Citizenship as status, habitus and acts: Language requirements and civic orientation in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
This article employs the notions of citizenship as status, habitus and acts as a framework through which to capture how sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower intersect in the context of Sweden’s current management of migration. Through an analysis of policy and media debates, the article first illustrates how citizenship as status and sovereign power in Sweden have undergone a shift from actively endorsing multilingualism and cultural dialogue to requiring migrants to demonstrate knowledge of a particular language, Swedish, and what is constructed as a singular national culture and its values. The article then homes in on a particular Arabic-language course in civic orientation for newly arrived adult migrants in a large urban area. We illustrate how disciplinary power and biopower work by socializing a group of migrants into a specific habitus of Swedish values and norms. We also unveil the acts of resistance they perform in response.

KEYWORDS
Civic orientation; governmentality; power; resistance; Sweden

Introduction

In the field of citizenship studies, Sweden has consistently been presented as a typical example of ‘multicultural pluralist citizenship’ (Koopmans and Statham 1999, 661); that is, a context in which ‘the state not only offers easy access to full social and political rights, but actually sponsors ethnic difference by recognizing immigrant groups as ‘ethnic minorities’ with their own cultural rights and privileges’ (661). Scholars have argued that, within such a multicultural haven, ‘citizenship is largely vacuous of popular sentimental registers’ and ‘does not stir up vigorous public debate and nationalist emotions’ (Jensen, Fernandez, and Brochmann 2017, 618). Such reticence regarding overt pronouncements about citizenship is attributed to the fact that in Sweden ‘nationhood is a highly sensitive concept that politicians tend to evade because it is typically associated with a repertoire of ethnic symbols and sentiments’ (Jensen, Fernandez, and Brochmann 2017, 618). This has led to the conclusion that ‘while cultivating national identity is seen as important, there is no official set of Swedish norms and values, because integration is
believed to equally rely on the majority’s ability to accept and adapt to new cultures’ (Fernandez and Jensen 2017, 3; emphasis added; see also Borevi 2012; Midtbøen 2015; Breidahl 2017 for similar discussions of Sweden’s multicultural pluralism).

The aim of this article is to challenge this rather uniform portrayal of Sweden, which has been drawn primarily on the basis of analyses of adopted policy documents at the expense of more grounded inquiry. To this end, we employ a methodologically multi-pronged approach that combines (1) an analysis of public discourses about Swedish language requirements for citizenship and their connections with discussions about the importance of knowledge of civics for newly arrived adult migrants; and (2) ethnographic insights into the educational provision of samhällsorientering, which literally means ‘societal orientation’ but can be better rendered in English as ‘civic orientation’.

More specifically, we draw upon Isin’s (2008) tripartite model of citizenship as status, habitus and acts, in order first to illustrate how over the past decades citizenship as status in Sweden has undergone a ‘discursive shift’ (Krzyzanowski 2017) in relation to language, Swedish values and norms. We then home in on an Arabic-language course in civic orientation in a large urban area in order to demonstrate how a group of adult migrants are being socialized into a specific mode of conduct framed by Swedish values and norms, and to unveil the subtle acts of defiance they perform in response.

We argue in this article that such a bi-focal lens on language and citizenship status in public debates, on the one hand, and on habitus and acts in an ongoing educational provision, on the other, offers a unique empirical vantage point from which to capture how sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower (see Foucault 1978) intersect in the context of Sweden’s current management of migration. With the help of ethnography, we also illustrate that resistance to power does not necessarily manifests itself through large-scale, strategic movements but can take more elusive and embodied forms in the everyday. Before delving into this analysis, we will first present the theoretical framework that informs it.

Citizenship as status, habitus, acts – unveiling the ‘triangle of power’

In order to account for the complex connections between discursive regimes and people’s everyday practices, political theorist Engin Isin (2008) has proposed a model of citizenship as status, habitus and acts. Citizenship constitutes a status in that it is understood as a form of membership in the (nation-)state. It is in this sense that citizenship and nationality become woven together in such a way that ‘citizenship law is synonymous with nationality law’ and ‘[the] terms citizenship and nationality are virtually interchangeable’ (Vincent 2002, 83). However, citizenship as status is not only a social contract that is enshrined in the law and concerns rights and duties between individuals and one or more states, but also involves the discourses circulating in a specific context at a given time about the kinds of rights and duties that are involved in citizenship. Such discourses are not limited to what the state and its officials say, but also include the attitudes of majorities and minorities towards citizenship requirements (see e.g. Midtbøen et al. 2020). Taken together, the law as well as public pronouncements and attitudes constitute the ‘the discursive field’ (Foucault 1972) of citizenship, a framework that shapes a variety of social institutions, including different educational provisions, such as the civic orientation for adult migrants we consider below.
Albeit useful for understanding citizenship at the ‘macro-level’ of public discourse in the realms of media and politics, a view of citizenship as status alone fails to grasp the dynamics through which individuals perceive and enact citizenship in their daily lives. As Isin points out, it is important to understand ‘how status becomes contested by investigating practices through which claims are articulated and subjectivities are formed’ (2008, 17, emphasis added). Here practices and subjectivities are particularly apt analytical concepts that resonate well with the focus of this special issue on community and the everyday. More specifically, Isin’s understanding of citizenship as a set of practices of the everyday is influenced theoretically by (1) Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions . . . which generate and organize practices and representations’ (1980, 53), and (2) Foucault’s (1991) notion of governmentality as the conduct of conduct, that is, more or less subtle mechanisms of self-management that are internalized by individuals and ultimately influence their actions without them being fully aware. As habitus, then, citizenship is not so much the sum of rights and duties, or the status a person is endowed with by the state, either by birth or through naturalization, but rather a mode of conduct that is acquired over time. Such an approach lays bare the multiple everyday discursive processes in which ‘citizenship regimes and their meanings materialise through mundane encounters, chance interactions, and routinised practices’ (Puumala and Shindo 2021).

