

Annual Spring Conference of the Section “Migration and Ethnic Minorities”
of the German Sociological Association (DGS). Cologne, May 21st- 22nd, 2026

Social Citizenship on the Move

Arenas, Actors and Practices of Social Rights within and beyond the State

Conference organizers:

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Call for Papers

Migration and mobility have long been central themes in citizenship research. People on the move are often regarded as either an asset to increasingly diverse societies (Bukow, 2014) or as challenges to state governance. In public discourse, they are often portrayed as threats to security, social cohesion, or state welfare, which legitimizes new practices of exclusion (Wemyss, Yuval-Davis, & Cassidy, 2019). Depending on the context, these dynamics involve both migrants and internally displaced people.

As a result, people on the move often experience unequal and precarious citizenship relations, involving, for example, limited access to social rights, as well as social exclusion and discrimination, both during their journeys (Worm 2020) and after (Yildiz, 2015). While states tend to fix people in place in order to govern them more effectively (Cruikshank, 1999), people on the move appropriate and create new political subjectivities, thereby challenging the existing membership order to claim social rights (Isin, 2008). These groups are thus subjected to intensified control, surveillance, and discipline, but at the same time they devise creative modes to subvert these processes. From the migrants' perspective, citizenship manifests in complex relations and engagements with, often several, states or state-like entities, for instance, but not limited to, the “state of origin” and the “state of residence.”

Following critical citizenship studies, the concept of citizenship encompasses a range of relations that extend far beyond the formal status afforded to full citizens. Citizenship regulates relations between all people under the authority of a state, be they ‘full’ citizens, denizens, migrants, refugees, or ‘non-citizens’ (Ong, 2004; Cohen, 2010), while they *do* citizenship from the margins and the state sharpens its technologies to exercise authority (Das & Poole, 2004; Malkki, 1992). Social citizenship comprises rights and entitlements, as well as practices, mediated by socio-political and institutional conditions that shape access to rights such as education, healthcare, social security, and administrative services. These rights are central to questions of identity, the emergence of a sense of belonging, and a sense of political membership.

Although *all* people are ultimately subject to the biopolitics of the state over ‘its’ citizens, the opportunities to experience and assert oneself as a free subject in the face of this control are very unevenly distributed (Agamben, 1998; Lemke, 2010; Wiertz, 2020). Against the backdrop of the ongoing wars and mass displacements, current attacks on the welfare state, and the discursive framing of migration as a problem for societies, the planned conference will focus on the future of social citizenship for people on the move.

This involves two different perspectives. While the state perspective and actions to regulate access to citizenship for different people remain an important research focus in ever-changing governance regimes, the conference also welcomes contributions exploring citizenship as a lived experience through practices and acts associated with the acquisition of rights and the development of political subjectivity. Social groups with limited legal status are in focus, including illegalized migrants, stateless persons, precarious labour migrants, and internally displaced persons. In addition to the dismantling of the welfare state, the spread of political and militarized conflicts, and restrictive migration regimes, the shifting power relations between and within the so-called Global North and South, as well as the nexus of climate change and migration, present themselves as important conditions for a discussion of social citizenship. Since citizenship is a ‘traveling’ key principle for fostering solidarity in modern societies (e.g. Harris et al., 2015), it is important to focus on spaces and encounters where exclusion and marginalization takes place as well as resistance and renegotiation of power relations, namely on the margins, at the borders, and in spaces of state-citizen encounters (Brandzel, 2022; Shachar, 2009).

We therefore expressly welcome empirical and theoretical contributions that examine how people – and the very idea of social citizenship – are “on the move,” reshaping access to and practices of social rights, as well as the sense of belonging, membership, and participation. We invite contributors to consider these developments within a broader context of economic crisis, climate change, military conflicts, and shifts in care structures. The conference seeks to bring together current empirical findings and new theoretical perspectives on the future of social citizenship. Selected papers will be considered for publication in a special issue of an international peer-reviewed journal.

Possible themes and guiding questions include:

- What are the political and public **arenas** where social citizenship is negotiated? Are there new emergent legitimacy frames for democratic access (or denial) to social citizenship?
- Who are the key **actors** in these negotiations and struggles, and how do they legitimize or delegitimize access to social rights? What views and concepts on “the migrant” (IDPs, refugees, labour migrants, irregularized migrants) contribute to the theorization of social citizenship?
- What **practices** or acts do people employ to negotiate, claim, reaffirm, exercise, or reject social citizenship and social rights, either in a mode of deliberation or one of conflictual struggle? How do states maintain, reconfigure, limit, or deny citizenship entitlements and social rights to people on the move?
- To what extent can social citizenship serve as a universal **emancipatory framework**? Are there alternative frameworks, and which contextual conditions shape the figuration of social citizenship?

The conference will take place at the Institute for Migration and Diversity (MIDI), TH Cologne. Please submit your proposal abstract (200 words) in English **by January 15, 2026**, along with the contact details of the main presenter.

Send proposals by email to the organizers:

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