

Making the case for Global North citizenship as a form of reparations

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Abstract

The automatic bestowal of citizenship on infants of Global North states confers privileges which may be seen as the untaxed inheritance of lifelong access to valuable resources.

I contend that all refugees (broadly construed) should also be granted automatic citizenship within Global North states.

Arguments:

1. Granting refugees citizenship within Global North states may serve as a form of **distributive justice**;
2. **Moral consistency** demands that if we grant automatic citizenship to newborns we should also grant it to refugees.

I anticipate and tackle several counterarguments.

Based on: Shahvisi, A (2020) "Redistribution and moral consistency: arguments for granting automatic citizenship to refugees" *Journal of Global Ethics*.

Preliminaries

Standard definitions of refugees require evidence of persecution. I consider it no less reasonable to seek membership elsewhere in order to escape poverty or environmental harms than to escape persecution.

Therefore **refugees** are those whose **basic needs or safety are not protected in their state of origin**, whether because of persecution, poverty, climate change, natural disaster, or environmental destruction.

By **citizenship** I mean: access to public services such as healthcare, education, housing, and welfare; the right to work; the right to remain in the state without fear of being returned, and to be readmitted, should one travel abroad; the right to vote and stand for office.

Citizenship privilege

Birthright citizenship may be seen as an extreme form of **untaxed, inherited property**, like the *entail* regimes of old English common law (Shachar 2009).

Citizenship is a resource because it is the gateway to other resources. Its distribution is morally arbitrary; citizenship is a lottery (Carens, 2013).

If citizenship is a resource, then like other resources its redistribution may contribute to addressing global inequality.

Citizenship as redistribution

(i) In a geographically *general* sense:

Morally apt since Global North states are responsible for designing and maintaining the global financial institutions which protect their own wealth and interests while impoverishing the Global South.

(ii) in a geographically *specific* sense:

The majority of those seeking entry to Europe have fled Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, DRC, CAR, and Eritrea.

Consider the histories of (British) imperialism in these regions.



Automatic citizenship as morally consistent

153,462 people were granted UK citizenship in 2019.

16,952 people granted protection in the year ending June 2020
(of 32,423 applications).

640,370 live births in 2019.

Is there really an issue of **scarcity**? If so, the major challenge is from **within**, not without.

Automatic citizenship as morally consistent

Newborns should be granted automatic membership because:

- (a) they have urgent needs;
- (b) their needs can easily be met by the state they have just entered;
- (c) the state they have just entered is a morally appropriate place for their needs to be met.

Refugees should be granted automatic membership because:

- (a) they have urgent needs (**often caused by the actions of Global North states**);
- (b) their needs can easily be met by the state they have just entered (**if a state can cater for newborns, there's room for refugees**);
- (c) the state they have just entered is a morally appropriate place for their needs to be met (**especially if there is a historic link, but also because of personal ties**).

Plus: **existing** needs come before **future** needs!

Counterarguments

Objection	Response
Over-population and resource scarcity	Global North “demographic crisis”, migrants are net contributors; migration strengthens welfare budget; refugees’ needs trump UK losses.
Inheriting from ancestors’ contribution to state	Descendants of colonial and neo-colonial subjects must also inherit.
Preserving British culture;	Cultures are bricolages, anyone can adopt them, and they are not necessarily worthy of defence;

Conclusion

While automatic citizenship for newborns is morally justifiable, it is not justifiable to deny citizenship to existing seekers while holding citizenship resources in reserve for future newborns.

We should grant asylum and-or citizenship to all seekers, because:

- (a) It is a form of redistribution, and-or **reparation**;
- (b) The **same reasoning** that motivates automatic citizenship for newborns obliges the automatic citizenship of refugees.

Extending automatic citizenship to refugees may be one of the simplest and most morally fitting ways of making amends for the wrongs of colonialism and addressing the ongoing inequalities of neocolonialism.

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