Viewing citizenship as an acquired mode of conduct does not mean that individuals cannot ‘break with habitus’ or even act without having official ‘status’. Isin’s theorization of acts of citizenship draws attention to those performances of dissent (see also Carlson and Kanci 2017) which happen ‘when one may be led to least expect it – in the nooks and crannies of everyday life, outside of institutionalized contexts that one ordinarily associates with politics’ (Besnier 2009, 11). As Isin puts it,

> for acts of citizenship to be acts at all they must call the law into question, and, sometimes, break it. Similarly, for acts of citizenship to be acts at all they must call established forms of responsibilization into question, and, sometimes, be irresponsible (Isin 2008, 39).

Isin’s theorization thus constructs acts of citizenship as intentional and volitional. However, as some anthropologists have pointed out, intentionality, purpose and consciousness have been an ‘analytical conundrum in the study of resistance’ (Urla and Helepololei 2014, 434). Certain scholars have instead suggested that for resistance to count as such there should be ‘no demand for any particular intention or consciousness of the actor or recognition by targets of resistance’ (Baaz et al. 2017, 141). In light of this critique of intentionality, we propose that Isin’s understanding of acts of citizenship should be broadened so as to encompass small-scale embodied practices at a low level of self-awareness. These are what James Scott famously called the ‘weapons of the weak’, which ‘typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority’ (Scott 1985, xvi) but question nonetheless ‘established forms of responsibilization’ (Isin 2008, 39), such as those concerning what to eat, how to find employment and interact with the environment advocated in the context of civic orientation classes (see below).

On a theoretical level, our analysis of citizenship as status, habitus and acts also contributes to a better understanding of how Foucault’s sovereign, disciplinary and biopolitical dimensions of power interact on different levels of policy, education and everyday life for newly arrived adult migrants in Sweden. On the one hand, according to
Foucault, sovereign power is the ‘right to take life or let live’ (Foucault 1978, 143) which, in the context of migration, amounts to the right to expel or let stay. Disciplinary power, on the other hand, ‘is exercised over one or more individuals in order to provide them with particular skills and attributes, to develop their capacity for self-control . . . or mould their characters’ (Hindess 1996, 113). The prison and the classroom are prototypical settings for such shapings of conduct. Meanwhile, bio-power is a specific form of disciplinary power targeting populations, and is productive rather than repressive, ‘taking charge of life’ (Foucault 1978, 143). Bio-power is concerned with ‘the optimization of the life of a population . . . the social, cultural, environmental, economic and geographic conditions . . . the family, with housing, living and working conditions, with what we call ‘lifestyle’ . . . and the standards of living (Dean 2010, 119).

To sum up, by complementing an analysis of public debates with the ‘blood, brick, and mortar of everyday life’ (Browne and Nash 2010, 6) in a civic orientation class, we illustrate how the three sides of this ‘triangle of power’ (Dean 2010) are not fully separate, but instead intersect in the discursive field of language (Swedish and migrants’ mother tongues) and knowledge of civics in Sweden for newly arrived adult migrants.

Sovereign power and the changing discursive field of citizenship as status

If one considers the letter of the law exclusively, there is little doubt that current legislation in Sweden is exceptional in Europe for its limited, and lenient requirements for the naturalization of migrants: five years’ residence (four years for refugees) and voluntary participation in citizenship ceremonies, while no oath of allegiance to the nation is required, nor a demonstration of Swedish language proficiency or knowledge of Swedish culture and society. Moreover, ‘integration is not a condition for citizenship, but rather a voluntary process which is encouraged through rights, provisions and other forms of formal inclusion’ (Fernandez and Jensen 2017, 3). Among these are permanent residents’ voting rights in local and regional elections, and the possibility of dual citizenship.

