
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mapping a Sociology of Statelessness

Nannie Sköld*

This article aims to problematize some of the common assumptions within the dominant discourse on statelessness, such as the hegemonic framework of the international state system and the conceptualization of the state as an emancipatory actor, by using sociological notions of citizenship and nationalism to provide a more nuanced framework of understanding. Through a sociological lens, citizenship is considered a concept beyond formal legal status and as one heavily intertwined with notions of nationhood, and as a concept which can be utilized as a political tool. The paper argues that it is necessary to consider a sociological understanding of statelessness alongside a legal understanding of the issue in order to be able to address the complexities of statelessness.

Keywords: Statelessness; Citizenship; Nationalism; Sociology; Tool of Oppression

1 Introduction

Although statelessness is still an emerging field of study within sociology, established fields of sociological research such as citizenship and nationalism studies offer crucial insights into the issue of statelessness. This paper will argue that in order to be able to address the issue of statelessness in its full complexity, theory and practice cannot be limited to the dominant legalistic framing of the issue but must also incorporate sociological understandings of the issue in order to be able to challenge underlying hegemonic assumptions of the international state system and of the state as an emancipatory actor on which the existence of statelessness rests. The concept of citizenship will be deconstructed and then analyzed by looking at how it relates to ideas of nationalism. In light of a more nuanced understanding of citizenship, sociological conceptualizations of statelessness will be explored in light of the hegemonic international state system. Thereafter the paper will start from the deconstructed concepts of *citizenship*, *nationalism* and *statelessness* in an attempt to challenge the notion of citizenship as a blanket solution to statelessness and ultimately to analyze citizenship as a political tool which states can use in order to oppress populations. Although a legal understanding of statelessness is essential for identifying and offering solutions to statelessness, a legal understanding alone cannot provide a complete understanding of the underlying structures and nuances inherent in the issue; an interdisciplinary understanding is required.

As the academic and practice-oriented professional field of statelessness is dominated by a legal understanding of the issue, this analysis of a sociological understanding of statelessness will first situate the sociological concepts within the main legal discourse. The dominant framework surrounding statelessness, largely determined by United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) as well as NGOs such as the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion and the European Network on Statelessness, defines statelessness in terms of its legal definition in the 1954 Convention on Statelessness as someone who is, 'not recognized as a national by any state under the operation of its law'.¹ Accordingly, the organizations' approaches to addressing statelessness are centered around advocating for states to accede to the statelessness conventions and to implement changes in their respective citizenship laws.² However, this dominant approach to statelessness has come to be criticized for having a restricted legal focus and for obscuring broader structural

* Current MSc student in Sociology: Migration and Ethnic Studies at Universiteit van Amsterdam, nannieskold@hotmail.com

¹ Art. 1 of the 1954 Convention on Stateless Persons.

² UNHCR, 'Ending Statelessness within 10 Years' (2010); Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 'The World's Stateless' (2014); Europeans Network on Statelessness, 'Still Stateless, Still Suffering: Why Europe Must Act Now to Protect Stateless Persons' (2014).

discrimination.³ Lindsey Kingston argues that, '[UNHCR's "I Belong" campaign] tends to "flatten" the problem of statelessness and posit the acquisition of legal nationality as its sole aim'.⁴ Continuing, '[s]cholarship on statelessness is complicated, in part, by a limited vocabulary that makes it difficult to adequately discuss notions of membership and status'.⁵ It is within this context that the value of a sociological understanding of statelessness, resting on concepts whose terms hold a different meaning than in legal literature, ought to be understood. Drawing on major works from within citizenship and nationalism studies, along with more recent sociological literature on statelessness that deviates from the dominant discourse on the issue, the paper seeks to address statelessness as an issue that is best understood through an interdisciplinary approach.

