
As its title suggests, the work of Elaine R. Thomas, Professor of Political Studies at the University of Bard, presents the very sensitive and controversial issues related to immigration, the role of Islam and politics of belonging in France. The structure of the book is composed of four parts divided into several chapters and a conclusion. Part 1 includes an introductory statement setting out the theoretical framework of the analysis. Thomas starts with situating the subject in a global context mentioning the issues related to multiculturalism and immigration policies implemented in economically advanced liberal democracies like North America, Australia and Western Europe, which specifically faced a strong influx of immigrants’ right after the Second World War (p. 3). She also analyzes the various definitions of the notions of “politics of belonging”, “nation-state” and “citizenship”. Referring to classical authors like Greenfeld, Brubaker, Nieguth, Khon, McCrone, and Kiely, she attempts to give a new impetus to these definitions. Thus, in highlighting the weaknesses of these traditional definitions, in chapter 2 Thomas introduces an alternative analytical framework, the originality of which lies in the use of the method of ordinary language (p. 21), a technique used in current analytical philosophy that implies an analysis of the discourse through a better understanding of the use of everyday’s words and expressions:

The way we discuss membership in our ordinary speech is more orderly and systematic than it might first appear. The surprisingly systematic way in which we unreflectingly classify memberships in apparent in the way we normally choose verbs to discuss voluntary terminations of membership in various groups . . . In choosing verbs that sound right when we talk about these aspects of various forms of memberships, we are already semiconsciously classifying all memberships (p. 22).

This method is innovative since this field of study usually opts for the classical ethnic and civic dichotomy. Thus Thomas proposes a typology study of ordinary language policy of the politics of belonging and identifies five expressions referring to various historic-political events which allow her to highlight five models to outline policies of belonging.

Firstly, by descent (p. 34): in that case citizenship and nationality are equated and “both appear as innate characteristics that cannot be acquired other than by birth” (p. 34). Thomas underlines that this model is not used in the European social and political organization with the exception of Germany, which strict policy on immigration and citizenship resembles to the descent model.

Secondly, by culture (p. 35): here, Thomas develops the theory which implies that “the national family is understood primarily as a vehicle for socialization, not biological transmission or inherited characteristics” (p. 36). Described as such,
this model is a good support for a better understanding of the roots and the functioning of communitarianism.

Thirdly, by belief (p. 38) which is an American philosophical theory (Huntington, Walzer, Jacobson), based on the assumption that political culture and belief in liberal democracies are the basis of citizenship and national identity. For Thomas this conception resembles to the culture model because of the sense of “identification and commitment involved” (p. 39). However, whereas in the culture model there is an element of choice, in the Belief model “citizenship is supposed to be a form of membership whose acceptance involves asserting one’s autonomy and individuality” (p. 39). Thomas rightly criticizes the advocates of this theory on the grounds that the Belief model wrongly leads to think that it is the only model that might be an alternative to “an illiberal, exclusionary or ethnicultural approach to membership in the nation” (p. 39) while this “illiberal, exclusionary or ethnicultural approach” is in fact an amalgam of the two previous models.

Fourth, by contract (p. 39), where citizenship is conceived as a contract between the citizen and the State consisting of a set of duties towards or participation in the state or community balanced by a set of rights the citizen enjoys guaranteed by the State. Thomas relies on the British liberal thinking (Weale, Marshall, Heater, and Oliver) to develop this model.

Finally, by monetized contract (p. 42), which is a theory which implies an economic participation to the national community, through taxes, employment or financial investment (p. 43).

The construction of such a typology definitely helps the reader who is not familiar with the area of study to comprehend the topic, even if sometimes, some divisions could have been avoided (like the model of the contract and the monetized contract, which—even different in some respects—are closely related and could have been merged into one category).

These models are used by Thomas as a tool to understand and to situate the question of belonging with the Harkis in France (those Algerian soldiers who fought by France’s side during the Algerian war of independence) and the issue related to their treatment and their integration within French society after Algeria’s decolonization. To do so, she establishes a distinction between the culture and beliefs model:

The Culture conception of citizenship grounds commonality in the kind of shared language, manners, customs, and habits typically associated with primary socialization. The Belief model focuses more narrowly on political culture, values, and identification (p. 47).

Hence, the case of the Harkis is an excellent example for the distinguishing of both conceptions. Indeed, Thomas stresses really well the complexity of the situation of this group, rejected both by Algeria who considers them as traitors after the war and who deny some of them the right to come back but also by the French who did not treat them as full part French citizens: