

Aleksandar Matković

Activism and Capitalism: On the Forms of Engagement

Abstract This short essay aims at providing an outline for a critical reflection on the notion of activism and to bring to attention the significance for distinguishing between different *forms* of engagement in contemporary neoliberal societies. The article traces the history of the notion of 'activism' and argues that it went hand in hand with the reduction of heterogeneous political activity to immediate generic action. In order to counter such a reduction, the article relies on the work of Ellen Meiksins Wood and her critical history of the development of the liberal conception of citizenship. In conclusion, it will be argued that the conceptual significance of the notion of capitalism is crucial for distinguishing between different forms and figures of political activity – from the 'activist', 'active citizen' and what Engin Isin termed 'activist citizenship'.

Keywords: active citizenship, activism, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Engin Isin, capitalism

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Although they have become academic and political buzzwords, notions such as civic and social engagement, 'active citizenship' and the like, are neither new nor separate from their liberal conceptual heritage. I will argue that the emergence of the notion of 'activism' went hand in hand with the reduction of its political content which was then seamlessly transposed onto other notions of engagement, often blurring the lines that lie between them. The first section of this article will thus tackle the conceptual history of the notion of 'activism' while the second and third will focus on its roots in liberal conceptions of citizenship and the trajectories which point beyond them.

1. The history of the activist

The history of the term 'activist' is a telling one. Even though originally conceived as inextricable from the sphere of the political, it gradually came to signify generic political action, paradoxically disassociated from any concrete political struggle:

"Unlike the term *organizer*, with its clear roots in trade union and labor politics, *activist* has murky origins. Associated early on with German idealist philosopher Rudolf Eucken — who believed that striving is necessary to a spiritual life — it was then sometimes used to describe outspoken supporters of the Central Powers during the First World War. Eventually, the term came to signify political action more broadly [...]. In the early 1960s the *New York Times* described both Bertrand Russell and C. Wright

Mills as ‘activists’ [...] and searches through archival records from that period reveal scattered mentions of labor activists, and then civil rights activists, and then student activists.” (Taylor, internet)

According to Astra Taylor it was through politics of identity in the sixties and seventies that the term ‘activist’ began to proliferate. However, this proliferation of ‘activism’ came at the expense of its political content as well as the entirely different varieties of political action which were once expressed through various terms of socialist, unionist and/or feminist origins. Briefly, when ‘activism’ first appeared on the political stage, not only did it broaden its initial meaning to encompass various different strands of political action, but political action itself became much less differentiated in common language and hence much harder to grasp – not least, through the politics of identity which were on the rise at the time.

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“Unlike *abolitionist*, *populist*, *suffragette*, *unionist*, and *socialist*, which all convey a clear position on an issue, *activist* is a generic category [...]. While there are notable exceptions, many strands of contemporary activism risk emphasizing the self over the collective. By contrast, organizing is cooperative by definition: it aims to bring others into the fold, to build and exercise shared power.” (Taylor, internet)

Since some of these notions came from revolutionary and/or worker’s movements, it should not come as a surprise that the proponents of these political traditions reacted fiercely to their conflation with generic political activity. In fact, it is in 20th century Marxist and communist political thought that we find a development of a critique of the notion of activism: Amadeo Bordiga, the founder of the Communist Party of Italy, called activism “an illness of the workers’ movement that requires continuous treatment” (Bordiga 1952); the French *Organisation des Jeunes Travailleurs Revolutionnaires* (Organization of Young Revolutionary Workers), inspired by the Situationist Internationale, in 1972 published the study *Le Militantisme – Stade Supreme De L’alienation* (Activism – the Highest Stage of Alienation) (OJTR: 2005, internet); while Theodor Adorno, who famously opposed student movements, criticized activism for its ‘immediatism’ to which he contrasted the universality of thought that points beyond immediate relations. To emphasize this juxtaposition, in his brief essay on *Resignation*, Adorno even uses the term ‘actionism’, *Aktionismus*, which, for him, remains a pseudo-activity: “Pseudo-activity is generally the attempt to rescue enclaves of immediacy in the midst of a thoroughly mediated and rigidified society” (Adorno 1998: 291). In this sense, the critical reactions towards the proliferation of activism point to exactly this shift in meaning: to the reduction of the mediate to immediate, of the organized to spontaneous and generic, of the universal to particular, and so on. Of course, the history of the term ‘activism’ should not mean that it was less important or effective than the figures of the ‘organizer’/‘suffragette’/‘socialist’/etc. Activism, in a sense,

even helped establish novel political action: for example, the fact is that gay or queer, student or civic activism were not initially considered favorable by many strands of the communist left across Europe and the USA all the way up to the end of the 20th century¹.

But ultimately, its history is telling in another sense. The ambiguity of its political content and its strong emphasis on activity can only have one meaningful use: to juxtapose the otherwise ‘passive’ citizenry to its more ‘active’ parts. In this sense, ‘activism’ is more of a reaction to *passive citizenship*. But unlike those who see it as a symptom of the *decay* of (liberal) democracy (including the quoted Astra Taylor), it can be said that it is a symptom not of decay, but of the vitality of one *particular conception* of citizenship. It is interesting to see a similar distinction developing fairly early, namely, during the French Revolution. It was as early as October 1789, whilst wrestling with the issues of sovereignty and elective principles, that the Constitution foresaw the bifurcation of ‘the people’ into ‘active’ and ‘passive citizens’ – essentially, propertied males over 25 who paid annual taxes and were entitled to vote and stand office, and others who could not. Thus: “By creating the active and passive citizens, the Revolution had already become ambivalent as to who were the people were. While the people in abstract remained sovereign, the Constituent had deliberately placed all attributes of sovereignty in the hands of active citizens alone” (Mitchel 1988: 111). Of course, one cannot claim that this distinction is to blame for the upsurge of ‘activism’ in the 20th century nor that the two are related by more than a coincidence. However, both of them belong to the same inherently *passive* configuration of citizenship which was already bifurcated *in itself* from the very moment of its inception. Thus, by focusing on the nature of this configuration, we may be better able to distinguish between different forms of engagement (such as the ‘activist’, the ‘active citizen’ and what Isin Engin called ‘activist citizenship’, described in section 3). In order to do so, we would need to go beyond this brief philological account and to turn to the origins of the distinctively liberal conception of citizenship and its formal-democratic expressions.

1 One should recall for example the French PCF and the initial quarrels between its militants – to use another ‘old’ term for ‘activism’ (coming from the French verb ‘militaire’, ‘to campaign for’) – and its theorists, including Foucault. Of course, there are plenty of examples of these issues being covered or at least tackled upon by progressive movements and parties across Europe: examples include the abolishment of the Tsarist laws in the Soviet Union and the legalization of homosexuality, abortion, no-fault divorce in post-revolutionary (and pre-Stalinist) Russia and the key roles that some of the leading figures of Marxist feminism, like Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg have played within and beyond the German Spartacus League and the KPD, etc. Nevertheless, the proliferation of ‘activism’ did help in making visible and indeed changing the status of otherwise repressed social groups.

2. Capitalism/Civil Society/Citizenship Triad

In this section I will introduce the issue of the distinction between different forms of ‘activism’ within the broader context of the ‘liberal’ conception of citizenship. I argue that the ‘liberal’ conception of citizenship is inseparable from the notion of capitalism *as an underlying system which accounts for the causality of its changes*. However, it is important to contrast the explanatory significance that keeping the notion of capitalism as such a system has over its rejection. This could be seen, for example, in the discourse on civil society, when it is rejected in favor of a reduced conception of repression which presents civil society through a state/non-state dichotomy. Hence, before proceeding, we will briefly describe the issue.

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For one, the fairly recent come-back of the public and political discourse on civil society could be said to originate from the experience of the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc as well as the rise of neoliberal policies. The connection between the two is that after the 1990’s it was the advocates of the free market that saw in civil society a useful actor for ‘counter-balancing’ state policies and introducing ‘market-enabling’ and ‘market-sustaining’ reforms. What brought civil society into public discourse then was the ‘need’ of new regimes to rely on the state’s supposed antagonist – seen precisely in civil society – to spearhead the so-called ‘return’ to normal, liberal-democracies and market economies in Eastern European countries following the disintegration of their communist regimes. This led to the reduction not only of the rich conceptual history of the notion of civil society to the sphere of the ‘non-state’ but also of the state to its coercive role and of the negation of any systematic unity which would comprise them both. Of course, most philosophical traditions from which the notion of civil society can be derived were far from such reductive conceptions. Whether they revolved around social contract (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) or the emergence of civil society within the nascent nation-states (Adam Ferguson, Kant’s universal civil society, Hegel and Marx’s subsequent critique, Alexis de Tocqueville, etc.) or attempted to underlie the significance of civil society for ideological struggles or functional democracies (Gramsci and the concept of the integral state or Habermas and the debates on the public sphere, etc.), most of these theories never simply juxtaposed the state and civil society in such a reductive way. However, what the ‘state/non-state’ dichotomy downplayed was the role of repression *within* civil society: by opposing conjoining these two notions, the very notion of repression was itself impoverished. This reduction of oppression to the ‘state/non-state’ dichotomy only helped obscure, rather than explain, the complex relations of power found across any society driven by the contradictions of the market economy – exactly at the time such an economy was making a ‘come-back’ itself. In the words of Ellen Meiksins Wood: “Just when reformers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are looking to Western capitalism

for paradigms of economic and political success, many of us appear to be abdicating the traditional role of the Western left as critic of capitalism.” (E. M. Wood: 1990:60) More importantly, she argued that it was during this time that the Left began to ‘conceptualize away the notion of capitalism’ and that in “conceptually dissolving capitalism, they often share one especially serviceable concept: ‘civil society’” (E. M. Wood: 1990:60). This conceptual dissolution often left unthematized what Ishay Landa called ‘the liberal split’ between the spheres of economy and politics, or rather, between an ‘economic’ strand of liberalism and its more politically-minded parts (Landa 2010: 21). And, conversely, by overly thematizing the distinctions ‘public/private’, ‘state/non-state’, ‘market/non-market’, ‘individual/collective’, etc., the crucial relation between the spheres of economy and politics was often overlooked. And consequentially, by overlooking the relations between the spheres of economy and politics, any take on the histories of citizenship or indeed the histories of its inceptions would remain conceptually futile. Briefly, without the notion of capitalism, any history of the origins of liberal citizenship would remain vague. It is here that I would like to expand on the work of Ellen Meiksins Wood who stressed all of these points in great detail – which we should only briefly summarize here.

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In her 1995 book *Democracy Against Capitalism*, Wood introduces *two histories* of citizenship (E. M. Wood: 1995). The first stems, according to Wood, from the ancient Athenian conceptions of democracy, from Solon and Cleisthenes, and represents an ascendancy of the ‘peasant-citizen’, a figure marking the historical elevation of the *demos* to citizenship. The other historical trajectory is essentially modern, and emerges from within the contradictions of European feudalism: its development was paved and secured by events such as the *Magna Carta* and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which mark the ascent of the propertied classes. As Wood contends: “In this case, it is not a question of peasants liberating themselves from the political domination of their overlords, but lords themselves asserting their independent powers against the claims of monarchy” (E. M. Wood 1995: 204). If the representatives of the first history were peasant-citizens, the epitomes of the second would be the feudal baron and the Whig aristocrat.

To further deepen this narrative, we should also take into account the following insights. The emergence of the second history and its subsequent domination over the first, according to Wood, assumed two things: 1) that the nascent civil society came to be constituted as an exclusive political nation made up of propertied classes, and 2) that the Parliament would become the embodiment, the representative body of all of the Commonwealth’s subjects, whose function would become to constantly ‘check’ the power of the monarch. Thus, although at least partly accountable to its ‘electorate’, the Parliament functioned on a premise that ‘the people’ had not been fully sovereign – initially even *regardless* of whether they had the