2 Conceptualizing Citizenship

Integral to the sociological understanding of statelessness is the distinction between citizenship and nationality—terms which, Katherine Tonkiss argues, have been conflated in legal literature on the issue.⁶ Paired with Balaton-Chrimes' suggestion that the concept of citizenship espoused in the dominant discourse around statelessness is a "thin" notion of citizenship operationalized primarily through legal citizenship,⁷ the conflation of citizenship and nationality result in both concepts being operationalized through formal legal status. By contrast, citizenship and nationality are considered to be two different (albeit deeply inter-related) fields of study within sociology—neither of which can be contained within the legal definition of citizenship. The sociologists Schinkel and van Houdt define citizenship as 'a state regulated mechanism of inclusion and exclusion' and differentiate between "formal citizenship", or formal legal status, and "moral citizenship", or a normative concept of how a "good citizen" should be.⁸ Conceptualizing citizenship slightly differently, Isin and Turner outline three fundamental axes along which citizenship can be situated: extent (who is included/excluded), content (its associated rights and responsibilities), and depth (in terms of "thinness" or "thickness").⁹ Each of these definitions open up for different interpretations of what it means to be a citizen and problematizes any clear-cut citizen/non-citizen binary. In turn, a broader understanding of citizenship allows for a more complex conceptualization of statelessness in which the issue cannot simply be reduced to the lack of formal legal status and where the issue cannot be fully addressed by acquisition of legal citizenship. This will be explored in more depth in the following sections.

The fundamental role of our underlying conceptualizations of citizenship in shaping how we understand statelessness is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the concept of *de facto* statelessness. Crucially, the very concept of *de facto* statelessness, or the idea that a person can possess citizenship that is ineffective,¹⁰ acknowledges that citizenship is a concept that is not fully encompassed by formal legal status.¹¹ The concept implies that the rights associated with citizenship are not universally applied among citizens and raises the challenge of determining when citizenship is effective and when it is not. Lindsey Kingston approaches this issue through introducing the concept of "functioning citizenship", or citizenship where there is 'an active

³ See Latif Tas, 'How International Law Impacts on Statelessness and Citizenship: the Case of Kurdish Nationalism, Conflict and Peace' (2016) 12 International Journal of Law in Context 42; Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole, 'Introduction: Providing a Framework for Understanding Statelessness' in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds) *Understanding Statelessness* (Routledge: 2017); Lindsey Kingston, 'Worthy of Rights: Statelessness as a Cause and Symptom of Marginalisation' in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds) *Understanding Statelessness* (Routledge: 2017).

⁴ Kingston (n 2) 28.

⁵ Kingston (n 2) 29. Although legal scholarship of citizenship does not focus only on citizenship acquisition as an end in itself, but also on citizenship as a 'gateway right' to accessing other rights (Matthew Gibney, 'Statelessness and the Right to Citizenship' (2009) 32 FMR 50), Kingston argues that these discussions are nonetheless framed and limited by a vocabulary that does not allow for a comprehensive engagement with underlying social structures.

⁶ Katherine Tonkiss, 'Statelessness and the Performance of Citizenship-as-Nationality' in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds) *Understanding Statelessness* (Routledge: 2017). Notably, UNHCR's *Global Action Plan to End Statelessness* (2014) uses the terms 'nationality' and 'citizenship' interchangeably.

⁷ Samantha Balaton-Chrimes, 'Statelessness, Identity Cards and Citizenship as Status in the Case of Nubians in Kenya' (2014) 18 Citizenship Studies 17.

⁸ Willem Schinkel and Friso van Houdt, 'The Double Helix of Cultural Assimilationism and Neo-Liberalism: Citizenship in Contemporary Governmentality' (2010) 61 The British Journal of Sociology 696; See also Willem Schinkel, 'The Virtualization of Citizenship' (2010) 36 Critical Sociology 265.

⁹ Engin Isin and Bryan Turner, *Handbook of Citizenship Studies* (Sage 2002).

¹⁰ Hugh Massey, 'UNHCR and de facto statelessness' (2010).

¹¹ See Gibney (n 4) 50 for further legal examples of citizenship as a concept broader than formal legal status, such as in the case of amnesty programs.

and mutually-beneficial relationship between the state and the individual'.¹² Kingston thereby builds on Marion Young's pre-existing notion of "differentiated citizenship" through which the presumed universality of citizenship is challenged and which calls for differentiated forms of citizenship, such as through group representation, to better achieve full inclusion for all citizens.¹³ Ultimately, Isin and Wood argue that citizenship should not be understood as an exclusively legal or sociological concept, but as a combination.¹⁴ Thus, the narrow legal definition of citizenship as formal legal status is not wrong *per se*, but rather deeply emblematic of the visionary societal structure ascribed to by liberal nation-states. Understanding the legal concept of citizenship is fundamental for understanding the grounds on which inclusion and exclusion is perceived to be justified. By combining this framework with sociological concepts of citizenship, where citizenship is in various ways understood as a social mechanism of inclusion and exclusion beyond formal legal status, the dominant assumptions around citizenship and statelessness can be brought to light and scrutinized.

