



Evolution of Citizenship and the Construction of a Welfare State—The Connotation and Practical Significance of T.H. Marshall's Citizenship Theory

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Abstract

Based on T.H. Marshall's theory of citizenship, this paper analyzes the core role of the three-stage model (civil, political, and social rights) in the welfare state, and the importance of social rights in the realization of social equality and social integration. By tracing the historical background and theoretical connotation development process of citizenship theory, it reveals its contribution to the legitimacy of the welfare state, and discusses the popularization and fairness of citizenship in combination with the current situation of China's social security system, under the background of globalization. Despite the remarkable academic and practical value of Marshall's theory, its universal assumption has limitations in developing countries with limited resources. In the reform of welfare system, China needs to combine its national conditions, promote the precise implementation of social rights, narrow the gap between urban and rural areas and regions, and explore a more adaptive and sustainable path to realize social rights under the dual background of globalization and digitalization, so as to lay a solid foundation for realizing social equity and social harmony.

Keywords

Marshall; civil rights and welfare state; social security; China's welfare system reform

1. Introduction

In the middle of the 20th century, the economic changes and social contradictions caused by the industrial revolution promoted the rise of modern social governance theory. Although the capitalist society has brought about a great improvement in productivity, the problems of class differentiation and social inequality have become more serious. With the consolidation of the nation-state, the popularization of civil rights and political rights has become an important tool for the legalization of national governance. As a theoretical attempt to deal with social inequality, T.H. Marshall put forward the three stages of citizenship theory, emphasize through the civil rights, political and social power, build a stable and inclusive social order, the popularity of social rights is not only the core characteristics of the development of modern welfare state, is also an important means of easing the contradiction of capitalism (Marshall, T. H., 1992). This theoretical framework profoundly influences the development model of subsequent welfare states and becomes an important basis for social policy research.

The deepening development of globalization has brought new challenges and changes to the social welfare system of various countries. On the one hand, globalization intensifies the economic imbalance, leading to capital concentration and marginalization; on the other hand, countries also face multiple tests of resource allocation, policy

coordination, and social equity. With China's rapid economic development, the gap between urban and rural areas and the uneven development between regions have become increasingly prominent. Although some achievements have been made in the construction of the social security system, there are still obvious deficiencies in terms of universality and balance.

This paper takes Marshall's citizenship theory to explore its core ideas and practical significance in the development of the welfare state. Especially in the context of globalization and social transformation, the problem of the popularization and fairness of social rights, and combined with the current situation of China's social security system, the enlightenment of the Marshall theory on the construction of China's welfare system is analyzed.

2. Civil rights and their interaction with the social class

In *Citizenship and Social Class*, Marshall proposed that citizenship is a social system closely related to the principle of equality, and this system gives all members of society a common right status. He defined citizenship as "a status" that includes both rights and obligations (Chen, P., 2008), and is embedded in the structure of modern society. Citizenship contains three basic elements: civil, political, and social rights. Civil rights mainly involve personal freedom, including freedom of speech, freedom of belief, personal freedom, and the right to achieve equality through the law, which depends on the legal system as a guarantee. Political power is embodied in the right to vote and the right to be called for election. By participating in the exercise of political power, citizens can influence the decision-making process of the country and society. Social rights involve a series of rights, from basic living security to the sharing of social heritage, and their realization depends on the support of the education system and social service institutions.

Marshall's theory of citizenship reveals the internal contradiction between this "equality system" and the social class, and also clarifies the influence of citizenship on the unequal system of the social class. He pointed out that the three elements of citizenship have had three important impacts on the social class in different historical periods. The first shock occurred in the 18th century, and the expansion of civil rights provided the free labor force for the capitalist market economy by deconstructing the feudal hierarchy, and promoted the development of social individualism to a certain extent. The second shock occurred in the 19th century. With the development of political power, the expansion of suffrage began to give more people the opportunity to participate in political decision-making, but the early reforms did not achieve broad social equality, especially since the working class was still excluded from (Chen, P., 2008). The third shock is reflected in the embedding process of social rights in the 20th century, which directly challenges the unequal structure of capitalism (Marshall, T. H., 1992), and further pushes the concept of equality through social security and public services. Especially under the promotion of social rights, citizenship rights have become a mechanism to redistribute social resources and wealth, and their goal is shifted from simple relief to the reconstruction of the social inequality mode.

