

What is wrong with denationalization: Citizenship revocation and social equality

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Abstract

In recent years, states have expanded their formal legal powers to strip their subjects of citizenship. But should states have the power to revoke citizenship? If so, how may this power be permissibly exercised, and how ought it to be constrained? This article argues that some standard critiques of denationalization face some important limitations. These limitations stem from the fact that these critiques fail to identify the distinctiveness of citizenship as a status, and, thus, fail to identify an objection that is directly connected with citizenship loss. To supplement these critiques, I offer a framework for understanding the value of citizenship, which draws attention to the egalitarian functions of citizenship. This yields a novel interpretation and defense of the charge that denationalization is problematically inequalitarian: viz., denationalization threatens to impair the egalitarian functions of citizenship.

Keywords

Denationalization, citizenship, relational egalitarianism, citizenship revocation, social equality

Introduction

In recent years, states have expanded their legal powers to strip people of their citizenship. Denationalization raises normative questions. Should states have the power to

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revoke citizenship? If so, how may this power be permissibly exercised, and how should it be institutionally constrained?

This article contributes to the debate about these issues. Negatively, I argue that existing critiques of denationalization face significant limitations. While they identify important objections to denationalization, these objections are not necessarily linked to citizenship loss, but only to the loss of specific rights associated with citizenship. Since one can decouple these rights from citizenship, states can denationalize without triggering these objections. This lays the groundwork for my positive argument. Since the problems with existing critiques stem from their failure to account for citizenship as a specific kind of status with distinctive normative functions, my positive argument begins with a pluralist, egalitarian account of the normative functions of citizenship. In addition to protecting various rights, citizenship helps to secure status equality and provides each citizen with equal recognition. Since fulfilling these functions depends on the robustness with which one holds citizenship and denationalization powers undermine citizenship's robustness, denationalization undermines citizenship's egalitarian functions.¹

My aim is to offer an account of what is *pro tanto* wrong about denationalization. An assessment of whether denationalization is ever permissible, all things considered, would depend on a detailed consideration of defenses of denationalization. While I consider some possible defenses briefly in the article's final section, a full assessment of their merits is a task for another day.

After some background on denationalization, I introduce my functionalist methodology. I then use this method to show that standard arguments offer an incomplete picture of what is wrong with denationalization. Afterward, I sketch an account of the egalitarian functions of citizenship and demonstrate that this account provides a novel basis for critiquing denationalization. I conclude by considering defenses of denationalization.

What is denationalization?

I define denationalization as follows:

(Denationalization) The forced, nonconsensual, or otherwise nonvoluntary withdrawal of citizenship or nationality from a person by a state in which that person is a citizen (c.f. Lenard, 2016: 103; Gibney, 2017: 361).

Denationalization is something that states do to their citizens; it is distinct from citizenship renunciation, something that citizens do to transform their own legal status (although this distinction is not sharp; see Gibney, 2017). My definition covers loss of both citizenship and legal nationality, the counterpart of citizenship in international law (CETS, 1997, no. 166, art. 2A), though the two concepts are often seen as equivalent.

"Citizenship" is used in many ways (Cohen, 2009: 13–58). Here, I am concerned with citizenship as a legal status (Joppke, 2010: 28–29; Sharp, 2023: 3–5). The status "citizen" is typically understood as conferring a kind of social membership (Carens, 2013: 158–169). Citizenship confers membership in part by providing citizens with certain core legal

rights. However, citizenship is not reducible to any set of rights (Sharp, 2023: 411). Some rights, such as residency rights, are necessary for a rights-conferring status to count as citizenship. Nevertheless, having these rights does not *make* one a citizen; only the legal status of “citizenship” does (Oberman, 2017: 93). Rights normally reserved for citizens may be, and sometimes are, conferred on noncitizens. My claim is *not* that the title, “citizen,” suffices for citizenship independently of the rights it confers. Citizenship is fundamentally a rights-conferring status. Although the exact package of rights citizenship confers is variable, citizenship without rights is not citizenship at all, though this does not entail that the status is reducible to rights.

Since citizenship is a complex category, citizenship loss is a complicated phenomenon. On the one hand, it is sufficient for denationalization that one loses the legal status of “citizen.” If the state strips you of this status, you have been denationalized. On the other hand, it is not necessary that one loses any particular set of rights. Suppose a state stripped A of citizenship, but allowed A to pass into another status (for example) permanent residency, and keep most rights associated with citizenship. A would have lost her citizenship without much rights loss. If involuntary loss of citizenship status suffices for denationalization, then one may lose citizenship *without losing any rights*, though my negative arguments depend only on the weaker claim that this is true for any particular set of rights commonly associated with citizenship.²

Denationalization, in its modern form, arose alongside the transformations of citizenship around the beginning of the 20th century (Gibney, 2017). The practice reached its apogee during World War II with the mass denationalizations perpetrated by the Nazi regime (Arendt, 1951). Postwar, the use of denationalization waned, as an international regime governing statelessness emerged and states began to tolerate dual nationality (Gibney, 2017: 364–367). However, denationalization has returned. As Prener (2023: 3) notes, “22 out of 36 ‘Western countries’ had by 1 January 2016 expanded denationalization powers to include deprivation on grounds of misconduct or disloyalty ... since the advent of the September 11 attacks.” This is because denationalization facilitates acts that would otherwise be forbidden for states to do to their citizens—that is, “expulsion, deportation, or exclusion” (Gibney, 2017: 361). Hence, the Trump administration’s recent directive to “prioritize and maximally pursue denaturalization proceedings” as part of his racist mass deportation agenda (Lalljee, 2025).

Many cases of denationalization in Europe have targeted individuals who were affiliated with the Islamic State. However, a disproportionate focus on denationalization as a response to terrorism may distort our theorizing by causing us to overlook some important facts. First, denationalization powers provide state officials with considerable discretion. Accordingly, these powers are selectively deployed. Even within the class of terrorists, denationalization is almost exclusively exercised against Islamist terrorists rather than, say, white nationalist terrorists. Second, terrorism is only one reason why states strip citizenship. Voluntary foreign military service (for example) can result in loss of Austrian citizenship, even where this results in statelessness (StBg 311/1985, art. 32). Third, the law often specifies denationalization powers in a broad manner, which allows for citizenship deprivation in cases besides terrorism. U.K. law allows citizenship revocation if this is deemed to be “conducive to the public good” (British Nationality Act

1981 c. 61 (UK), s 40); these powers can be exercised even without giving the person stripped of citizenship notice, if the authorities deem notice is not “reasonably practical” to give. Finally, the practice of denationalization extends beyond the “West” and often has context-specific motivations. For example, as part of its effort to remake Indian citizenship in accord with Hindutva ideology, the Modi government has stripped millions of Indian Muslims of citizenship. This has been done via an update to the National Register of Citizens in Assam (Ministry of Home Affairs, No. 9/5/2009-CRD), a process that has resulted in “one of the world’s largest stateless populations” (Choudhury, 2022: 326). Hard cases make bad law. Thus, discussions of denationalization should start with a broader inquiry about the functions of citizenship and the normative basis of the state’s power to strip it, and only then explore how this theory bears on specific grounds for citizenship deprivation, such as terrorism (for discussions, see Joppke, 2016; Trimbach, 2018).