Such an inclusive and multicultural approach to citizenship is a direct result of the three principles that have framed the discursive field of migration in Sweden since 1975: jämlikhet (‘equality’), valfrihet (‘freedom of choice’), and samverkan (‘partnership’) (Prop. 1975:26). The first principle indicated the wish to achieve equality of opportunity for immigrants and Swedes; the second highlighted the freedom of choice for immigrants to decide to what degree they wanted to preserve their cultural/linguistic traditions; and the third emphasized the importance of collaboration between immigrants and Swedes in the creation of a multicultural society. Such an embrace of multiculturalism was entextualized in two distinct but related sets of policies – language policies and citizenship policies – that are particularly relevant for the purpose of this article.

With regard to language policies, in 1977 the state endorsed immigrants’ rights to maintain and develop their home languages (hemspråk) – later re-named mother tongues (modersmål) – thus granting these languages a legitimate status in Swedish society alongside Swedish. At the same time, the state continued offering free-of-charge language courses that would give immigrants opportunities to learn Swedish. One of these is Svenska för Invandrare (SFI) ‘Swedish for Immigrants’ (see Carlson 2002), an educational provision that started in the mid-1960s and is at present a municipal
responsibility, offered to anyone who lives in Sweden and lacks basic knowledge of the Swedish language. The relationship between the official recognition of migrants’ languages and multilingualism more broadly on the one hand, and the state’s responsibility to guarantee Swedish language instruction on the other, is also at the heart of the Language Law, the aim of which is to ‘to protect the Swedish language and the linguistic diversity in Sweden as well as an individual’s access to language’ (Sfs 2009:600). Such an active endorsement of multilingualism requires a bidirectional approach according to which ‘Everyone who lives in Sweden must be given the opportunity to learn, develop and use Swedish’, at the same time as ‘Anyone who has a mother tongue other than the languages specified in the first paragraph [Swedish, the five national minorities languages and Swedish Sign Language] shall be given the opportunity to develop and use their mother tongue’ (ibid.).

As for citizenship policies, proficiency in the Swedish language is not mentioned in any of the Citizenship Acts, the government bill (Prop. 1950:217) preceding the ratification of the 1950 Citizenship Act (Sfs 1950:382) emphasized that ‘the applicant’s knowledge of the Swedish language should be given great importance in the naturalization process’ (cited in SOU 1999:34, 307). Moreover, the promulgation (kungörelse) of the 1950 Citizenship Act established that every application for naturalization should be accompanied by a certificate released by ‘a teacher, a priest or other competent person’ (cited in SOU 1999:34, 307) testifying to the applicant’s knowledge of the Swedish language. From the beginning of the 1980s immigrants applying for naturalization were no longer required to produce a certificate of proficiency in the Swedish language.

While knowledge of civics was never an official requirement for naturalization, it was nonetheless an integral part of SFI. As SFI became a purely language training programme after 2007 and the quality of civics orientation varied dramatically across municipalities, the government appointed a special investigator to develop a comprehensive proposal for how civic orientation should be organized, and which topics it should cover. In line with the principle of samverkan (‘partnership’), the Government highlighted that civic orientation should be based on ‘dialogue and respect’ (Dir. 2009:101). Informed by the same principle, the special investigator emphasized in the final report that

[c]ivic orientation must be characterized by equal treatment and respect for individual participants. […] The purpose of civic orientation is to strengthen participants’ ability to shape not only their own lives, but also participate in the shaping of Swedish society (SOU 2010, 37, 18; emphasis added)

Moreover, in line with the respect for multilingualism enshrined in the Language Law, it was suggested that civic orientation should be offered in migrants’ ‘mother tongues’. This is because ‘instruction in Swedish with the help of an interpreter would not provide the same opportunities for active participation with questions and discussion as instruction in the mother tongue’ (SOU 2010:37, 16, emphasis added).

Dialogue, respect and mother-tongue instruction were stipulated in the final policy documents governing civic orientation, as well as a minimum of 60 hours of tuition (increased to 100 hours in 2020), which can be combined with work, studies and other activities that may facilitate and speed up the ‘establishment’ of newly arrived adult migrants in the labour market (Förordning 2010, 1138). In terms of content, it was established that civic orientation
must provide a basic understanding of Swedish society and a basis for continued knowledge acquisition. The goal should be for the participants to develop knowledge about 1. human rights and fundamental democratic values; 2. the rights and obligations of the individual in general; 3. how society is organized, and 4. practical everyday life. ( Förordning 2010, 1138).

It was also stated that those who hold civic orientation classes – who are not called teachers but communicators (kommunikatörer) – should have appropriate educational experience and subject knowledge (Förordning 2010, 1138). The label ‘communicators’ is interesting in itself because it plays down the educational aspect while highlighting the dialogic property of civic orientation. However, we will illustrate below how this overt downplaying of educational mission can mask a covert pedagogical and essentially biopolitical, disciplinary activity.