2.1 Conceptualizing Citizenship in Light of Nationality

Although sociological literature on nationality is commonly situated within the field of nationalism studies, a comprehensive understanding of citizenship requires an interrogation of the dialectical relationship between citizenship and nationality. The concepts of "nation", "nationality" and "nationalism" have proved notoriously difficult to define but 'are among those terms used to refer not to any clearly definable set, the members of which all share some common features which nonmembers lack, but rather to a cluster of "family resemblances"'.¹⁵

In his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as 'an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' and goes on to argue that '[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'.¹⁶ Here, the term "imagined" is not to be confused with the term "invented", which bears a connotation of falsity. Rather, the idea of nationhood as "imagined" can be thought of as a way to address nationhood in a non-prescriptive manner, focusing on the nation as a lived experience. Whereas some scholars, notably Anthony Smith, argue that the origins of the nation lie in pre-existing ethnic populations, or "ethnies", contemporary literature takes a stronger modernist approach in their understanding of nations and nationalism.¹⁷ Central to the study of nations and nationalism is the interrogation of how the concepts in the nexus between ethnicity, nationalism and state relate to one another. An in-depth exploration of the origins of the nation is beyond the scope of this paper, but I argue that it is crucial to situate the concept of citizenship within an understanding of nationhood in order to be able to explore processes of inclusion and exclusion within its appropriate national and state context.

Thus, it must be recognized that nation-states' criteria for citizenship are deeply reflective of their dominant understanding of nationhood and of who is included and excluded within this idea.¹⁸ In other words, citizenship reflects the nation as it is 'imagined' by the dominant group, but might be less reflective of how the nation is 'imagined' by other groups. This is made possible partly through the rights that states possess to determine their own criteria for citizenship. In this way, citizenship can be understood as a tool to institutionalize a dominant group's idea of nationhood and national identity, which Bosniak illustrates through conceptualizing citizenship as a mask through which the dominant group's interests are operationalized and masquerade as a state's universal identity.¹⁹

To exemplify by looking at the case of Kurdistan, Eliassi writes that in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, citizenship is understood as a heavily ethno-nationalist concept, and is closely associated with being Turkish, Arab or Persian, respectively. This is clearly attested in the case of Syria, where the country's official name is the Syrian Arab Republic, and thus explicitly conflates Arab identity with Syrian citizenship.²⁰ Eliassi continues this line of reasoning when stating that the national identities of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey were all

¹² Lindsey Kingston, 'Statelessness as a Lack of Functioning Citizenship' (2014) 19 *Tilburg Law Review* 127.

¹³ Iris Marion Young, 'Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship' (1989) 99 *Ethics* 250.

¹⁴ Engin Isin and Patricia Wood, *Citizenship and Identity* (Sage 1999).

¹⁵ Craig Calhoun, 'Nationalism and Ethnicity' (1993) 19 *Annual Review of Sociology* 215.

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev edn, Verso 2006).

¹⁷ Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Blackwell 1986).

¹⁸ See Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Harvard University Press 1992), where he suggests to treat 'legal definitions of citizenship as expressions of deeply rooted cultural and political conceptions of nationhood'.

¹⁹ Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership* (Princeton University Press 2006).

²⁰ Since 2016 there have been discussions of removing the term 'Arab' from the country's name.

partly constructed through the suppression of Kurdish identity, and argues that the “cultural [o]thering” of the Kurds partly explains the process of Kurdish identity formation.²¹ Echoing this idea, Natali argues that “[e]thnicity became that basis of Kurdish identity not because it was rooted in some premodern past, but because it was the category of political identities used by central governments to determine inclusion and exclusion in the modern state system.”²² Locating Kurdish nationalism within the outlined citizenship processes of Middle Eastern states, Natali argues that ‘Kurdish communities “Kurdified” what the state elite Arabized, Turkified, and Persianized’.²³ Thus, the ethno-nationalist dimension of Kurdish conflict should not be essentialized, but is better understood as a manifestation of the lines along which exclusion has been articulated.