A functionalist approach to denationalization

How, then, should one construct a normative theory of denationalization? In this section, I suggest some guidelines that any such theory should respect and introduce my preferred methodology for theorizing denationalization.

I begin with the guidelines. A theory of denationalization should be pluralistic. Because citizenship loss is complex, denationalization may be problematic for a multiplicity of reasons, and a theory of denationalization should link different objections to citizenship loss to different aspects of citizenship, explaining which feature(s) of citizenship loss trigger the objection. Second, a theory should distinguish between generic claims to citizenship somewhere and claims to citizenship in a particular state. Denationalization is invariably the loss of a *particular* citizenship, but this only sometimes results in a lack of citizenship full stop (statelessness). Third, a theory should distinguish direct from indirect objections to denationalization. Indirect objections are objections to incidental features of denationalization, such as the lack of procedural protections, whereas direct objections are to necessary features of denationalization, such as status loss. I focus on direct objections. Finally, a theory should distinguish objections to the *power* to denationalize from objections to the *exercise* of denationalization powers.

To develop a theory of denationalization, I employ a specific methodological approach, which I call *normative functionalism*. This approach begins by identifying a sociolegal institution, citizenship, and isolating its core features. It then identifies various *normative functions* that this institution serves. By normative functions, I mean the various normatively important goals, ends, and purposes that the institution serves. An institution is justified if it fulfills important normative functions that could not be better served by some alternative institution; the normativity of the institution comes from the moral importance of the functions it serves. On this approach, the strongest justification of an institution consists in showing that, because essential features of the relevant institution are required to fulfill some important function, no alternative institution could adequately fulfill that function.³ Hence, citizenship is strongly justified if it serves important normative functions that alternative institution could not fulfill.

Normative functionalism offers a productive way to approach questions about citizenship policy. Some have argued that it is necessary to complete arguments for immigrant naturalization (Sharp, 2023). Moreover, because this approach allows one to assess how closely various functions are connected to citizenship, it can help in evaluating proposals for reforming citizenship regimes. Finally, normative functionalism naturally supports a pluralist theory of citizenship, which isolates several distinct functions citizenship serves.

This methodology also yields a distinctive approach to denationalization. In order to determine whether denationalization is problematic, we begin from the normative functions of citizenship. We then show how the power to denationalize, or its exercise, threatens to undermine citizenship's ability to fulfill those functions. If denationalization undermines important functions of citizenship without adequate justification, we have reason to reject it. In the next section, I demonstrate how this approach works.

The functions of citizenship as constraints on permissible denationalization

I turn now to some normative functions of citizenship and show how they generate constraints on denationalization. I build on and critique the work of other theorists. While the authors with whom I engage do not frame their arguments in terms of citizenship's normative functions, their arguments can be restated within this framework. Doing so allows us to identify the range of normative purposes which citizenship serves, with some of these purposes more, and others less, intimately connected to citizenship as a status. For our purposes, the key issue is whether a given function must be served by citizenship or whether it can be fulfilled by other means; when the latter is the case, we have not identified a fully direct objection to denationalization.

Responsibility allocation function

I begin with the most important function of citizenship—the base function on top of which citizenship's other functions are layered. The most basic function of citizenship is to assign responsibility for human rights protection: “citizenship is an international filing system, a mechanism for allocating persons to states” (Brubaker, 1992: 31). Citizenship maps individuals, whose basic rights require protection, to states charged with protecting them (Capisani, 2020). Denationalization severs this link and thereby undermines this *responsibility allocation function*. Specifically, denationalizing persons who lack a second citizenship renders them stateless, without a state to whom they can appeal for protection. Since statelessness is a fundamentally precarious condition, denationalization is wrong if it renders the denationalized person involuntarily stateless.

While philosophers widely agree that there is a strict prohibition on statelessness, under international law, this prohibition is not absolute.⁴ This is a moral mistake. Given the extreme harms that stateless persons face, this prohibition ought to be more stringent. Nevertheless, the argument for a stringent prohibition on statelessness raises important questions. One concerns who should count as stateless. If making people

stateless is wrong because it renders their fundamental rights insecure, our concern about statelessness should not only cover *de jure*, but also *de facto* statelessness, wherein people lack *functioning citizenship* because their state is unable or unwilling to protect their rights (Kingston, 2014). Denationalizing persons who would thereby be made *de facto* stateless is thus also impermissible.

Moreover, the relationship between citizenship and basic rights protection stated in the responsibility allocation function is complex. It is *in principle* possible that states could assign responsibility for basic rights protection through some other mechanism besides citizenship. States could assign responsibility for basic human rights protection without assigning it via citizenship. For example, states could simply protect the rights of all persons in their territory. The resulting mechanism would need to play a similar *functional role* to citizenship. But this is not a problem. A pluralist, functionalist theory will have the result that *some* of the functions of citizenship are realizable by alternative institutions. However, given the current absence of an alternative mechanism, and the intense harms stateless persons generally face, the prohibition should be absolute. This point is bolstered by the fact that there are other significant normative deficits that stateless persons face (Parekh, 2014).

However the prohibition on statelessness does not prohibit states from denationalizing persons who have a functioning second citizenship—that is, some dual citizens. Yet, such cases seem intuitively problematic. It is thus implausible that this prohibition constitutes a full normative theory of denationalization. For that, we need to consider other functions of citizenship. For the remainder of the article, I focus on cases of citizenship deprivation involving dual nationals, unless otherwise noted.

Stability function

A second function of citizenship is to protect people's residency rights. These rights protect important place-based interests (Stilz, 2019). A continuing entitlement to inhabit a particular territory serves as a precondition for secure diachronic agency. To form and pursue temporally extended projects, one needs assurance that one will have continuing access to the specific places and communities on which those projects depend. Citizenship fulfills this function by robustly protecting people's residency rights. This helps to secure the preconditions for stable diachronic agency. This is the *stability function* of citizenship. But denationalization typically strips people of residency rights. Given the importance of residency rights, we can conclude denationalization is *pro tanto* wrong when it undermines their robust protection (Lenard, 2016).

This argument extends beyond cases where denationalization is followed by expulsion. This is because *robust* protection of residency rights matters (Hosein, 2014). But robust protection may be undermined even where one is not deported. If the state can denationalize you, your residency rights are made less secure, and significant insecurity undermines diachronic agency. So, the stability function of citizenship yields a strong reason to limit the states' denationalization powers, since, in practice, citizenship protects residency rights more robustly than other statuses.

However, this argument suffers from a limitation. It is in principle possible for the state to protect robust entitlements to residency by some means besides citizenship. States

could create a kind of legal status—call it robust permanent residency—which fully immunized people against deportation. States could then permissibly strip persons with a functioning second citizenship of their citizenship. Thus, although the argument yields a significant objection to actual cases of denationalization, it does not provide a direct reason to universally prohibit denationalization in principle. States might simply “demote” their citizens in status—from citizenship to robust permanent residency—without imperiling their residency rights.

The problem is general. Citizenship confers various rights, but it is not reducible to those rights. It is thus possible to decouple from citizenship any particular set of rights that are normally linked to it and provide those rights to people independently of their citizenship status (Tanasoca, 2018). Suppose citizenship is important because it confers voting rights. Denationalization is then problematic because it disenfranchises. However, it is possible to strip a person of citizenship but allow them to keep their voting rights, just as states can disenfranchise individuals while allowing them to retain their citizenship. So, rights-based objections to denationalization cannot furnish a fully direct reason to prohibit denationalization.

Granted, some rights are more intimately connected to citizenship than others. Some rights (e.g. residency rights) are necessary for a status to count as citizenship. Moreover, in practice, states seldom allow denationalized subjects to pass into other rights-bearing statuses. They are usually stripped of all legal status. Thus, the residency rights argument is an important critique of *actual* denationalization regimes. Yet, the possibility of citizenship deprivation without residency rights loss makes it worth exploring whether there is an alternative objection to denationalization based directly on the loss of citizenship status as such. To bring this possibility into view, I first explore the claim that denationalization is problematic because it is discriminatory.

Denationalization and discrimination

A common worry about denationalization is that it is discriminatory (Gibney, 2020; Lenard, 2016; Van Waas and Jaghai, 2018). Gibney puts the worry as follows: “denationalization is invidious [discrimination], violating liberal principles of equal respect by generating a group of second-class citizens” (Gibney, 2013b: 652). This is because, in many states, “denationalization laws enable governments to strip citizenship only from naturalized citizens, and not from the native born” (Gibney, 2013b: 652). Gibney’s critique contains two distinct lines of argument, one of which I develop below. But I first consider the view that denationalization involves wrongful discrimination and show that this argument cannot support a fully general critique of denationalization.

What makes discrimination wrongful? A simple answer is that discrimination is wrongful when the state creates one group worse than another without a suitable justification (Kolodny, 2019). This simple answer is too simple, but it helps to illustrate some general problems with the discrimination worry that apply to any view of what makes discrimination wrongful.

The first problem is *justified unequal treatment*. Suppose the state has the policy, P1, that it may denationalize only *naturalized* citizens, but may not denationalize native-born

citizens. P1 is discriminatory because there is nothing sufficiently significant about how a person acquires citizenship that supports treating naturalized citizens worse than the natural born (Lovett and Sharp, 2022). So, per the simple view, it wrongfully discriminates. However, suppose, the state adopts instead policy, P2, which allows it denationalize dual citizens, disallows denationalizing those who lack a secure second citizenship. Plausible specifications of equal treatment aren't blanket prohibitions on treating people differently; they hold that differential treatment is impermissible unless there's a suitable *justifying difference*. While there is no such difference in P1, there might be in P2: denationalizing mono-nationals makes them stateless, whereas denationalizing dual citizens does not. It is thus not as harmful to denationalize dual nationals with a functioning second citizenship. This reason does not apply to all those who acquired citizenship via naturalization—some of them may, for example, have renounced their prior citizenship. So, arguably, P2 does not violate equal treatment (c.f. (Miller, 2016: 268); see Gibney (2020: 13) for a reply).

The second problem concerns *unjustified equal treatment*. Suppose that a state, Dualia, treats all citizens as denationalizable, but all citizens of Dualia have a secure and functioning second citizenship. This case is not entirely fanciful; almost all of the Vatican's citizens are dual nationals. There is no *discrimination* objection to this policy; it is a case of equal treatment. Yet, this policy seems problematic. A theory of denationalization should be able to explain this claim, but this cannot be explained by concern about discrimination.

Granted, *actual* cases of denationalization are discriminatory because they: (1) unfairly disadvantage naturalized citizens, (2) constitute indirect discrimination in virtue of the way categories like dual nationality map onto other salient social categories, or (3) are selectively used only against members of certain minority groups (e.g. Muslims) (Gibney, 2013a). Still, there is a third problem. Existing versions of the discrimination objection fail to locate the distinctive way that discriminatory denationalization is wrongful. What we are looking is not a *generic* complaint about discrimination, but a *specific* complaint about discrimination in the realm of *citizenship deprivation*. To locate such a complaint, we must consider the broader effects of the power to denationalize on persons and their social relationships.⁵

Fortunately, there is another way the discrimination objection is sometimes articulated: differential denationalization policies *devalue* some people's citizenship and this may produce hierarchies *within* citizenship. The worry is that denationalization *powers* create problematic hierarchies *among* citizens, some of whom have secure citizenship and some of whom do not. Gibney makes this claim when he suggests denationalization risks "generating a group of second-class citizens" (Gibney, 2013b: 652), but does not offer a detailed explanation of this claim nor does he consider how it might apply to cases like Dualia. Thus, while the "unequal citizenship" and "devaluing citizenship" charges are often cited, they have yet to be given a systematic philosophical defense (see Van Waas and Jaghai, 2018 for the most developed version). A defense must meet two desiderata. First, it must explain what is problematic about devaluing the citizenship of some or all citizens. Second, it must explain how denationalization policies do this.

The egalitarian functions of citizenship

To fulfill the first desideratum, we must consider other normative functions of citizenship. In this section, I argue that citizenship has distinctive egalitarian functions (for a further defense, see Sharp, 2023, 2025). In the next section, I demonstrate how denationalization impairs these functions.

Citizenship helps to realize equality among a group of people who must interact with one another on an ongoing basis. Note some features of well-functioning citizenship regimes. First, they award individuals important rights and entitlements—residency rights, voting rights, social welfare entitlements, etc. Call these *core rights*. Second, they confer upon all citizens the same bundle of core rights. Finally, all this is a matter of common knowledge: each citizen knows that they receive the same bundle of rights as every other citizen.

When citizenship does these things, it makes citizens' social equality manifest to them in an *epistemically accessible manner*. People disagree about what rights they are owed, and about which rights matter most. Yet, we have claims to equal treatment from the state and to relate as equals to our compatriots. So, we need institutions that acknowledge our equal standing and make our equal standing transparent in a way that is accessible from a wide range of normative standpoints. Thus, the state needs to send a clear message that it regards all its members as equals.

How can it do so? In part, through citizenship. Citizenship, when it works well, sends a message of public equality. This is not only because it provides people with core rights equally, but also because of *the way* citizenship confers those rights. Well-functioning citizenship regimes bundle core rights and provide the same bundle to each citizen. This is done in a distinctively clear way such that each citizen knows that all citizens have been provided the same bundle of core rights. More precisely, each person knows, or could easily come to know, whether they are a citizen and that if they are, they possess the same rights as all other citizens. By awarding rights in this way, citizenship transparently expresses that each citizen has an elevated, equal standing. It expresses elevated standing through its provision of substantive core rights, and equal standing by providing the same bundle of rights to all citizens. It does so in a public way since people are awarded these rights *because* they are citizens and this is a matter of common knowledge. Thus, citizenship makes clear that each person is equal in the eyes of a state in a matter that parties with differing normative commitments can easily grasp.