Although the development of citizenship had an important impact on the inequality of social classes, Marshall also acknowledged that the development of the social class itself in turn promoted the expansion of citizenship. He pointed out that the development of the social class has been intertwined with the growth of citizenship many times in history. In the 18th century, the struggle of the bourgeoisie against feudal hierarchical privilege created conditions for the popularization of civil rights; in the industrial bourgeoisie in the 19th century, the demand promoted the development of limited voting rights; and the social movement of the working class in the 20th century to change the status of "commercialization" further promoted the establishment of social rights. This interaction shows that citizenship is not only the result of institutional evolution, but also the product of class struggle.

As a system of equality, citizenship tries to alleviate the inequality of capitalism, but it is inevitably restricted and promoted by the social class power. The expansion of citizenship rights cannot completely eliminate the inequality in the capitalist system, but it promotes the redistribution of social resources in a gradual way. In modern society, civil rights are not only the basis of the sharing of members of society, but also an important embodiment of the contradiction between equality and inequality within capitalism.

3. Social rights and the welfare state

3.1 The central position of social rights in the welfare state

Social right is an important component of modern social welfare thought, which reflects the country's commitment

to the basic living security of citizens. Marshall points out that the welfare state affects the relationship between the state and its citizens through its social rights. Social rights to become the core foundation of the welfare state, The development level of social rights is an important marker of distinguishing between different welfare states, Its universality and unconditional nature directly determine the type of welfare state (especially the social democratic welfare state); Citizens' welfare attitude also directly affects the formulation and implementation of government welfare policies, Then affect the social unity (Yang, K. & Yuan, Y., 2018); The welfare state is an important tool for the integration of modern societies, Through the universal satisfaction of social rights, The state can achieve social integration and legitimacy of (Esping-Andersen, 1990), The establishment of this right, Enable citizens to access basic social services such as education, medical care and housing, Ensure their basic quality of life. To sum up, social rights are one of the key factors in the formation of the modern welfare state model. Through the institutionalization of social rights, the state not only meets the basic needs of its citizens, but also strengthens the equality and solidarity among social members (Zheng, B., 2005).

3.2 The positive influence of the citizenship theory

The extension of civil rights to social rights has played a positive role in alleviating social class contradictions. Marshall (1992) stressed that the establishment of social rights has helped to reduce the social inequality caused by competition in the capitalist market. By providing universal social welfare, the state is able to balance the interests between different social classes to some extent and reduce social conflict. The expansion of social rights makes social affairs national, and the state gradually intervenes in welfare undertakings and becomes the welfare state (Zheng, B., 2005). This intervention helps to alleviate social contradictions and promote social harmony. By meeting the basic needs of citizens, the state can also gain the trust and support of citizens, thus consolidating its ruling foundation. Social rights not only balance social class relations structurally, but also shape a social value with equality and justice as the core at the ideological level. Such values can be spread and consolidated through welfare policies, thus strengthening the legitimacy and sustainability of social policies. When citizens feel the concern and security of the state for their well-being, they are more inclined to identify with the system and values of the country, thus enhancing social cohesion.

Marshall's theory of citizenship has far-reaching guiding significance for the construction and practice of the Western welfare state, and also has an important influence on the formation of social policy, the study of citizenship, and the practice of social equality and social justice. His division of citizenship is not only a theoretical construction of the concept of citizenship, but also provides a legal basis for the social legislation of Britain and even the western welfare states, especially in the generalization of social rights, the significance of its theory is particularly prominent in practice (Hu, J., 2015). The introduction of social rights achieves equality of social members by redistribution social resources and providing universal welfare, which directly establishes the legitimacy of the welfare state system. By institutionalizing social rights, the state can transcend the market logic and directly intervene and alleviate the social inequality caused by market competition.