3 Statelessness and the International State System

Within sociological literature, and stemming from Hannah Arendt’s thoughts in *The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man*, statelessness is frequently approached through a critical analysis of the hegemonic international state system.²⁴ It is through critically engaging with this hegemonic framework that the scale of the consequences of exclusion from citizenship, and its embeddedness within exclusion from the nation, can be approached in a comprehensive manner. However, although Arendt thinks of statelessness as an iconic fallacy of the international state system, she also finds the solution to statelessness to be within this same system, through citizenship acquisition. Arendt’s ideas are explicitly challenged by Blitz, who argues that Arendt’s firm belief in state protection is an idealization,²⁵ as well as implicitly challenged by authors who advocate for statelessness to be addressed beyond the state system. Gabiam argues that the root cause of statelessness is ‘a political order built on the false assumption that the entirety of the world population can be neatly divided into sovereign nation-states consisting of citizens’ and points to the emphasis this places on the collective dimensions of statelessness.²⁶ Similarly, Eliassi explains statelessness as ‘a product of the international state system that yields sovereign states the right to include and exclude groups of people who are not viewed as “core” members of the nation’.²⁷ As liberal political thought and the foundations of international law are “sovereignty-affirming”, conceptualizing the problems of and solutions to statelessness within these frameworks consequentially means to rest firmly within the international state system. Considering the “rightlessness” associated with statelessness, Staples argues that the reliance upon the international state system undermines any promise of protection from outwith the state.²⁸

As a consequence of the international state system, nations exist that have not been recognized as sovereign states and which thereby are considered to not have legitimate claims—perhaps most notably Palestine and Kurdistan. Furthermore, indigenous groups are also expected to fall into the citizen/non-citizen binary of the state system.²⁹ It is within this context that statelessness is by some social scientists conceptualized as existing on both the level of individuals or groups lacking citizenship (‘stateless person’ or *de jure* statelessness) as well as on a level of groups whose nation is not internationally recognized as a sovereign state (‘stateless people’ or ‘social statelessness’).³⁰ In addition to the dimension of *de jure* statelessness, understood as an individual or group lacking citizenship in terms of formal legal status, this allows for statelessness to be understood as a phenomenon grounded in the idea of the existence of nations that are not recognized as sovereign through the international state system. The intention here is not to detract attention from *de jure* stateless individuals or groups, but to suggest that there is another dimension of statelessness that has been overlooked.

²¹ Barzoo Eliassi, ‘Statelessness in a World of Nation-States’ (2016) 42 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1404–5.; See also Thomas McGee, ‘The Stateless Kurds of Syria’ (2014) 19 *Tilburg Law Review* 171; Tas (n 2) 45.

²² Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State* (Syracuse University Press 2005) xxvi.

²³ Natali (n 21) 180.

²⁴ For example, see Eliassi (n 20); Bloom, Tonkiss and Cole (n 2); Tendayi Bloom, ‘Members of Colonised Groups, Statelessness and the Right to have Rights’ in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds) *Understanding Statelessness* (Routledge: 2017).

²⁵ Brad Blitz, ‘The State and the Stateless: The Legacy of Hannah Arendt Reconsidered’ in Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole (eds) *Understanding Statelessness* (Routledge: 2017).

²⁶ Nell Gabiam, ‘Citizenship and Development: Palestinians in France and the Multiple Meanings of Statelessness’ (2015) 50 *St Com Ind Dev* 486.

²⁷ Eliassi (n 20) 1403.

²⁸ Kelly Staples, *Rethorising Statelessness: A Background Theory of Membership in World Politics* (Edinburgh University Press 2012).

²⁹ See Bloom (n 23) for an in-depth analysis.

³⁰ See Gabiam (n 25); McGee (n 20); Tas (n 2). Bloom (n 23) distinguishes between ‘stateless people’ and ‘stateless peoples’.

Considering Calhoun's statement that '[t]he notion of nation is so deeply imbricated in modern politics as to be 'essentially contested' (in Gallie's phrase), because any definition will legitimate some claims and delegitimize others',³¹ the suggestion that the international state system fails to accommodate certain groups is necessarily political. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that currently it is only stateless Palestinians, excluded from UNHCR's campaigns and statistics on stateless, for whom the issue of statelessness is considered political, and their situation considered 'exceptional'. She poses that stateless persons (whether individually or collectively stateless, or both) ought to be approached as 'political subjects' rather than primarily as victims. Understood as political subjects, stateless persons would (at least theoretically) be in a position to define the terms of their inclusion and to demand individual, collective, and perhaps national, rights.³²