right to vote or not. The people were ultimately depoliticized players in a territorially centralized arena, where all politics relating to the people was to be confined to the Parliament. By spreading its representational power over what it presupposed to be ‘the people’, it depoliticized all those that did not purport to be members of the exclusive club of propertied classes. And if this history sounds too ‘English’ it is because it precisely is English: the period which Wood speaks of is the period of the emergence of capitalism in England at the turn of the 17th century, in times when citizenship also underwent fundamental transformations. It would cease to embody the obsolete feudal relations of power and slowly come to reflect those of a society in which its ‘economic’ sphere, based on the principles of market competition, was more and more distinguished from the rest of society. Citizenship would in time become less a thing of the lords and barons and more of the presumed subject of ‘the people’. But at the same time it would lose its social and economic significance that it may have had in its previous conceptions (as in the ‘Athenian’ or ‘demotic’ traditions). The reason for this was the aforementioned ‘autonomization’ of the sphere of economy during the primitive accumulation and the subsequent rise of market economy. Accordingly: “Capitalism, by shifting the locus of power from lordship to property, made civic status less salient, as the benefits of political privilege gave way to purely ‘economic’ advantage” (E. M. Wood 1995: 208). Citizenship, in short, was ‘spread out’ to include the non-propertied classes and the ‘laboring multitude’ (which was previously stripped of their self-subsistence and deprived of their reliance on the commons)². The fact that they were not counted as citizens did not offer them any protection against purely economic compulsion in a system in which economic compulsion *per se* was the main determinant of economy.

The main reason for this coupling of capitalism and the liberal traditions of citizenship could be summed in the distinction between civil, political and social rights that T. H. Marshall made in his “Citizenship and Social Class”: “The explanation lies in fact at the core of citizenship at this stage was composed of civil rights. And civil rights were indispensable for a competitive market economy. They gave each man, as part of his individual status, the power to engage as an independent unit in an economic struggle and made it possible to deny him social protection on the ground that he was equipped with the means to protect himself” (Marshall 2009: 150). Hence, it was market competition that conditioned the liberal amalgam of a quasi-inclusive but fundamentally *passive* conception of citizenship within the presupposed framework of the nation-state. The conceptual

2 For a detailed description of the deprivation of the emerging working class of their commons and self-subsistence, see Perelman: 2000: 13, available at: https://is.vsfz.cz/el/6410/leto2013/BA_ETD/um/3968033/The_Invention_of_Capitalism.pdf (last accessed: 03. 25. 2016.)

significance and the necessity of conceptually outlining such a historical move for the differentiation between different sorts of engagements, will be the task of the last section.

3. 'Active citizenship' versus 'activist citizenship'

So far, the argument focused on the history of 'activism' and pointed out the shift in its meaning whereby it became a notion encompassing different political activities, albeit in reduced form. We then proceeded to account for the formation of the liberal conception of citizenship as an inherently formal or passive conception which went hand in hand with the emergence of capitalism as an underlying socio-economic system. In this section I will argue that capitalism plays a pivotal role in shaping our understandings about what it means to be an 'active citizen' and contrast the 'active citizen' to what Isin Engin termed 'activist citizenship' in his debate with Étienne Balibar.

The meaning of 'active citizen' – today, most certainly, quite different from the one defined by the Revolutionary Constitution of 1789 – can perhaps be grasped by contrasting the positions of Isin Engin and Étienne Balibar in the debate on the *sans-papiers*. Namely, unlike Balibar who saw in the *sans-papiers* an invigorated figure of *active citizens*, Isin distinguished between *active citizens* and what he termed '*activist citizenship*'. Isin argues that the actors of citizenship are not necessarily those who hold the status of citizenship. Instead, "if we understand citizenship as an instituted subject-position, it can be performed or enacted by various categories of subjects including aliens, migrants, refugees, states, courts and so on. The political is not limited to an already constituted territory or its legal 'subjects': it always exceeds them." (Isin: 2009: 379) Rather than focusing on the already constituted actors, scales or sites of citizenship, we need to take into account the transformations that are making citizenship vivid and not merely an abstract category of state governing. Indeed, if we understand citizenship as the very enactment of being political, and not as a designation of membership of any given state, then it is possible to speak of 'acts of citizenship', which are in no way reducible to any pre-given actor or state of affairs. In fact, Isin describes these acts as the ones "that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (that is, claimants of rights) through creating or transforming sites and stretching scales." (Isin: 2009: 383). Unlike Balibar, who makes no such similar strong distinctions, Isin designates a clear line of distinction between the formal realization of abstract categories of citizenship enforced by the nation-states and 'acts of citizenship' which break up or introduce a caesura in these categories themselves. The former can easily be subsumed under the term 'active citizens' to designate more or less successful participation in regular or irregular 'scripted' activities (voting, taxpaying, enlisting, etc.) which in