The influence of Marshall's theory is not limited to promoting the construction practice of the welfare state and the formation of social policies, but also transcends the welfare state itself and profoundly shapes the theoretical discourse of equality and justice in modern society. As a comprehensive framework of rights, Marshall regards citizenship as a system of dynamic evolution in the social system. Under this framework, citizenship is not only a legal status, but also a dynamic collection of rights, reflecting the principles of fairness and justice in modern society. Marshall stressed that the introduction of social rights is a symbol of the development of modern society, it not only help individuals get rid of poverty and marginalization, also through the system design to ensure that all social members can participate in and share social wealth, prompting sociologists and policy researchers to review the connotation and extension of citizenship, especially in different social background of the realization of citizenship. Within the capitalist society, the market logic usually dominates the distribution of resources, and this logic inevitably leads to inequality between the social classes. Through the introduction of social rights, the welfare state to a certain extent, changed the situation, the equality and justice into the core of the capitalist system, not only in practice to alleviate social class conflict, also through welfare policy provides the concrete way of social justice, the justice reflected in the fairness of resource allocation, equality of social opportunities and the universality of basic rights and so on (Esping-Andersen, 1990), promote the theory of equality and justice discourse system.

4. The applicability and limitations of Marshall citizenship theory—in contemporary further development

Marshall's theory of citizenship has a continuous influence on the development of modern social welfare thought. In the revival in the middle and late 1980s, it was supplemented and criticized by many scholars. The social rights proposed by him are also under severe and cruel impact in the eastern and western worlds. These studies extend them from gender, race, globalization, cultural identity, and social space to enrich and complicate the connotation of citizenship.

In the mid and late 1980s, with the advancement of globalization, the crisis of the welfare state and the liberal reform, Marshall's theory ushered in a revival, and became a research hotspot in the academic circle during this period. Scholars have reinterpreted Marshall's theory from multiple perspectives. Feminist scholar Carol Petman (Carole Pateman) criticized Marshall's theory for ignoring gender, arguing that traditional concepts of citizenship exclude women and fail to fully consider women's unequal status in the public and private sphere. She noted that the "gender contract" in the social contract theory puts women in a subordinate position and affects their citizenship. This criticism also reveals the limitations of Marshall's theory. His "universal" perspective actually covers up the important structural differences in the society. In the practice of social rights, women are often regarded as "attachments", rather than equal individuals, and there is actually a kind of inequality within civil rights.

Bob Jessop (Bob Jessop) pointed out that globalization has weakened the control of countries in the economic field, leading to the gradual weakening of their economic responsibility to their citizens and the gradual marginalization of social rights. Similarly, Giddens also mentioned in the "third Road" theory that the traditional welfare state model cannot cope with the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor and social inequality brought about by globalization, and relying solely on the traditional social rights can not effectively alleviate the impact on the working class. Marshall's theory describes the development process of citizenship with a phased model, assuming that the expansion of rights is gradual and irreversible. However, the development of citizenship is not always linear forward, but accompanied by the expansion and contraction of rights. In the late 20th century, the neoliberal policy weakened the development of social rights in many countries, and the marketization of public services further eroded the basic rights of ordinary citizens. Economic crisis and social unrest often led to the regression of citizenship, and the lack of rights protection aggravated the social inequality and instability. Marshall's vision of social rights is becoming increasingly inadequate and needs to be supplemented and developed through a new theoretical framework.

At the same time, Will Kymlicka (Will Kymlicka) extended Marshall's theory of citizenship, suggesting that in a multicultural and globalized society, the connotation of citizenship should not be limited to political and social rights, but also include cultural identity and minority rights. Cultural identity and identity rights have become an important dimension of modern citizenship, and individual identity has gradually become an indispensable part of citizenship, which is not only a response to a multicultural society, but also an important way to realize social justice and citizen equality. In the post-welfare state era, the connotation of citizenship is more diverse and complex, requiring the integration of social rights, cultural identity, and identity rights to better cope with the social inequality and cultural conflicts brought about by globalization.

Henri Lefebvre The theory of social space is also very enlightening for the extended study of citizenship. In *The Production of Space*, he pointed out that space is not only a passive physical place, but also the product of social relations, containing the power structure and social practice. Although Lefebvre does not directly discuss citizenship, subsequent scholars (Don Mitchell and David Harvey) argue based on their theories that the realization of citizenship is not only a manifestation of legal identity, but also a social process, linked to a specific social space and practice. Mitchell Emphasis is placed that public space is an important place for the realization of citizenship in a democratic society, and the concept of "spatial rights" (Right to the City) proposed by Lefebvre further expands Marshall's theory of social rights, regards urban space as an important dimension of citizenship, and emphasizes that citizens can achieve equality and social justice through the participation of public space. From the perspective of the public domain, Habermas also combines citizenship with democratic theory, and proposes that the core of citizenship in modern society is the equal right of participation and the right of expression in the public domain.

Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (Partha Chatterjee) and Bhabra (Gurminder K. Bhambra) re-examined Marshall's theory of citizenship from the perspective of history and culture and pointed out that its limitations lie in the lack of attention to colonial and post-colonial countries. the proportion of social welfare expenditure to the total GDP

expenditure of developing countries in some selected countries is still small, and the level of social welfare is low. Chatterjee criticizes in *The Politics of the Governed* that Marshall's theory relies too much on the experience of the Western European welfare state and ignores the unique history and power relations in the formation of citizenship in non-Western societies. In *Rethinking Modernity*, Bhabra further points out that Marshall's concept of citizenship failed to fully consider the profound impact of colonialism on global inequality and citizenship. These criticisms reveal the lack of explanatory power around the globe of Marshall theory and call for a deeper exploration of the diverse and uneven development of citizenship.

In addition, the concept of environmental citizenship (Environmental Citizenship) proposed by Andrew Dobson (Andrew Dobson) expands the connotation of traditional citizenship and provides a new perspective for dealing with the environmental crisis in the background of globalization. Dobson believes that citizenship is not only limited to the social contract between the state and the individual, but also includes the individual's responsibilities and obligations to the environment (Dobson & Guo, 2007). Environmental citizenship emphasizes citizens' moral responsibility to the environment in their daily behavior, and responds to environmental problems by participating in collective actions, such as reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable development policy (Huan, Q., 2007). This concern on environmental issues gives a new dimension to the practice of social rights in the modern welfare state, that is, how to integrate ecological justice into the realization path of social rights. The climax of the citizenship research in the Western academic circles found the importance of the concept of citizenship far more than Marshall himself. Although the theoretical positions of different disciplines are different, they all return to Marshall's theory of citizenship to find the theoretical roots.

5. The enlightenment of Marshall's citizenship theory to the construction of the Chinese welfare system

Marshall's citizenship theory as an important theoretical foundation of the construction of the welfare state, the construction of China's welfare system also provides many significance of enlightenment, especially the concept of social rights, for the modern welfare state how to realize social fairness and justice provides the theoretical basis, the welfare system in China construction and perfect the process of important reference value, construction and perfect the Chinese social citizenship system will be a more urgent, strong and arduous practical task (Chen, P., 2008).

In the concept of civil rights, the basic social rights of citizens include education, medical care, housing, social security, and other aspects, and these rights are not only the result of market behavior, but the embodiment of national and social responsibility. Since the reform and opening up, China has gradually transformed from the traditional planned economy system to the socialist market economic system. In this process, the construction of the social security system has become an important task (Zhang, J. & Hou, W., 2025). However, in the process of market-oriented reform, due to the uneven distribution of resources and social and economic development level, Chinese society faces increasingly serious gap between urban and rural areas and regional differences, education, health care, housing become pressure on the Chinese people of the new "three mountains", the construction of the social security system should be universal social rights as the core, to reduce inequality, realize social equity, promote equal basic public services, countries in providing basic public services (Cheng, M. & Yue, J., 2025), should avoid marketization logic as much as possible, but through state intervention and financial input, to ensure that every citizen enjoys the basic social security.

In China, the traditional welfare system is mainly based on the "unit system", which meets the needs of a specific historical stage in the era of planned economy (Liu, J. & Zhou, J., 2024), but under the market economy system, its inherent "fragmentation" and unfairness are increasingly apparent. Social rights should be universal, not based on the rights of a specific occupation, region, or group. We need to establish a unified and universal social security system to break the urban-rural dual structure, east and west, and occupations and regions. For example, in the hot topic of the reform of the medical security system, we should accelerate the reform of urban-rural integration and establish a fair medical insurance system covering the whole population, rather than continuing the medical insurance system based on occupational stratification. Such reform can not only improve the fairness of the welfare system, but also reduce the social tension caused by social inequality, and provide institutional guarantees for social harmony.