This argument draws on Christiano's (2004) conception of "public equality." Christiano argues that it is not enough that people *be* treated as equals; people must also be able to *see* that they are so treated. This does not mean that everyone in fact agrees about the quality of the treatment they receive, but only that the relevant information about how people are treated is *epistemically accessible* to them. Thus, in emphasizing that citizenship realizes public equality, I do not mean that *who* is a citizen is accessible to everyone; one cannot literally "see" citizenship. Rather, the point is that (1) each person is in a position to know whether *they* are a citizen and can be secure in their status as a citizen, and (2) that each person knows that the state provides all citizens with the same bundle of rights. When this is so, equality (at least among citizens) is publicly realized.

Realizing public equality is important for two reasons. First, it serves as a check against the social status hierarchies that commonly arise in bounded political communities. It does so by creating a form of public equal standing in which the state's subjects stand as equals to one another and to which they can appeal when their status is challenged. This serves to check hierarchies of rank and status. This is the *status equality function* of citizenship.⁶ Second, citizenship provides public assurance to each citizen of their equal status. This is the *equal recognition function* of citizenship. This assurance counteracts the psychological harms—for example, to one's sense of self-esteem and self-respect—that commonly stem from social hierarchy. This explains what is important about citizenship *as a status*, rather than as a mere set of rights, by appealing to relational egalitarian ideals concerning citizenship's role in creating and maintaining a society of equals.

Crucially, citizenship can only fulfill these egalitarian functions if citizenship regimes are *appropriately constituted*. This requires that certain “objective” conditions are met: specifically,

Secure Status Condition: The rights provided to citizens are substantial enough to convey the message that citizens are to be regarded as full members; and

Equal Rights Condition: each citizen is awarded an equivalent set of comparably valuable rights.

To fully realize equality, citizenship regimes must also meet certain “social” conditions. The state must not only promulgate a view of citizenship on which it is understood to express public equality; this message must also receive sufficient *uptake*. Citizens must hear the state's message of public equality and treat their compatriots as equals accordingly. When citizens fail to do this—when they, for example, fail to accept that their compatriots from minority racial groups are genuine citizens entitled to equality (Do and Astier, 2025), citizenship fails to fully realize its egalitarian functions.⁷ Whether citizenship fulfills its egalitarian functions is partly a matter of how citizenship is *socially understood* (c.f. Shklar, 2001). So, we arrive at the following further social condition:

Social Meaning Condition: Citizenship is socially understood as expressing public equality.

The objective and social conditions are related. A status that provides people with equal rights and secures their full membership is naturally seen as a marker of equality. So, meeting the objective conditions is necessary but not sufficient to fulfill the Social Meaning Condition.

Let me ward off some misunderstandings. First, my claim is not that these egalitarian functions of citizenship are more fundamental than the other functions of citizenship. Citizenship plays several normative roles, layered on top of one another. Protection against statelessness and protection of residency rights form the base layers, on top of which citizenship's egalitarian functions rest. What's distinctive about the egalitarian functions of citizenship is rather the intimacy with which they are connected to citizenship *as a status*. To fulfill these functions, citizenship must be linked to certain core rights awarded equally. But rights alone do not suffice; these rights need to be bestowed *via* a

status that all share and that everyone knows that they share equally. Second, not all citizenship regimes meet these conditions. Most citizenship regimes are defective. They provide too few rights to citizens or provide rights unequally. When this is the case, we have reason to reform citizenship to ensure it better serves equality. Third, my claim is not that citizenship is sufficient to realize public equality, but rather only that an appropriately constituted citizenship regime is *part* of what is *necessary* for full social equality.

This account explains what is distinctively normatively important about equal citizenship. This allows us to explain what is distinctively problematic about creating hierarchies of citizenship: doing so impairs citizenship's egalitarian functions and contributes to objectionable status hierarchies. This meets the first desideratum. Our next task is to explain how denationalization powers and their exercise may undermine citizenship's egalitarian functions.

Objections

Before doing so, I consider two objections to my view of citizenship. The first objection is that citizenship as an *elevated* equal status necessarily creates a problematic status inequality between citizens and noncitizens. If the equality of citizenship guarantees among citizens must necessarily be purchased at the price of objectionable inequality between citizens and noncitizens, this would not be a price worth paying. This worry comes in two forms.

The first concerns the relationship between citizens and noncitizens denied the option to immigrate. Given background inequalities, territorial exclusion can generate objectionable inequalities between citizens and noncitizens, based on the former's power to withhold territorially located goods from the latter which they cannot access otherwise (Sharp, 2022).⁸ Yet, who is owed entry and who is owed citizenship are distinct questions. Thus, it is consistent with my argument to endorse egalitarian arguments for open borders.⁹ Moreover, the inequality at issue in this objection is different than the inequality against which citizenship protects. Citizenship protects against *social status* hierarchies. These are constituted by prevalent inegalitarian social norms. As such, status hierarchies are typically indexed to individual societies (but see Akhtar, 2022).

A second version of the objection concerns the relationship between citizens and noncitizens who live together in the same state. Endorsement of this sort of hierarchy would be problematic because noncitizen residents are threatened by domestic status hierarchies. My view of citizenship explains what is problematic about status hierarchies generated by the denial of naturalization: locking immigrants out of citizenship confines them to a lower position in a social hierarchy. Therefore, settled immigrants should have the opportunity to naturalize (Sharp, 2023). If all persons with claims to permanent residency are offered the opportunity to naturalize, the citizen–noncitizen distinction ceases to be an ossified status distinction hierarchy and becomes an open status.

Still, this argument does not entail that all territorially present persons must be naturalized *immediately*. Citizenship is about securing equality between people who have claims to live together on an ongoing basis. But not all noncitizen territorially present persons have such claims or intend to take up residency. French tourists who lack the

intention to settle in Canada need not be offered Canadian citizenship upon arrival. For those who are only intending to reside in a state's territory temporally ("sojourners" Song, 2016), the harms of being denied citizenship are limited. The French tourist can leave Canada without incurring significant costs; they are not pervasively subject to an ongoing social hierarchy. While sojourners' core dignity interests must be protected, and this requires that the state protect them from certain status harms by providing sojourners with a high-level of rights protection, it does not necessarily require naturalization.

Indeed, offering naturalization to all sojourners immediately may be problematic. Citizenship confers important rights (e.g. voting rights, welfare entitlements) and duties. Spreading these rights too widely would undermine their distinctive functions (e.g. dilute citizens' voting power) and impose considerable costs on citizens (e.g. for the sustainability of social welfare programs); it may also foist onerous obligations (e.g. jury duty) on sojourners. So, *some* exclusion from citizenship for those who plan to stay within the state's territory only for a limited period of time is permissible, provided they are treated with dignity. Citizen, as a status that denotes full, equal membership, may thus be reserved for those who have claims to ongoing residency, given the special threat subjection to pervasive social hierarchy.

This brings me to a second objection—that this argument in the case of sojourners can be extended to dual citizens. If dual citizens have a secure status elsewhere, one might argue they do not require the special protection against hierarchy that citizenship offers. This would undercut my argument against denationalization powers, since such powers are only potentially exercisable against dual citizens due to the prohibition against statelessness.

However, my functionalist theory explains why dual citizens should be treated the same as mono-nationals. To determine whether a person is owed citizenship, we must first determine whether they have a claim to *residency*. Such claims are typically grounded in the person's agency and social interests. But people can have attachments and projects in more than one state, and these place-based interests should be respected. So, once one has ongoing contact with two societies and claims rights to reside in both of them, one is vulnerable to the threat of social hierarchy within each society. Dual citizens cannot easily avoid subjection to social inequality by emigrating, because, given that their significant attachments to both societies, the costs of emigrating are high. So, they require the special protection against social hierarchy that citizenship affords. This protection provided via the limited protections of external citizenship. Moreover, the meaning of citizenship, and thus its ability to check local status hierarchies, is indexed to one's particular society. Appealing to one's Canadian citizenship hardly suffices to make one a social equal to Americans. So, dual citizenship is required to ensure that those with claims to live in more than one state relate to members of both states as equals; to treat dual citizens differently would devalue their citizenship.

The egalitarian case against denationalization

I now turn to the second desideratum: demonstrating how denationalization policies undermine the conditions that must be met for citizenship to fulfill its egalitarian

functions. I argued above that citizenship's egalitarian functions are only fulfilled if the three conditions are met. I now show that denationalization policies can undermine each of these conditions, and so impair citizenship's egalitarian functions. This explains of denationalization powers devalue citizenship and why that is problematic.

Let me first illustrate the core idea—that citizenship policies can impair the egalitarian functions of citizenship—with regard to naturalization. Per the Social Meaning Condition, which alleges that citizenship must be socially understood as designating an equal social status. Suppose the state imposed onerous requirements for some citizens to naturalize, but extremely lax requirements for other groups. This is what India's recent Citizenship Amendment Act (Act No. 47 of 2019) does. It creates a new path to citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who came to India before 2015 (Choudhury, 2022), but does *not* create such a path for Muslims from those countries.¹⁰ This law expresses that Muslims are less eligible for citizenship than Hindus. It communicates that Muslims who *are* citizens of India are *lesser* citizens than Hindus. It thus transforms the social meaning of Indian citizenship from a civic status to an *ethnonationalist* one.

So, laws governing citizenship can shape the social meaning of citizenship to create hierarchies in citizenship that undermine its egalitarian functions. I now show that denationalization policies can also impair citizenship's egalitarian functions through two different mechanisms.

Tiered citizenship

The first mechanism is *tiered citizenship*. This mechanism functions analogously to the above case. Indeed, India has simultaneously waged a campaign of mass denationalization, targeting Muslims in Assam (Choudhury, 2022). The key thought here is that rules allowing the withdrawal of citizenship from some but not others transform the meaning of citizenship from an equal status to a tiered status by designating some as more secure, and thereby fuller, members than others.

Recall the conditions that must be met for citizenship's egalitarian functions to be fulfilled. Per the *Equal Rights Condition*, each citizen is awarded an equivalent set of comparably valuable rights. This requires not only that all citizens currently possess the same rights, but that they possess these rights equally robustly. This is because the value of a right is partly a function of the robustness with which one possesses it.¹¹ Now, suppose the state imposed a rule according to which As cannot lose citizenship, but Bs can lose citizenship at the whim of the immigration authorities. Subjecting certain social groups but not others to denationalization powers undermines the worth of the former's citizenship rights. It straightforwardly makes them less valuable by making them less secure. Citizenship can only fulfill its egalitarian functions if it provides equal rights with comparably equivalent value. So, differential denationalization undermines the egalitarian functions of citizenship.

The failure to meet the *Equal Rights Condition*, in turn, undermines the *Social Meaning Condition*. The above policy clearly expresses that As are more fully members of the political community than Bs. If a citizenship regime provides unequally robust

rights, it cannot be reasonably understood as a marker of equal status. So, differential denationalization shapes the social meaning of citizenship in ways that undermine its egalitarian functions.

Thus, differential denationalization powers transform citizenship into a stratified status. This charge has also been levied against recent changes to British citizenship law. Critics claim that the state's power to strip citizenship from some citizens creates a group of people who "can lose their British citizenship on the say-so of a minister," who possess "a second-class, disposable, contingent citizenship" (Webber, 2022). The best way to vindicate this charge is to claim that differential denationalization powers codify differential standing, which undermines the egalitarian functions of citizenship. This is what is distinctively wrong with discriminatory denationalization.

This argument offers a weighty objection to *the power* to denationalize when this power is held vis-a-vis some citizens but not others. This argument applies to all actual cases of denationalization because any set of permissible denationalization powers must respect the prohibition against statelessness and actual polities are composed of both dual and mono-nationals. The argument is strongest when differential denationalization targets social groups who have been historically marginalized, for example, Muslims in India and Britain. This compounds preexisting social inequalities. But differential denationalization powers may also generate status inequalities where none previously existed. A society that began to treat dual and mono-nationals differently would undermine the equal standing of dual citizens by codifying their inferior status.

One might object that dual citizens are comparatively more advantaged than mononationals. This is not usually so (Lovett and Sharp, 2022), but if it were, perhaps having a second-class citizenship is offset by the benefits of a second citizenship. What matters, however, is not the distribution of benefits, but one's relative standing within a society. The benefits of dual citizenship do have direct relevance to people's standing (Spiro, 2019); the fact that some has citizenship in two societies need not create an inequalitarian relationship between them and their mono-national compatriots. So, dual citizens have the right to stand as equals in both societies, and so their citizenship status shouldn't be devalued.

Insecure citizenship

I now turn to a second mechanism, *insecure citizenship*. Suppose everyone was a dual citizen, as in *Dualia*. Would there be any *egalitarian* objection to broad denationalization powers that applied to all citizens? I think so: citizenship's egalitarian functions can be undermined even if denationalization laws are applied to everyone equally. The core idea is that rules allowing for the withdrawal of citizenship can be reasonably taken to express that the social standing of those subject to those rules is only condition, and thus inadequately secure. This undercuts the value of the citizenship of those subject to these rules because citizenship's value is partly a function of the security with which one possesses it.¹²

First, general denationalization rules may undermine the *Secure Status Condition*. Per this condition, citizenship rights must be substantial enough to convey the message that

citizens are to be regarded as full members. What citizenship must express to fulfill its egalitarian functions is that each citizen has an equal and elevated standing; that they are to be valued as a full member of the political community on an ongoing basis. This requires that citizenship must be a robust standing: that is, that one's social status is sufficiently secure. Now, suppose the state is permitted it to revoke anyone's citizenship at the whim of a minister. This would make each citizen's standing less secure. They would not have a sufficiently elevated standing for them to be recognized as a full and equal member. The worry is about whether *anyone* can consider themselves a member in full standing. In a society with universal denationalization powers, everyone is skating on thin ice. No one can be assured of their full membership because everyone's membership remains essentially conditional. For citizenship to function well, it must be *sufficiently robust*.

Second, denationalization powers may impact how citizenship is socially understood. For citizenship to express its egalitarian message, it must be a secure status which guarantees robustly equal membership. But denationalization powers may alter how people view their citizenship—viz., whether they see themselves as secure and equal members—and this may impair citizenship's egalitarian functions. It is difficult to imagine citizens feeling confident in asserting their rights if their status can be easily revoked; it is difficult to feel recognized as a full and equal member if one's membership remains perpetually up for grabs. Thus, denationalization powers may undermine the egalitarian functions of citizenship.

Indeed, British law undermines citizenship's robustness in an even more extreme way. As noted above, it permits citizenship revocation without notice in certain cases. Some British citizens thus lack assurance *that they are still citizens*; they are now only *possibly* British. This would be problematic even if this law were applied equally to everyone, for it would mean no one's status is robustly secure.

One might wonder lacking robust standing is an *egalitarian* problem. Is not the issue just whether one's standing is equal? However, the status equality function and the equal recognition functions presuppose not only that we have *equal* standing—this standing could be very low, after all. It also matters that we have sufficiently *elevated* standing—full membership. A state that treated everyone's citizenship as conditional and disposable would satisfy equality, but not elevatedness. Without being recognized as having sufficiently high social status, the threat of hierarchy is not effectively countered. We need to be recognized as having a high social status that mirrors our elevated moral status. This requires the secure possession of a legal status that unconditionally confers equal core rights. Yet, this is just what the insecure citizenship generated by denationalization powers undermines.

What is wrong with denationalization?

Denationalization powers, then, wrong citizens in many ways. First, they wrong citizens by making their rights less secure or rendering them stateless. Second, they wrong those who, in the absence of robust citizenship, face a significant threat of social inferiority due to economic and social inequalities against which they now lack an important check. This

argument depends on a background vulnerability to social hierarchy being present, which equals citizenship mitigates. This threat is not equally distributed, but the threat of social hierarchy is an enduring problem against which all require some protection. Third, those who are stripped of citizenship are denied an important good that they are owed—the good of equal recognition as a member, which counters the threat posed by hierarchy to one’s self-respect.

The egalitarian critique of denationalization has several advantages over existing accounts. First, denationalization can undermine citizenship’s egalitarian functions even where it treats all citizens alike and even where this power remains largely unexercised. Second, the objection here is direct—it applies to the potential loss of citizenship status—rather than only to the loss of rights. It thus avoids the problems with other views. To be sure, cases of denationalization that lead to rights loss are clearer repudiations of a person’s equal social status, and so ground a stronger objection to denationalization. But the objection does not depend on the loss of rights; demotion from the status citizen to noncitizen would also undermine equality. Finally, denationalization’s status-impairing features do not strongly depend on it being targeted toward an already oppressed social group. Nevertheless, my view explains why it matters normatively that actual denationalization policies target already disadvantaged social groups: doing so changes citizenship’s social meaning and expresses an ethnically or racially exclusive conception of citizenship. This further undermines citizenship’s egalitarian functions, and compounds the harms faced by oppressed groups.

While this argument focuses on the power to denationalize, my view also explains the wrong involved in the exercise of this power. Denationalization gives rise to

The Denationalization Dilemma: The exercise of denationalization powers is problematic because either (1) denationalized persons are deported, which undermines Robust Residency Protection; or (2) denationalized persons remain in the state’s territory with a second-class status, which undermines Status Equality and Equal Recognition.

Begin with the first horn. I argued that residency rights are a distinctively important right of citizenship. Thus, expulsion is generally prohibited because it violates people’s entitlements to residency rights, which are unconditional. So, states may only circumvent the residency rights worry by denationalizing without deporting. This leads to the second horn. Citizenship can be understood as a constituent of one’s social status. Therefore denying immigrants citizenship after a time risks reproducing pernicious status hierarchies (Sharp, 2023). Analogously, stripping citizenship denies people the status of citizen and so confines them to a second-class status. Denationalized subjects must live in the state that denationalized them as social inferiors, for they are denied the equal public recognition that citizenship provides. This parallels the wrongs involved in the denial of naturalization to immigrants. Denial of naturalization places people in a lower status category within a hierarchy of recognition. Not only are denationalized subjects denied this good; their equal status is *actively repudiated*. This argument highlights the explanatory power of my account of the normative functions of citizenship and shows how different functions work in concert to yield a fuller picture of what is problematic about denationalization.

Defenses of denationalization

I have articulated several constraints on the power to denationalize and its permissible exercise by drawing on a broader account of the normative functions of citizenship. However, I have offered only a *pro tanto* critique. To determine whether denationalization is ever permissible, all things considered, we must also consider possible defenses of denationalization.

We can distinguish between *discretionary denationalization*, the idea that the state has broad prerogatives to denationalize citizens for any reason, from *punitive denationalization*, the idea that states may denationalize as punishment for serious wrongdoing. My argument provides decisive reasons to reject all discretionary denationalization. The strongest argument in favor of discretionary denationalization appeals to collective self-determination (for critiques, see Akhtar, 2017; Hidalgo, 2014). Yet, many defenders of self-determination admit that considerations of domestic relational equality trump collective self-determination (Wellman, 2008). My argument is based on such considerations. This explains why self-determination cannot justify denationalization.

Matters are different with punitive denationalization. Just as a full assessment of the permissibility of criminal punishment requires an assessment of the grounds for and justification of penal sanctions, a full assessment of the permissibility of denationalization requires an assessment of the putative justifications for stripping citizenship. We must also take seriously the severity of the conduct for which denationalization is often reserved (e.g. terrorism) and consider whether denationalization may ever be permissible in light of such conduct. While I leave a full treatment of this issue for another paper, I explain below my grounds for skepticism about defenses of denationalization by considering the three strongest defenses of denationalization.

De facto renunciation

According to one argument, denaturalization is justified when the person being denationalized has *de facto* renounced their citizenship rights by engaging in certain acts, such as terrorism (Barry and Ferracioli, 2016). When *de facto* renunciation occurs, citizenship loss is the result of a voluntary decision made by the citizen herself. So, stripping citizenship from *de facto* renouncers does not wrong anyone or impair anyone's status.

It is possible to renounce one's membership by engaging in certain conduct. But which acts count as *de facto* renunciation? We should be conventionalists about this. No acts "intrinsically" constitute renunciation of citizenship. Rather, an act to count as *de facto* renunciation when certain shared expectations are in place: Specifically, when (1) some specific act type, Φ is taken by the state to constitute a repudiation of citizenship and (2) this fact is readily knowable by the agent (c.f. Lovett and Sharp, 2022: 338–339).

These conditions are only met when the state creates a law that makes explicit that it understands the performance of certain acts to constitute a renunciation. This sometimes occurs. The 2015 Australian Citizenship Amendment Act "recognises that Australian citizenship is a common bond, involving reciprocal rights and obligations, and that citizens may, through certain conduct incompatible with the shared values of the Australian

community, demonstrate that they have severed that bond and repudiated their allegiance to Australia” (Australian Citizenship Amendment Act, 2015: sec. 4). In Australia, condition (1) is fulfilled. But most states are not so explicit, and so this condition is often not met.

Condition (2) is required because the *de facto* renunciation argument hinges on renunciation being a voluntary exercise of a normative power. For this, the *agent’s* understanding of their conduct matters. Australia’s law states that “certain conduct incompatible with the shared values of the Australian community,” and further specifies this conduct in a reasonably precise manner (Australian Citizenship Amendment Act, 2015: sect. 3). However, in most states, denationalization powers are vaguely defined. In the United Kingdom, for example, any conduct deemed prejudicial to the state’s vital interests may result in citizenship loss. But this vague standard means (2) is not met. It is doubtful that citizens understand their actions as *de facto* renunciations of citizenship.

But even when these conditions obtain, there may be egalitarian reasons to worry about denationalization. The renunciation defense of denationalization hinges on the assumption that *only those denationalized* are wronged by denationalization. But my argument shows that denaturalization can also wrong citizens *who are not denaturalized*. It can do so by rendering *their* status as full and equal members less secure or changing its social meaning, even where denaturalization does not wrong the person denaturalized. Citizenship only secures equal public standing if it is sufficiently and equally robust for all. Otherwise, the message citizenship regimes communicate is that some are fuller citizens than others. Thus, the power to denationalize may undermine citizenship’s robustness even when the individuals denationalized may be rightly understood to have renounced their citizenship. The inherent ambiguity involved in the assessment of which acts constitute renunciation makes everyone’s citizenship less secure. Rather than only looking at the individual “renouncers” relation to the state, we also need to look at what the power to denationalize does to citizenship (Macklin, 2018). Thus even if *de facto* renunciation defense may make some cases of denationalization permissible if states adopt policies like Australia’s, the balance of reasons may speak against states adopting such policies because such policies make everyone’s citizenship less secure. Unless there is some reason why such a policy is necessary, we should opt for standard criminal punishment instead.

Rights forfeiture

A second defense of denationalization appeals to rights forfeiture theories of punishment (Wellman, 2012). Per such theories, by committing certain wrongful acts, wrongdoers forfeit certain rights; therefore, punishing them is permissible. So, one might argue that those who commit certain wrongful acts forfeit their right to citizenship; ergo, depriving them of citizenship is not wrongful. The most plausible version of this position asserts that one’s claim to status equality is conditional on respecting the core rights of others. When one violates others’ rights, one forfeits one’s claim to equality, and so, denationalization becomes permissible.

The key problem with this argument concerns why certain offenders forfeit their right to citizenship specifically. Rights forfeiture theories do not usually claim that criminals forfeit their right to citizenship. The thought that they do gives rise to a dilemma. *Either*: one must offer some general explanation of why those who engage in certain kinds of crimes, for example, terrorism, forfeit this right while those who engage in other serious crimes, for example, murder, assault, etc., do not. *Or*: one must accept that the state is permitted to denationalize a much wider set of individuals.

The former horn highlights a general weakness of rights forfeiture theories—that they lack a general account of which rights are forfeited and why. The available answers are either too vague—for example, “certain rights,” “the right not to be punished”—or have problematic implications—for example, the answer “equivalent rights to those violated,” which would entail overly harsh punishment. Moreover, a successful theory cannot be *ad hoc*: it must offer a principled basis for distinguishing (for example) terrorism from (for example) murder. But no known rights forfeiture theorist holds that terrorists forfeit their right to citizenship, and none yields a principled basis for distinguishing terrorism from other grievous offenses.

The latter horn involves a massive revision to penal practice. It implies the state may denationalize *all* dual nationals who commit serious crimes. This seems deeply problematic. There are ways of attempting to resist this implication: perhaps that a certain punishment is *permissible* does not imply that the state ought to enforce that punishment; or perhaps rights forfeiture is necessary, but not sufficient, for punishment. But both moves raise a further question, to which the theory of rights forfeiture provides no answer: why is stripping citizenship a fitting way to punish the relevant offense? We cannot answer this question solely by considering what rights people forfeit.

Finally, there are good reasons, grounded in relational equality, to treat the right to citizenship as something one cannot forfeit. According to an attractive view of criminal punishment, we ought to punish people in ways that respect their status as our social equals (Porro, 2021). Stripping people of citizenship undermines their equal social status. But equal social status is something that people have a basic claim to, not something one can forfeit (Kolodny, 2019). This is why we should prefer limited, rights-stripping punishments to permanent, status-stripping punishments. The former holds open the option of the offender rejoining society and reclaiming their status; the latter does not. We should thus prefer familiar means of criminal punishment because they better respect the equal status of offenders. This argument is bolstered by the fact that the state typically needs to punish terrorists with standard penal sanctions anyway. After all, they may be dangerous and so failure to incarcerate would be irresponsible. But there is then no clear reason why imprisoning *and* denationalizing is to be preferred to merely imprisoning them.

The expressive defense of denationalization

Perhaps expressivist defenses may provide such a reason. Denationalization policies alter the social meaning of citizenship. I have suggested that this is problematic. But one might claim that it can be beneficial. Perhaps citizenship *ought* to be constituted to expressively affirm that certain commitments are constitutive of good citizenship or to express

repudiation of certain conduct (c.f. Bennett, 2016). Egalitarian citizenship is more than a thin legal status; it aims to create a thicker social relationship of equality between persons.¹³ Therefore, citizenship needs to be accompanied by egalitarian norms to which citizens adhere. Targeted denationalization policies may help reinforce these egalitarian norms. Thus, attending to how denationalization can change citizenship's social meaning constitutes a resource for defenders of denationalization. This opens up a new avenue in the debate about denationalization: what do we want the social meaning of citizenship to be?

While this argument is promising, I doubt that this expressivist defense of denationalization ultimately succeeds. Even if the state ought to express repudiation of certain conduct or uphold norms of good citizenship, there is no reason why such expression *must* be pursued *via denationalization*. There are other ways to express such attitudes. The state may publicly simply proclaim its expectations about good citizenship. Alternatively, it may impose standard criminal sanctions for noncompliance. These practices may suffice to uphold the relevant norms. However, there is no suitable alternative to expressing public equality via citizenship. Doing so *requires* equal citizenship because of the uniquely public way in which citizenship bestows rights on subjects. So, we should thus be cautious about using citizenship revocation to pursue even otherwise laudable expressive objectives.

Is denationalization ever permissible?

