

The citizenship

The history of citizenship can be traced back to ancient Greece. In a nutshell, citizenship is still attached to a legal status – usually to nationality – today and is linked to rights and duties.

But, regardless of legal status, in a wider sense, a citizen is anyone who develops a collective conscience and a way of acting collectively and who also tries to think about and to push the boundaries of democracy. The core of this concept is that, thanks to their ability to reason, the members of a society can discuss, decide and build their future together.

Since it is impossible to physically bring together all the citizens, elections are held. They are a form of citizenship that allows representatives to be elected at different levels: municipal, national or even European. But citizenship also relies on the existence of an active civil society that voices its demands, which, in many countries, has given lots of people the chance to exercise their freedom in a more direct way. Historically, it was thanks to the activity of unions, professional chambers, and to the associative movement in general, that people such as workers, women or even immigrants were able to make their voices and common concerns heard, claim equal rights, negotiate a system of social protection, be recognized as ‘real’ citizens who have the power to act, etc. for the first time.

Far from being a rigid construct, citizenship now takes on many forms, which often lie outside the concept that we were able to define previously. Going beyond the idea of the elections and campaigning for a particular political party or trade union, it is developing more and more clearly into grassroots commitment. To be a citizen and ‘to be involved in politics’ also means to care about the future of your children by being a member of a school committee; to be active in an association to help people in need; to set up a group in order to solve a common problem; to participate in a focus group; to be alert to the information disseminated by the media; to become a whistle-blower in a situation that you deem unacceptable; to make the voice of the ‘voiceless’ heard; to denounce sexual violence; to march down the street in an attempt to overthrow a corrupt regime; but also to respect the environment by recycling or reducing your energy consumption, etc.

Aside from the major discussions which can be held at the international level through forums such as the United Nations, these new ways demonstrate that citizenship also comes in the form of an array of ideas, discourses and acts which allows us to design our collective future, our new forms of solidarity, our way of shaping society together...