no way alter the inner structure of citizenship – instead of questioning it, ‘active citizens’ simply follow it. However, opposite these ‘scripted’ events lies the ‘activist citizenship’ or the concrete acts of what Isin calls ‘activist citizens’. They do not have to be possessors of any tangible citizenship but can, in fact, *act* or *perform* in the name of citizenship as an instituted subject-position. Thus, they seek or induce transformations in their non- or mis-recognized status and, in turn, in the content of citizenship itself, remove it from its abstractness. The prime example for this would be the *sans-papiers* in France who, despite being illegalized and undergoing police roundups, various political attacks and no legal recognition for long periods of time, were able to influence the state to alter its citizenship so as to accept their role in French society. But, how we interpret their acts rests on our understanding of citizenship. Contrary to their description by the public authorities, Balibar described them as “privileged moments in the development of *active citizenship* (or, if you prefer, direct participation in *public affairs*) without which there exists no polity, but only a state form cut off from society and petrified in its own abstraction.” (Balibar: 2004: 48) Isin, on the other hand, described them not as active citizens but as *activist citizens* – those who carried out *acts of citizenship par excellence*. According to him, Balibar neglects that the *sans-papiers* were in no way following ‘scripted’ lines of active citizenship, but were in fact altering the fiber of citizenship itself: “Thus, an analysis of ‘activist citizens’ over an analysis of ‘active citizens’ is critical to the framework developed here. By contrast to active citizens who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting, activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene.” (Isin: 2009: 381).

From these contrasted positions we see how political content easily escapes the notion of ‘active citizen’ the very moment the formality of the conception of citizenship is questioned. However, while Isin is right in presenting citizenship as not solely a membership in any given state, but as an inherently dynamic category as well, it seems that his account could be complemented by emphasizing the *causality* behind the dynamics of its changes and transformations. According to him, there were simply several times when an ‘unnamed figure’ had ‘entered history’ and ‘challenged citizenship’, its scales and sites. For example, in ancient Greece the *polis* was a new site of politics, and in Roman times, although its scale grew, citizenship was still mediated *through* the city; and while the former had its actor-citizen in the figure of a propertied male warrior, for the latter it was “but a peaceful merchant and artisan of the medieval commune”. (Isin: 2009: 373). Likewise, in the case of the *sans-papiers* and similar ‘activist citizens’, there is a new ‘unsettling figure’ for which we use different categories: „foreigner, migrant, irregular migrant, illegal alien, immigrant, wanderer, refugee, émigré, exile, nomad, sojourner and many more that attempt to fix it.“ (Isin: 2009:

367). Although this figure cannot be subsumed under any one of these names, all of them do challenge the notion of citizenship.

However, what can be added to these descriptions is an emphasis on the *causality*: of how and why these transformations of citizenship happen. For example, we might ask what distinguishes these appearances of actor-citizens: what separates them, both historically and conceptually? It cannot be that they simply ‘appeared in history’ *ex nihilo* or that the various configurations of citizenship are only contingently linked to one another. Also, different actors may be similarly described but ultimately belonging to different configurations (a propertied warrior is not the same as a propertied *burgher*). And, as we have seen is often the case with the ‘activist’ heritage, Isin’s conception of ‘activist citizenship’ emphasizes the dynamics of change while downplaying the differences between the myriad acts of citizenship which ultimately end up as various versions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming political’. And, as Isin himself writes elsewhere: “Becoming political can perhaps be defined as acts of transfiguration and transvaluation by noncitizens. In the end, we may owe the existence of politics not to citizens, but to strangers, outsiders, and aliens.” (Isin: 1992: 282)

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This is why taking into account the notion of capitalism as an underlying system proves to have a considerable conceptual significance: it allows us to distinguish between the various modes of ‘being’ and ‘becoming political’ and between the histories and functions of its different categories, which may or may not belong to it (like property, labor, etc. – categories which were often taken to be ahistorical, not least in classical economics). In fact, one might argue that the notion of capitalism represents a conceptual requirement of any description of the concrete dynamics of modern citizenship: its qualitative transformations over time and how they differ from past configurations of citizenship. For one, precisely because it does not exhaust itself *in citizenship* but *underlies it*, it helps us highlight how different citizenship/non-citizenship relations function, how they relate to concrete social actors and *vice versa*. Examples might include what Balibar termed the ‘non-citizenship’ of women: without any notion of capitalism it would be impossible to understand how the space of private relations and ‘non-citizenship’ underwent changes before women could be integrated into the public space and political domain (Balibar: 1988: 724). Inversely, how actors influenced the qualitative changes of citizenship can be seen in the transformation that T. H. Marshall claims citizenship underwent when collective workers’ agreements were recognized, transcending the sphere of individual civil rights (Marshall: 2009: 156). As Balibar also writes, it is crucial to account for the institutional ‘dialectic’ between “formal autonomy and actual subjection” – how the changes in citizenship “passed through representative institutions and administrative (unions and parties and

public arbitrations and social security and public conventions). Thus the development of rights is paid for by the development of the state.” (Balibar: 1988: 725) Ultimately, to distinguish between the role of different social functions and categories present in different historical formations (such as property, money, etc. – which were used to distinguish between the status of different citizens since ancient times) one has to contend that at least some notion of an underlying system is needed.

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Coming back to the marriage between the liberal conception of citizenship and the notion of capitalism, one may conclude that instead of separating citizenship from any underlying system of socio-economic dynamics – as is perhaps inherent in the notion of ‘active citizen’ – it can be said that it is precisely this connection which holds considerable critical potential; ultimately, it is this connection that defines the boundaries of what an ‘active citizen’ might at all be. This is why we have argued that the conceptual presence of the notion of capitalism is needed to distinguish between those forms of engagement which do in fact *question* the underlying causes of various forms of social inequality, and others which claim to do so, but ultimately end up following what Isin termed as ‘scripted events’. In this sense, we can say that the purely *political* activism which does not question the separation between the economic and the political, also ends up following its own logic of ‘scripted events’ (like ephemeral protests, petitions, the hyper-production of forum discussions, etc.). Whether they question the social order (as in ‘activism’/‘actionism’) without seeking its structural alteration or wish to enhance it and make it work better (as in ‘active citizenship’), both forms of engagement follow the same logic of *not engaging* with the very *causes* of social inequalities beyond the realm of the political. Thus it is not enough to draw the line of distinction between forms of engagement based on purely political lines (as some do in the case of ‘civic’ *versus* ‘political’ participation)³; in doing so one ends up negating the separation between the political and economic in capitalism and reducing the scope and limits of engagement itself. And in the end, without acknowledging such a separation, it is easy to forget that what counts is not the distinction between active/passive citizenship, but its expansion to include what has, as a rule, been excluded from it – the promise of social welfare and economic democracy.

3 For example, between civic participation in the sense of “nonremunerative, publicly spirited collective action that is not motivated by the desire to affect public policy” and political participation in the sense to do so (Campbell: 2004), available at: http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/8/2/6/0/pages82606/p82606-8.php

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Aleksandar Matković

Aktivizam i kapitalizam:
o oblicima angažmana

Apstrakt

Namera ovog kratkog eseja je da pruži nacrt kritičke refleksije o pojmu aktivizma i da skrene pažnju na potrebu da se pravi razlika između različitih oblika angažmana u savremenim neoliberalnim društvima. Rad trasira istoriju pojma „aktivizam“ i tvrdi da je ona išla ruku pod ruku sa redukcijom heterogene političke aktivnosti na neposrednu generičku akciju. Radi kontriranja takvoj redukciji, članak se oslanja na rad Elen Meiksins Vud i njenu kritičku istoriju razvoja liberalne koncepcije građanstva. U krajnjem, tvrdiće se da je konceptualni značaj pojma kapitalizma ključan radi razlikovanja različitih formi i figura političke aktivnosti – od „aktiviste“ i „aktivnog građanina“ do onoga što je Isin Engin nazvao „aktivističkim državljanstvom“.

Ključne reči: aktivno građanstvo, aktivizam, Elen Meiksins Vud, Engin Isin, kapitalizam