In his exposition of citizenship rights, Marshall emphasized that the realization of social rights not only depends on the protection of the state, but also requires citizens to actively participate in social affairs and express their own needs through democratic politics. For China, this means that in the construction of the welfare system, the

participation of multiple subjects, including local governments, social organizations, and ordinary citizens, should be encouraged to improve the pertinence and effectiveness of welfare policies through consultation and participatory governance. In recent years, China in areas such as accurate poverty alleviation, community governance has gradually introduced the public participation in (Xu, L. & Fan, Y., 2016) mode, this approach to a certain extent response to the Marshall theory of citizenship, but still need to further expand the scope of citizen actual participation, especially in the policy formulation, implementation and supervision, to make up for the traditional top-down welfare policy "place to carry out the deviation" and "administrative efficiency".

When discussing the limitations of Marshall's citizenship theory, which is mainly based on the experience of the British welfare state, and its "social right" is based on industrialization and a mature market economy, which is different from China's current development stage. As a large developing country, China needs to give full consideration to its own economic development level and its unique social structure in its social security construction, and it cannot completely copy Marshall's theory. Marshall's social rights theory emphasizes the universality of social services, but China under the background of welfare resources limited, we must take gradual development strategy, priority to the basic needs of the most vulnerable groups, and then gradually realize the generalization of social rights, the "differences to achieve universality" path more in line with China's actual national conditions.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Focusing on the core connotation of Marshall's citizenship theory, this paper analyzes its important role in the construction of the welfare state and its enlightenment to the construction of China's social security system. From the historical background, Marshall's theory originates from the profound inequality in the capitalist society. The three-stage theory of civil rights, political rights, and social rights (Pink & Liu, 2013) not only provides a framework for the understanding of modern civil rights, but also lays the core position of social rights in the welfare state. Through the analysis, we can see that social rights, as the universal process of rights, are not only an institutionalized practice, but also an important embodiment of social fairness and justice.

As for the development path of civil rights, especially social rights in contemporary times, and the development mode in China's local environment, this paper thinks that we should pay attention to it from three aspects. First, the realization of social rights should change from "universality" to "adaptability". Although the universal welfare model in Marshall's theory is idealized, for developing countries with limited resources, the universal welfare may dilute the effectiveness of resources, thus weakening their practical support for vulnerable groups. The development of China's social security system should give more consideration to precision, and meet the needs of different regions and different groups through differentiated policies. For underdeveloped areas such as western regions and rural areas, priority can be given to concentrate resources to improve the basic medical and old-age security, while in economically developed areas, more innovative social welfare services can be promoted; second, the development of social rights is not only the "endowed" of rights, but also the "active participation" of the subject of rights need. The emphasis on state responsibility in Marshall's theory has, to some extent, ignored the role of individuals and social organizations in the practice of social rights. In China's social security reform, encouraging citizens and communities to actively participate in social security through system design is the future direction; third, globalization brings opportunities and challenges to the development of social rights in China. Against the background of enhanced capital liquidity and industrial transformation, the mobility of workers has become the focus of the implementation of social rights. This requires China to further promote the "universal" security system in the existing urban-rural dual structure, and provide more inclusive social welfare services for the floating population to solve their practical difficulties in employment, housing and children's education; in the future development of social rights, strengthen international cooperation to address the impact of global risks (aging, public health crisis, etc.) on the social security system.

However, in the process of analysis, the paper describes the current situation of the development of social rights in China, and fails to deeply analyze the practical contradictions in specific fields. The analysis of Marshall's theory focuses more on the classic framework of the welfare state and fails to update and expand its theory in accordance with the contemporary background, such as the digital economy. In future research and practice, more attention should be paid to the dynamics and innovation of the realization of citizenship. It is imperative to explore the integration of China's social security system with contemporary characteristics, emphasizing cultural adaptability in the realization of rights. We must investigate approaches to construct a social rights framework with Chinese distinctiveness, grounded in China's indigenous cultural and institutional features, while actively engaging with globalization dynamics.

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