4 Problematizing the State as an Emancipatory Actor and Citizenship as a Blanket Solution

The notion of citizenship as a blanket solution to statelessness, as advocated within the dominant discourse on statelessness, can be challenged on several fronts through a sociologically informed understanding of citizenship and statelessness. The problematization of a "thin" notion of citizenship as limited to formal legal status and the analysis of how citizenship is deeply embedded within dominant ideas of nationhood, highlight the shortfalls of addressing statelessness solely through citizenship acquisition. Firstly, the problematization of the concept of citizenship itself illustrates that the idea of being a "full citizen" is not synonymous with acquiring a formal legal status. Secondly, analyzing how citizenship and nationhood are deeply interrelated exposes structural dimensions of exclusion that are operationalized through citizenship. And lastly, critiquing the international state system raises the question of which nations are recognized as sovereign states and thereby legitimized. Through each of these strands of thought, the notions of citizenship as a blanket solution can be challenged. A range of authors, focusing on different approaches to the issue, have challenged this idea of the state as an emancipatory actor and of citizenship as a blanket solution to statelessness.³³ This is not to say that academics and practitioners within the field of statelessness presume that citizenship acquisition solves all problems associated with statelessness, but to challenge the crux of the dominant approach to statelessness by problematizing one of its core tenets.

By complicating the notion of citizenship and broadening its definition to encompass the three dimensions of citizenship outlined by Isin and Turner—extent, content and depth—the idea of citizenship as a blanket solution to statelessness is problematized. Behind the idea of citizenship as a blanket solution to statelessness lies the assumption of universality within citizenship. The idea that citizenship acquisition 'solves' the rightlessness and exclusion associated with statelessness, as well as the inherent legal problem of existing in a condition of statelessness, is only appealing if citizenship by definition also means access to rights and inclusion. If citizenship is instead conceptualized in line with Schinkel and van Houdt's definition—as 'a state regulated mechanism of inclusion and exclusion'³⁴—inclusion cannot be understood as inherent in all citizenship, as terms such as "differentiated citizenship" suggest. This is further problematized when accounting for Kingston's idea that statelessness is both a cause and a symptom of marginalization.³⁵ The intention here is by no means to undermine the immense importance of being recognized as a legal citizen. Rather, what this paper aims to challenge is the idea that citizenship acquisition can in all cases be considered *the* solution to statelessness.

In situations of statelessness in which the stateless group does not consider the acquisition of citizenship of the state in which they are situated to be an appropriate way to address their exclusion, the idea of citizenship as a blanket solution must be questioned. For groups in this situation, which might include "stateless people" such as Palestinians and Kurds as well as indigenous peoples, the state cannot *a priori* be assumed to be an emancipatory actor that holds the key to inclusion through the granting of citizenship. This becomes strikingly apparent within the context of struggles for self-determination, such as in the case of (a few) Puerto Rican *independentistas* who voluntarily renounced their only citizenship—that of the USA—in their struggle for recognition as a sovereign state.³⁶ In cases of struggle for self-determination, the

³¹ Calhoun (n 14) 215.

³² Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'On the Threshold of Statelessness: Palestinian Narratives of Loss and Erasure' (2015) 39 *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 303, 306.

³³ See Bloom, Tonkiss and Cole (n 2); Tas (n 2); Staples (n 27); Eliassi (n 20); Gabiam (n 25); Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (n 31); Blitz (n 24); Kingston (n 2).

³⁴ Schinkel and van Houdt (n 9) 696.

³⁵ Kingston (n 2).

³⁶ Katherine Nylund, 'The Indignity of a False Citizenship.' (2014) 19 *Tilburg Law Review* 224.

crux of the problem lies with the international state system, by which the party seeking self-determination has not yet been considered legitimate. By situating the issue of statelessness within its political context, it thus becomes apparent that the inclusion sought by the stateless individuals or groups is not an inclusion that can be achieved through citizenship of the state in question.

5 Citizenship as a Political Tool

When situating statelessness within its appropriate political context, it becomes imperative to identify who the different actors are and what their intentions might be. In light of this, I argue that both statelessness and citizenship are deeply political and that both can be used as political tools and, in some cases, specifically as tools of oppression. The idea of statelessness as a form of oppression recognizes the political dimension of denial of citizenship and situates the issue of statelessness within a framework of structural violence.³⁷ Direct causes of statelessness, such as gender discriminatory citizenship laws, would in this framework be understood as manifestations of the structural violence of patriarchy.

