This is largely due to the differences in arrest rates and imprisonment for drug offences, which is certainly part of the repressive face of the contractualized notion of citizenship that Somers discusses.

Most other indicators of racial inequality, however, have either indicated slight improvements in the relative position of African-Americans or no change in this period. Consider occupational distributions. In 1960 11.9% of white men were in managerial occupations compared to 1.7% of black men. By 1980, on the eve of the rise in market fundamentalism, the figure for white men had increased to 12.2% and for black men to 5.0%. That represents reduction in the disproportions from a ratio of 7:1 to a ratio of 2.4:1. Twenty years later, in 2000, the figures were 12.9% and 6.6%, or a ratio of 2.0:1. The parallel ratios for professional and technical occupations declined from 3.2:1 in 1960 to 1.9:1 in 1980 and 1.6:1 in 2000. To be sure, the sharpest declines in this indicator of ‘afflictions of racism’ occurred before 1980; nevertheless, the improvement in relative occupational prospects continued during the era of market fundamentalism. Similarly, black/white differentials in education have continued to decline, as have black/white ratios in poverty rates—from about 3.5:1 in 1979 to about 2.3:1 in 2005. Racial gaps in median income and various indicators of wealth have changed hardly at all. None of these indicators is consistent with the claim that the afflictions of racism have dramatically worsened.

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And yet, there is something obviously correct in Somers’ observation that the callous abandonment of poor African-Americans in the aftermath of Katrina signals a harsh new reality and a decline in the idea of full rights of social inclusion in the political community. I think she is probably also correct that what has changed is, in important ways, a consequence of the cultural and ideological shifts bound up with market fundamentalism. But rather than characterizing this change as an intensification of racism as such I think it is better viewed as an intensification of the interaction-effects of race and class. I have illustrated this in a very simplified—maybe even simple-minded—manner (Figure 3).

The tables in Figure 3 indicate the ‘degree of social exclusion’ for different race and class groups in the period before and during market fundamentalism. Again, the metric in parentheses is completely arbitrary. For simplicity the class categories are rich and poor, but it does not really matter for the purposes at hand how these are designated. In the left-hand table the effects of race and class are additive: each separately increases the degree of social exclusion by two points, and jointly by four points. In the right-hand table the effects are interactive: racial differences among the rich have declined, while class differences in exclusion have increased for both African-Americans and whites, but especially for African-Americans. The result is the extreme social exclusion of poor African-Americans. What has intensified, then, is not the affliction of racism per se, but the afflictions of racialized poverty.

This alternative view of the way to think about the intersection of race and class before and during the era of market fundamentalism is more in keeping with the contractualization thesis than the additive model. There is nothing inherently in the logic of market fundamentalism as such which should give any weight at all to ascriptive attributes of persons except insofar as these serve the contractual purposes of statistical discrimination—reducing transaction costs by using a group signal to provide information about a potential contract.
Given the war on drugs, the mass incarceration of blacks—especially young black men—and the economic marginalization of urban blacks, one might anticipate that statistical discrimination on racial grounds would intensify among the poor, but not among the affluent. This would underwrite an intensification of the afflictions of racism for poor blacks, but not for others, in the era of market fundamentalism.

*I have one final empirical comment, or rather empirical question, on the analysis of race and class. In her discussion of racism and the Katrina disaster, Somers acknowledges that a significant part of the observed racism in the reaction of public officials is to be explained by historical and cultural legacies:

[T]he problems that led to Katrina are deeper and of longer duration than can be explained by market fundamentalism and contractualization alone. No proposition makes sense without considering the legacy of chattel slavery, more than six decades of legal exclusion, a hypocritical New Deal that worsened the ‘old deal’ of race-based exclusion, and the stigmatizing system of welfare . . . Nonetheless . . . much of the fault lies with the noncontractual bonds of citizenship being forcefully displaced over the last four decades by the contractual conditionality of market exchange. (p. 92)

Suppose a skeptic argues that the historic legacies of racism are more than powerful enough a force to fully explain the forms of exclusion observed during the Katrina disaster. How would one provide evidence that market fundamentalism adds anything to the explanation? One strategy would be to systematically compare the Katrina disaster with an earlier catastrophe that occurred before the era of market fundamentalism and see if there were significant differences in the treatment of African-Americans. Of particular importance would be a close comparison of the treatment of poor whites and poor blacks in the earlier conditions.

Somers does refer briefly to one earlier episode (p. 66), with a reference to Ignatieff’s discussion of the performance of ‘Herbert Hoover and the Army Corps of Engineers . . . in their swift and effective response to the Mississippi Flood of 1927’. The expression ‘swift and effective response’ indicates one important contrast with the Katrina disaster: the level of competence displayed by the state efforts at relief. But what about the specific dynamics of social exclusion?

I do not know the history here, but relying on Wikipedia we get the following (text taken from Wikipedia):

In population affected, in territory flooded, in property loss and crop destruction, the flood’s figures were ‘staggering’. In one noted location, over 13,000 evacuees near Greenville, Mississippi, were gathered from area farms and evacuated to the crest of the unbroken Greenville Levee, and stranded there for days without food or clean water, while boats arrived to evacuate white women and children. The Greenville Levee was 8 feet wide and approximately 5 miles long.

Several reports on the terrible situation in the refugee camps, including one by the Colored Advisory Commission by Robert Russa Moton, were kept out of the media at the request of Herbert Hoover, with the promise of further reforms for blacks after the presidential election. When he failed to keep the promise, Moton and other influential African-Americans helped to shift the allegiance of Black Americans from the Republican party to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Democrats.

As a result of displacement lasting up to six months, tens of thousands of local African-Americans moved to the big cities of the North, particularly Chicago.

This does not sound so different from the Katrina episode nearly 80 years later. But of course, 1927 could also be described as an earlier era of market fundamentalism, so perhaps the same mechanisms were in play then as now. Alternatively, in both eras, directly because of racism, African-Americans, especially poor African-Americans, lacked the full citizenship of social inclusion.