While the special investigator emphasized that knowledge of civics should not be a requirement for naturalization in 2010, that year also saw a crucial ‘discursive shift’ (Krzyzanowski 2017) over citizenship as status occurred, when the far-right Sweden Democrats won representation in parliament for the first time since the party’s establishment in 1988. Soon after this success, the party’s leader Jimmie Åkesson gave an interview on the national radio programme Ekot:

The spread of Islam has been quite explosive throughout Europe, including Sweden. We have seen that this is the fastest growing minority, and it is clear that we have a problem here since there is a widespread lack of demands in Swedish society, we do not demand that those who come to our country should adapt to Swedish society. Those who come here – we are talking about hundreds of thousands of people – carry with them cultures and values that often do not belong to Swedish society; values which, if we ever had them in Sweden at all, we have got rid of. (Emphasis added)

Åkesson’s statement is built on a ‘demand rhetoric’ quite similar to that previously employed by the Liberal Party (see Milani 2008). Though we cannot lay their proposals out in detail here, the Liberal Party, which occupies a centre-right position in Swedish politics, had advocated increased (Swedish language) demands on migrants at the same time as they reiterated the principle of samverkan by emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural dialogue between Swedes and migrants. In contrast, the Sweden Democrats proposed an overtly assimilatory process through which Muslim migrants should ‘adapt’ to Swedish society by embracing certain values and norms. Such an assimilatory process is discursively legitimated via the creation of an antithesis between two ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1989): a Swedish majority, whose culture and values must be protected, and a growing Muslim migrant community, whose incompatible norms and tenets threaten the former. Such a discursive construction of antagonistic communities rests on an essentialized notion of internal homogeneity: ‘we’, Swedes, share the same democratic values and norms; conversely, ‘they’, Muslim migrants are bearers of a value system antithetical to ours. We will see however in the section below a counterpoint to such a dichotomy in the context of civic orientation.

In one of their first motions in parliament, the Sweden Democrats demanded stricter requirements for citizenship, including (1) a language test, (2) a test about Swedish history and social life, (3) compliance with the law, and (4) the signing of a declaration of oath. They also proposed increasing the residence requirement from five to ten years. This was motivated inter alia by a desire to raise the ostensibly low status of citizenship
and ‘to minimize the risk that people who come to Sweden only to enjoy social benefits, or who do not abide by the law, may be awarded Swedish citizenship’ (Motion 2010/11: Sf385).

In the following years, nearly all parties that had been sceptical of, or even opposed to Swedish language and social knowledge requirements for naturalization, made a volte-face on the issue. The most surprising change was made by the largest political party, the Social Democrats, the centre-left ruling party that had historically been critical of the introduction of language requirements for citizenship, and wary of endorsing overt expressions of Swedish nationalism (see also Oakes 2003). In 2016, Social Democratic prime minister Stefan Löfven stated: ‘It must be clear which rules apply in Sweden and which values should permeate our society’ (Aftonbladet, 15 June 2016), referring to importance of freedom, fairness and gender equality in relation to multiculturalism. Two years later, specifically addressing civic orientation for newly arrived adult migrants, the Social Democrat-led Ministry of Employment published a press release affirming the government’s belief that ‘civic orientation for newly arrived migrants should deal to a greater extent with the norms and values that underpin our society’ (Pressmeddelande 2018). What an increased focus on norms and values means is partly clarified in another section of the press release which refers to ‘equality, individual rights and duties, and a clear protection of children’s rights as well as gender equality’ (Pressmeddelande 2018). Later in 2018, the Social Democratic Party proposed the introduction of a ‘language duty’ (språkplikt) according to which ‘it will be mandatory for asylum seekers to participate in language training. In the event of absence from teaching, it should be possible to withhold an asylum seeker’s daily allowance’ (Socialdemokraterna 2018).

In light of these developments, it is quite unsurprising that the cross-bloc coalition that emerged from the January 2019 elections, bringing together parties that had been on opposing sides for decades – the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Party, the Centre Party and the Green Party – proposed increasing civic orientation to 100 hours. A parliamentary committee recently went further, proposing that knowledge of the Swedish language and Swedish society should become a requirement for naturalization as of 2025 (SOU 2021:2). It has also been suggested that similar requirements should be met by applicants for permanent residence (SOU 2020:54).

All in all, contrary to what other scholars of citizenship have argued (see e.g. Jensen, Fernandez, and Brochmann 2017), citizenship has indeed been an active topic of debate in Sweden over the past decade. Read diachronically, these debates indicate a shifting political consensus about the relationship between language requirements, socio-cultural knowledge and citizenship as status. While it is impossible to demonstrate a causal relationship between the entry of the Sweden Democrats into parliament and the broader shift of consensus, it is remarkable that the rhetoric of parties across the political spectrum on issues of language and societal knowledge has become increasingly aligned with that of the far right. A discourse that overtly invokes ‘our’ Swedish values and ‘our’ way of living as benchmarks for migrants’ integration was nearly anathema in Sweden twenty years ago; it was viewed as a manifestation of right-wing nationalism that was at odds with the principles of equality, freedom of choice and collaboration that characterized Swedish integration politics. In contrast, this is the underlying logic employed by nearly all mainstream parties across the political spectrum today in order to justify tests
on Swedish language and societal knowledge as requirements for permanent residence and/or Swedish citizenship (see also Ekström, Patrona, and Thornborrow 2020 for an investigation of the ‘normalization’ of far-right discourse in Sweden).

Crucially, such a shift in the discursive field of citizenship as status is not purely rhetorical, but has a direct effect on how sovereign power will handle migration and naturalization in Sweden in the very near future. From actively endorsing multilingualism and cultural dialogue between Swedes and migrants as the foundations of Swedish society, sovereign power, as the right to let migrants stay or expel them, has become increasingly predicated on the condition that migrants demonstrate knowledge of a particular language, Swedish, and what is constructed as a singular national culture and its values. Moreover, as we will see in the next section, Swedish social norms are already reproduced as what migrants ought to aspire to in civic orientation classes, even under the current dispensation, and in Arabic. It is to these everyday workings of governmentality that we now turn.

**Citizenship as habitus and acts: Disciplinary power meets biopolitics**

The examples we present in this section are taken from a civic orientation course which the second author of this article attended over the course of three months in a large urban municipality, with five weeks of teaching time in total. The course was taught in Arabic by eight different communicators, three women and five men of Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian origin, and all with higher education qualifications and advanced proficiency in Swedish. In what follows, we concentrate on the communicators Saeed, Tamer, Salma, Naser and Hasan. In total there were 19 participating migrants, from a number of Arab countries who had lived in Sweden for periods of time ranging from a few months to seven years. The second author attended the courses as a participant/observer, in person and online following the onset of Covid-19.

**Wholemeal bread, hydration and the socialization of healthy citizens**

In a significant example of the reproduction of cultural norms in the civic orientation courses we followed, Saeed tells participants that it is not good to consume baklava after every meal, as is done in Bilad al-Sham (the Levant) or Iraq. Instead, he informs them that it is better to eat fruit. Another communicator tells the participants that ‘Iraqi cuisine is not healthy. They drink a lot of sweet tea, eat rice with bread – carbohydrate with carbohydrate – and eat a lot of red meat. That is not healthy’. These moments highlight the operation of biopower in civic orientation. As Foucault argued, biopower is a technology of power that targets a whole population or specific groups; it is furthermore a productive force,

> steering the general behaviour, stimulating the tendencies and governing of how life is reproduced, and how productive society is. It is a power that is trying to improve the quality of life of its members, their cooperative ability as well as other qualities of the population. (Baaz et al. 2017, 53)

Such a biopolitical concern with the health and the quality of life of adult migrants takes a clear discursive shape in the communicators’ narrative when they go on to claim that a wholesome and varied diet will help the participants maintain their concentration, keep their weight under control, retain good eyesight, and have healthy skin.
Bread is central to this narrative. The communicators use a PowerPoint presentation with Swedish text, which states that participants should ‘Eat bread with every meal, preferably wholemeal bread’ (see also Karrebaek 2013 for the case of the socialization of ‘migrant children’ into eating rye bread in Denmark). The communicators add that white flour is not healthy, and should therefore be avoided:

Saeed says that this also includes bread, and that Arabic bread is not healthy, but that wholemeal bread is. The participants Israa’ and Fouad say that they eat both Arabic bread and wholemeal bread at Iftar during Ramadan. The participant Sabah tell the others that she used to eat Palestinian or Syrian bread, but that her husband had bought Swedish wholemeal bread for their house and that she liked it a lot. Saeed say that he eats a lot of wholemeal. (Fieldnotes April 2020)

What is particularly interesting in terms of citizenship habitus is that the communicator actively encourages those who ate wholemeal bread, even putting himself forward as a good example in this respect. The participants are subsequently informed about different types of grain that are high in fibre, such as rye, barley and oats. The communicator emphasizes that ‘fibre is very very very important’, deviating briefly but significantly from his Iraqi dialect to use the Standard Arabic word for ‘very’, ‘jiddan’, instead of the more everyday ‘ktiir’. Since Arabic bread does not contain as much fibre, it is presented as worse than Swedish wholemeal bread, and thus as something to be avoided. Another communicator, Tamer, who leads one of the classes on health and diet, tells the participants that ‘one should eat five times a day’, putting up his hand and signalling the number five. He points at each of his fingers, saying that the thumb is breakfast, the middle finger is lunch, and the little finger is dinner. The fingers in between are snacks or ‘mellanmål’ in Swedish [lit. ‘the meal between meals’]. The participants acknowledge that they had heard of ‘mellanmål’ before; Tamer specifies that mellanmål should consist of a fruit or vegetable snack.

While Foucault (1978) highlighted the nurturing and productive aspects of biopower, enhancing a specific population’s health and quality of life, it is often difficult to distinguish it from disciplinary power. As can be seen in the examples above, the biopolitical incitement to eat wholemeal bread and fruit goes hand in hand with more overt disciplinary admonitions against unhealthy food choices: white bread, rice and pastries. Thus, a dichotomy is created between what counts as ‘normal’ wholesome conduct, on the one hand, and deviant, harmful eating, on the other. Like other modern disciplinary systems (such as the prison) it becomes the aim of civic orientation to correct these deviant lifestyles.

Yet Foucault also reminds us that ‘where there is power there is resistance’ (1978, 95–96). While the portrayal of wholemeal bread as the healthiest choice remained unchallenged by the participants, silent embodied acts of defiance were enacted by two participants in response to the communicator’s encouragement to eat vegetables or fruit as a snack. Two women looked at each other and shook their heads, whereafter one of them stood up and left before the end of the class. Whether intentional or not, these embodied acts are similar to those ‘weapons of the poor’ that ‘require little or no coordination or planning’, making ‘use of implicit understandings’ (Scott 1985, xvi). These acts might not use overt verbal confrontation, but are nonetheless disobedient in ‘refusing to participate in self-disciplinary practices, which normalise subjects according to the norm’ (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014, 122).
Alongside food intake, the participants are also made aware that it is important to drink water all year round, preferably 2–3 litres a day, even though it is cold in Sweden during winter. On one occasion, the communicator goes around the group, asking each participant to promise that they will drink more water. Unlike the more overtly disciplinary aspects of communicators’ engagement with what migrants should eat or not, their handling of the topic of hydration does not work through repressive warnings – ‘you shan’t drink this or that’ – but manifests through incitements to drink more.

Everyone promises with the exception of a woman in her 50s, who says that she has been fine with the amount of water she has had during her life, and therefore that she does not understand why she would need to change that. On this same occasion, another participant, a man in his late 20s, turns to the researcher, asking whether he drinks water. After hearing a positive reply, the participant rolls his eyes and leaves the room. The communicator goes on to explain that it is very important to drink a lot of water when exercising. However, a participant rebuts this, saying that one does not have to drink as much water if one takes the bus instead of walking, which is met with the general laughter of the class. These examples illustrate how, on the one hand, the communicator seeks to impart a desirable mode of healthy conduct, while, on the other hand, participants subtly resist it through embodied acts of disagreement, irony and laughter (see also Scott 1985).

We certainly do not dispute the nutritional value of wholemeal bread or the importance of drinking water. Yet whether wholemeal bread and hydration really contribute to one’s wellbeing is ultimately beside the point. What is important for the purpose of this article is that civic orientation and the integration it advocates are not just about making migrants aware of different laws and regulations in Sweden, or creating a dialogue based on ‘equal treatment and respect’, through which individuals not only ‘shape their own lives but also participate in the shaping of Swedish society’ (SOU 2010), as committed to in policy documents. There is a normative element to this educational provision that clearly asserts what the correct lifestyle is.

Adult migrants are treated as children who are assumed not to know what is best for them, and therefore need to be taught. Since they are not in fact children, and their habituses have already been formed in their home countries, they are encouraged to undergo an internal overhaul, abandoning their unhealthy habituses, changing their routines, eating and drinking differently, and adopting a different lifestyle through which they can become healthy Swedish citizens (see also Eriksson 2010, 135). This practice was furthermore not specific to the classroom setting described above, but manifested itself over and over again with regard to different topics in the ethnographic field sites of our project. Importantly, however, participants across these sites are not automata who simply accept what they are taught to do. As we have already seen, they resist in more or less overt and subtle ways, and it is to more open acts of dissent that we now turn.

**Acts of citizenship: Employment, gender equality and climate change**

During a discussion of citizenship and residency permits, the communicator Salma told the participants that she had to undertake several temporary jobs and internships (‘praktik’) when she first arrived in Sweden, but she eventually managed to get full-time employment as a result of her hard work. This is an example of what critical
discourse analysts call mythopoesis, a legitimation strategy ‘conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions’ (van Leeuwen 2007, 92). In this specific case, Salma’s personal narrative is built on a neoliberal logic according to which individual labour and perseverance are the only legitimate actions leading to success. What is downplayed or even erased here are the structural constraints or barriers that impinge on migrants, irrespective of their motivation for entering the job market.

The narrative, however, did not remain unchallenged. One participant, Kawa, protested loudly and told the communicator that it is not possible to get permanent employment if one only speaks Arabic. That is what he was told by an employer. Another participant, Ibrahim, agreed with him, and a third walked out of the classroom. In response, the communicator raised her voice and objected that it is not true that one cannot get permanent employment in Sweden. Ibrahim, in turn, asked how it is possible to get internships, to which Salma responded that it can be done through the Swedish Public Employment Service. Kawa challenged the communicator once again, saying that this would not work because the partnered companies are not serious and do not want to help. The communicator countered that the Swedish Public Employment Service has a long history of helping people, but that it takes time, and that participants need to be patient. At the start of the break after this session, a very upset participant told the researcher that he still does not have permanent residency, and that after almost two years of doing internships he still does not have a permanent job.

While it is not our aim to question the communicator’s portrayal of the Swedish Public Employment Service, these interactions illustrate how, through the communicator, disciplinary power works to mould the character (Hindess 1996) of adult migrants through encouraging patience, and trust in the system. Moreover, these interactions testify to a chasm between the image of Sweden as a well-functioning system voiced by the communicator, on the one hand, and the frustrations with this very system experienced by the participants and loudly voiced in the civic orientation class, on the other.

Another disagreement between the participants and the communicator happened during a discussion about gender equality and discrimination in the participants’ home countries. One participant, Ra’ed, objected to the narrative that fewer women than men are admitted into higher education in Syria, and that there is more discrimination there. He argued that, while there may be more discrimination in rural areas, in his experience there was not much discrimination in Damascus. He went on to say that it is hard to compare all Arab countries to Sweden. In his view, there are so many countries and local contexts that it is impossible to argue that there is a monolithic ‘Arab world’ to be used as a point of comparison. According to Ra’ed, what is most salient to highlight is the huge discrepancy between rural and urban areas. Thus many, but not all, migrants need to readjust in order to integrate into Swedish society. This objection to the monolithic portrayal of Arab countries in comparison to Sweden recurred throughout the civic orientation course.

In another instance, the participant Nasim interrupted Salma, by saying that he thought that they were taking part in a course focused on Sweden, but that it was hard to believe that since the communicators kept talking about ‘our societies’. He said that the participants already knew about their homes. Salma raised her voice to explain that she was talking about ‘our communities’ here in Sweden, and not about Syria, Lebanon or
Iraq, disambiguating the Arabic word ‘mujtm’âtnâ’ which means both ‘our communities’ and ‘our societies’. She said that there are girls in Sweden who are forced into marriage, who are controlled, and who cannot choose what to wear. While the communicator is pointing to cases of gender oppression, the participants enact contestations of the very meaning of the ‘communities’ discussed during civic orientation. Thus, the participants question the official narrative presented by the communicators and position themselves as independent thinkers.

On a different occasion, Ra’ed asks whether communicators have a say in deciding what to teach. The communicator, Naser, replies that they have a standardized curriculum which specifies what information they are meant to convey. However, every communicator can present the content in their own way. Ra’ed objects that some of the topics they had talked about seemed quite superfluous. He takes particular exception to the amount of information about vitamins and nutrition. Naser insists that vitamins are very important, since many of those who come to Sweden as refugees do not know about them. Ra’ed openly disagrees, and Naser suggests that his frustration might be due to a greater difficulty of concentrating during Ramadan before Iftar (the breaking of the fast). Ra’ed retorts that he is not ‘doing Iftar’. What can be seen here is how a participant both questions the usefulness of the material taught during civic orientation and the competence of those who decide on it. What is most noteworthy in this exchange is how Ra’ed acts against the presuppositions that all Arabic-speaking participants are fasting Muslims. He resists the communicator’s explanation that he finds civic orientation less useful because he is fasting, and insists that it is because what is taught is not useful.

Another overt act of resistance against the content of civic orientation took place during a class on climate change, nature and the environment. At the end of the class, the communicator Hasan asked the participants to share their thoughts on the subject. Nasim responded that he thought that there should be more focus on, and information about, laws and other topics that might be useful for those who are new to Sweden. He asked, ‘What are the laws here?’ and added that they already knew about climate change and so on. Hasan ignored Nasim’s question and moved on to another participant, Fouad, asking him what he thought about the class. Fouad responded that he thought that it was good because ‘it is important for our health and that of our children’. He said that civic orientation should help the participants integrate by actually talking about what integration means, how to get housing, and what the laws are. Hasan then objected, stating that while it is true that civic orientation is supposed to help migrants to integrate, nature and the environment are really important topics in order to fully understand Swedish society. In order to integrate, he says, migrants need to understand the role played by nature in everyday life in Sweden.

Here it is possible to see once again a clash between, on the one hand, the official discourse of the state as ventriloquized by the communicator and, on the other hand, the acts performed by the participants who seek to go against the grain of the official narrative about what is and is not useful for migrants to know. Most importantly, while the communicators seek to impart ‘established forms of responsibilization’ (Isin
the participants call these into question, and at the same time reject the subject position of the docile and less knowledgeable migrant. In doing so, they ultimately question civic orientation itself.