Furthermore, a state's capacity to grant citizenship can also be understood as a political tool. The idea that a state can use the granting of citizenship as a means to achieve a particular political aim goes back to the origins of citizenship, where it has largely been associated with states' interests in mobilizing labor, drafting citizens to the army and collecting taxes.³⁸ Although these are arguably political intentions, several contemporary examples, such as the Russian state granting citizenship to subjects in Abkhazia or the Donbas region in Ukraine in attempts to undermine the sovereignty of other states, exemplify explicitly political intentions that are even more difficult to overlook.³⁹ Relating this idea to statelessness, McGee illustrates how the Syrian state used citizenship as a tool in its relationship with Syrian Kurds, and explains how Kurds were made eligible to apply for citizenship as part of a strategic government decree to dissuade Kurds from mobilizing as part of ongoing anti-government protests.⁴⁰ In this case it is important to note that individuals did benefit from acquiring Syrian citizenship. However, it is crucial to situate this within its political context in order to understand how citizenship was granted as a consequence of dominant state interests rather than from an underlying intention of ensuring that Syrian Kurds would be included within the Syrian nation-state as equals. Despite the majority of eligible Syrian Kurds applying for Syrian citizenship, most people also acknowledged the value in rejecting Syrian citizenship and echoed the idea of Syrian citizenship being insufficient in ending the injustice they have experienced (both as stateless and as a Kurdish minority).⁴¹

In an explicit example of how citizenship can be used as a political tool of oppression, Eliassi outlines how the Iraqi government has made use of the Iraqi citizenship of Kurds in the country to be able to legitimately exert political authority and violence over the community. He argues that the mass murder campaign targeting Kurds in the 1980s was commonly referred to as Saddam Hussein killing 'his own people', and suggests that it was the Kurds' Iraqi citizenship that initially denied them international protection at the time.⁴² Eliassi thereby provides a stark example of when the idea of the state as an emancipatory actor is vastly inappropriate, and where citizenship has been used by the state as a tool to legitimize oppression. The term 'tool' is used here to signify that the root cause of the exclusion is not citizenship in itself, but rather that citizenship can be used within contexts of extreme oppression as a political tool to legitimize and reinforce violence carried out by the state.

6 Conclusion

A sociologically informed approach to statelessness challenges several of the pillars of the legal understanding of this issue, and thereby provides an alternative framework for conceptualizing and addressing statelessness. The concept of citizenship—at the crux of any understanding of statelessness—is approached from the field of citizenship studies, in which it is understood as a broad idea, heavily interrelated with ideas of nationhood, which cannot be reduced to formal legal status. The sociological distinction between 'stateless person' and 'stateless people' is then considered in light of the hegemonic international

³⁷ Structural violence is here understood as violence that 'is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances', in accordance with Johan Galtung's definition in 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research' (1969) 6 *Journal of Peace Research* 171.

³⁸ John Torpey, 'Coming and Going: On State Monopolization of the Legitimate "Means of Movement"' (1998) 16 *Sociological Theory* 241.

³⁹ Blitz (n 24) 74.

⁴⁰ McGee (n 20) 178.

⁴¹ McGee (n 20) 179.

⁴² Eliassi (n 20) 1410.

state system. The alternative conceptualizations offered are then used to address the notion of citizenship as a blanket solution to statelessness. The problematization of the idea of citizenship is at the heart of complicating the idea of citizenship as a blanket solution, as it questions several of the assumptions that are inherent in a legal understanding of citizenship, such as its universality. Citizenship as a blanket solution is then addressed in the context of struggles for self-determination, in which the state cannot be conceived of as an emancipatory actor. Following this idea, the political dimension of citizenship and statelessness is addressed and the idea of both citizenship and statelessness as political tools is introduced. Using the example of Kurdistan, it is argued that citizenship can be used as a tool of oppression.

In line with Isin and Wood's suggestion that citizenship should not be understood as an exclusively legal or sociological concept, but as a combination of the two, I posit that statelessness is best approached through a joint understanding of its legal definitions and its sociological conceptualizations. The aim of this paper is by no means to downplay the importance of accessing citizenship, challenging discriminatory citizenship laws or ensuring individuals' access to justice, but to offer a nuanced framework through which dominant assumptions concerning statelessness can be reconsidered. The dominant legal understanding of statelessness offers a narrow framework of conceptualization but, whereas law is sovereignty-affirming, sociology allows for a space to question the hegemonic rules by which society is structured.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Nannie Sköld, 'Mapping a Sociology of Statelessness' (2019) 24(2) *Tilburg Law Review* pp. 217–223. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/tlr.155>

Published: 02 July 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Tilburg Law Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiqity Press.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, a stylized 'a' inside a circle.