Let us grant the defender of denationalization this much: whether and with what force the egalitarian objection to denationalization applies depends on the specific denationalization powers accorded to the state. Policies that are narrowly targeted, seldom exercised, and reliably constrained less significantly impair the egalitarian function of citizenship. Policies restrict denationalization to a limited, unambiguously identified set of wrongful acts do less to undermine citizenship's egalitarian functions than broad, vague denationalization powers, as they give people a way to predictably avoid losing their citizenship (c.f. Kelly, 2018: 30). Thus, while my argument offers some reason to think that all cases of denationalization are *pro tanto* problematic, the egalitarian objection to denationalization is not always equally forceful.

However, the above discussion suggests several general problems that must be overcome for any defense of denationalization to succeed. First, *the necessity problem*: one must show that denationalization achieves some end that cannot be comparably achieved by standard forms of punishment, such as incarceration. If it cannot do so, then we have no reason to allow denationalization. This issue is pressing since, for all of the cases where it is tempting to believe that denationalization may be permissible, such as the case of international terrorism, states are arguably morally required to engage in standard criminal punishment, for example, incarceration, anyway. It is unclear what denationalization adds. The claim that it adds extra protection to the state's citizen's and so is a decent substitute for standard criminal punishment can only be maintained at the risk of triggering *free riding problem*: the state displaces the risk onto another society to which the defender is deported. The claim that the state should denationalize and

incarcerate but not deport faces *the double punishment problem*: the state unequally punishes dual citizens extra harshly for no obvious benefit.

Then there is the *equality problem*. There are good reasons, grounded in the value of relational equality, to treat the right to citizenship as something one cannot forfeit. Plausibly, we should punish people in ways that respect their status as our social equals. Yet, stripping people of citizenship undermines their equal social status. Thus, we should prefer limited, rights-stripping punishments to permanent, status-stripping punishments. To succeed, therefore, defenders of denationalization must show that either this default position is mistaken or that the importance of status equality is outweighed by some other consideration.

The final problem is *wronging third-parties*. Rather than looking solely at the impact of denationalization on the offender, we must consider what denationalization powers do to citizenship as a whole. The power to denationalize may undermine citizenship's ability to fulfill its egalitarian functions by problematically transforming its social meaning. This can harm others and so be worrisome even if no one's entitlement to citizenship is violated. As Justin Trudeau once put it, "As soon as you make citizenship for some Canadians conditional on good behavior, you devalue citizenship for everyone" (Vice News, 2015).

Together, these arguments show that defending denationalization is more difficult than is often believed. At the very least, they establish that we have very strong reasons to be intensely critical of actual denationalization policies, and, given that there is seldom a compelling reason such measures need to be adopted, there should be a very strong presumption against denationalization. To refute this presumption, a fuller defense of denationalization is required than has so far been provided. In my view, however, such a defense is unlikely to succeed for the reasons given. Thus, I think, the more general conclusion we should draw is even stronger: the core argument of the article, when combined with the problems mentioned in this section, and the horrific track record of denationalization through history, suggest that states should never possess the power to denationalize.

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Notes

1. I'm not the first to connect denationalization and inequality (Gibney, 2013a; Pillai and Williams, 2017; Van Waas and Jaghai, 2018). But this connection is more often asserted than defended, and has sometimes been mischaracterized. What's lacking, and what I provide, is an account of how denationalization impairs equality and why this matters.
2. Certain forms of rights loss suffice for denationalization. For example, states sometimes deny citizens repatriation. Tripkovic (2023) describes this as *de facto* denationalization.
3. In this respect, my functionalism differs from Burelli and Camboni (2023) who argue for a distinctive kind of functional normativity. However, their distinction between "functional needs" and "functional mechanisms" maps roughly onto my distinction between a normative function and the institution that fulfills that function. My own functionalist position is closest to (Viehoff, 2025), albeit with some notable differences.
4. The primary bases for the international prohibition on denationalization resulting in statelessness are Article 15 on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 8 of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The latter allows for deprivation of nationality in certain conditions (Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, Art. 8(2-4), 1961). Accordingly, while some European democracies prohibit all denationalization resulting in statelessness, not all do so categorically. In 2014, the United Kingdom amended their citizenship law to allow for deprivation of nationality resulting in statelessness when (1) a person has engaged in conduct deemed "prejudicial" to the "vital interests" of the state, and (2) there are "reasonable grounds" for believing the person would be eligible to naturalize elsewhere (British Nationality Act 1981 *c. 61 (U.K.)* 1981, sec. 40). There is a significant gap between "reasonable grounds for belief in eligibility for" and actual possession of another citizenship. Thus, when Shamima Begum's citizenship was revoked, the government alleged that she possessed Bangladeshi citizenship, a claim Bangladesh denied. Begum was thus made stateless (*R (on the application of Begum) (Respondent) v Secretary of State for the Home Department (Appellant)* 2020).
5. Some theories of wrongful discrimination take this form. Moreau (2020), for example, argues that discrimination is wrong when it subordinates. But Moreau does not discuss denationalization and theorists of usually simply state that second-class citizenship worry, rather than explaining what's problematic about tiered citizenship.
6. As Bloemraad and Sheares put it, (2017) "Citizenship in the Western tradition embodies the normative ideal of equality, even if that ideal has been poorly achieved in most times and places. The moral claim of equality is powerful, such that holding citizenship might increase immigrant-origin residents' legitimacy and standing in the eyes of others." This fits with Bloemraad's (2017) theory of citizenship as claims-making, and her hypothesis that citizens are more likely to assert their rights and participate politically.
7. As Bloemraad (2017: 546) puts it, "Those who worry about substantive citizenship are right to point to inequalities based on race, origins, religion, and so forth, but wrong in concluding that

citizenship fails to mitigate, if only partially, those inequalities. Citizenship does not erase inequalities, but its lack probably exacerbates them.”

8. Kochenov (2019) discusses citizenship’s role in maintaining global inequality. He argues for the abolition of citizenship. I think citizenship can be reformed to address these problems. However, if one rejects my view, one should endorse abolitionism, since it is only citizenship’s egalitarian functions cannot be fulfilled by alternative institutional arrangements.
9. Carens (2013) thus defends open borders and waiting periods for naturalization.
10. This is because the aim of the law was in part not allow those stripped of citizenship in Assam not to renaturalize, but to allow people from these groups who could not prove citizenship to renaturalized.
11. This distinction between a right and its value is derived from Rawls’ discussion of the “fair value” of a liberty (Rawls, 1971).
12. Honohan (2020), who criticizes citizenship revocation on republican grounds, also focuses on robustness.
13. Another way of developing this idea is in terms of citizens’ identification with society. In my view, the function of citizenship is to realize status equality, not to enforce identity bonds. Identification is not necessary for citizenship. Moreover, nationalist understandings of citizenship undermine equality, making it difficult for minority residents to be seen as equals. I therefore favor a civic conception of citizenship. This conception is compatible with the claim that the state should promote solidaristic bonds among citizens.

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