**Concluding remarks**

Drawing upon Isin’s notion of citizenship as status, habitus and acts, our analysis of public discussions about language and societal knowledge requirements for naturalization, coupled with ethnographically grounded descriptions of routinized actions, norms and habits in the educational provision civic orientation for adult migrants has allowed us to offer a granular picture of everyday citizenship as a dynamic process through which individuals are ‘gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc’. (Foucault 1980, 97). This focus on status, habitus and acts has enabled us to illustrate how sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower intersect in the management of (newly arrived) adult migrants in Sweden.

At the level of policy and sovereign power, Sweden is undergoing a major shift from the official endorsement of multilingualism and multicultural dialogue to the active promotion of a monolingual and monocultural Swedish norm which migrants need to acquire in order for them to be granted the right to stay. While proof of Swedish language proficiency and knowledge of civics has not yet become compulsory for naturalization and permanent residence, they are expected to enter in force very soon.

Moreover, knowledge of ostensible ‘Swedish’ norms and values is already being imparted to migrants in the context of civic orientation programmes, where ‘mother tongues’ – Arabic in the specific case of the examples in this article – play a key role in the everyday workings of governmentality. Rather than providing ‘the best conditions for a deeper understanding’ of Swedish legislation and practical information about everyday life, as intended by civic orientation legislation, Arabic is a conduit of disciplinary and biopolitical power through which migrants are socialized into a specific habitus so they can behave in particular ways and thus become good Swedish citizens. Through advice about what to eat and drink, reminders about the importance of the environment and of gender equality, as well as encouragements to trust and be patient with the Swedish bureaucracy, adult migrants are disciplined into what counts as good versus bad conduct at the same time as they are taught to take charge of their life and optimize it, by leaving behind what are constructed as bad habits from their countries, and instead approximate Swedishness not just in the mind but also in the body.

Pivotal to this nexus of power are the communicators. We want to underscore that it is not our aim to point fingers at them, criticizing how they taught certain topics. Communicators have very little room to influence the actual content of the meetings; they follow a script that has been developed by the organizers of civic orientation at the municipal and regional level in line with broad guidelines established by policy regulations at state level described above. As such, they are ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 1980) who are themselves caught up within intersections of sovereign, disciplinary and biopolitical power.
In terms of sovereign power, civic orientation is mandatory for any adult migrant who has been granted a residence permit and is part of the Employment Service’s ‘establishment programme’. Moreover, the ‘establishment benefit’ (etableringsbidraget), which is a specific government grant to newly arrived migrants, is reduced if a migrant is absent from a civic orientation course. As a result, communicators are the ‘long hand’ of the state taking attendance and marking absences, which need to be reported back to the Employment Service. On the other hand, they ventriloquize a script that is geared to disciplining bad behaviour and simultaneously encouraging ‘new forms of reponsibilization’ (Isin 2008) through which migrants can adopt a new Swedish lifestyle. This is done by juggling between the script and their own personal experiences as migrants, at the same time as they encounter resistance from participants.

We have conceded that the dissent of participants does not fit neatly into Isin’s theorization of acts of citizenship as purposeful and volitional. We have argued that they are in fact more reminiscent of the ordinary weapons of the poor (Scott 1985), which might ‘stop well short of outright collective defiance’ (Scott 1985, xvi) but trouble nonetheless the ‘forms of responsibilization’ (Isin 2008, 39) that structure, for example, eating and drinking habits, being a fasting Muslim, or dealing with the environment.

Finally, the tensions between the participants of the civic orientation courses and their instructors, who are migrants themselves and yet introduce a ‘Swedish’ way of living to other migrants, also complicate the clear-cut dichotomy between ‘citizens/Swedes’ and ‘migrants/foreigners’ presented by the Sweden Democrats and other political parties in policy and media discourse. These frictions in civic orientation classes seem to suggest that enacting citizenship is a complex process which exceeds the ‘citizens’ versus ‘foreigners/immigrants’ opposition. The ‘community’ thus enacted, which goes beyond the citizen-foreigner dichotomy, constitutes a phenomenon that citizenship studies scholarship might explore in more detail.

Notes

1 The data upon which this article rests have been taken from (1) a corpus of media outputs and policy documents on language requirements for citizenship collected during the period 2002-2020; (2) a corpus of policy documents on the educational provision Civic Orientation for Newly Arrived Adult Migrants; (3) ethnographic fieldnotes on three civic orientation courses in Arabic and three civic orientation courses in English in three major urban municipalities. The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over February-August 2020. We followed the principles of research ethics spelled out by the Swedish National Research Foundation (Vetenskapsrådet). All participants have given their written consent to take part in the study and all the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

2 All translations from Swedish are our own. We have aimed at keeping the translations as close as possible to the original.

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